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Reflections on trust and acceptance in ethnographic studies of policing: the importance of police role conception

Slide 2 – abstract

- Important to gain a measure of trust and acceptance from the police officers we study
- Reflexivity stressed the need to consider personal biography, but little attention paid to police role conception.
- In the case study discussed below, significant attempts were made by some police officers to avoid being observed for the purpose of the research.
- It is possible the researcher's biography –a young, black, male, university student– may have heightened the usual concerns about allowing outsiders to study police behaviour.
- However, different groups of police officers, responded differently to the project.
- Some were obstructive and uncooperative, whilst others enthusiastically generated opportunities for observation of routine police activity, throughout the fieldwork.
- No evidence that those more receptive to the research held less-problematic views about the researcher's personal characteristics.
- Instead appeared that the more comfortable officers in their policing role, the more willing they were to being researched.
- Reflexive accounts should thus attend to how police officers conceptualise their intuitional role.

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How do we get close to police practice and culture?

- We want to understand police practice and culture
- To do so, many of us have adopted or combined different methodological tools

- Some policing studies have involved interviews and/or focus groups, whilst others relied on analysis of records, statistics and documents relating to policing.
- Both approaches generate data rooted in accounts offered by police officers themselves.
- Does not mean that such accounts are less valuable or relevant to the researcher
- But can hamper the ability of researchers to examine information that the same participants might prefer to conceal.

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How useful is ethnography to this process?

- Ethnography is an attractive technique, particularly for shining a light on the assortment of informal values and cultural norms that appear to frame police decision-making (variously referred to as 'police culture')
- Observations indispensable way of getting close to the everyday realities of frontline policing and the associated 'low visibility' cultural practices, which operate beneath the presentational canopy of police organisations

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- So, what is the problem?

- The problem may be us
- Our presence can alter the behaviour of the police
- Generally, in the direction of suspicion and introversion among participants (Skolnick, 1966).
- Can have broad implications for the quality of data and potentially the validity of the study (Reiner and Newburn 2008).

- Little wonder then that ethnographers of the police have long drawn attention to the importance of gaining a degree of trust and acceptance from participants in the study.

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How do ethnographers secure the requisite degree of trust and acceptance?

Guidance comes in the form of reflexive accounts of police researchers

Tales from the field that conclude that trust between the police and researcher is unlikely to ever be complete, and emphasise that particular factors, including,

- (i) personal biography and
- (ii) the researcher's presentation of self,

impact to various degrees on the level of acceptance gained (e.g., Reiner 1978, Skolnick 1966, Marks 2005, Van Maanen 1995, Herbert 1997, Loftus 2009, Loftus *et al.* 2016, Bacon 2018).

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The importance of role conception

- My own experience of observing police officers confirm these assumptions, but also highlights an additional concern that should form part of the reflexive practice of police ethnographers – the role officers carry out within the police organisation.

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Discrete ways in which police officers conceptualise their role

Evidence of the discrete ways in which police officers conceptualise their role (Reiner 1978, Young 1991, Marks 2005, McConville *et al* 1991). E.g.,

- (i) structural divides of 'them' (managers) and 'us' (street cops),
- (ii) status of policing activities, such as between those perceived as carrying out real police work (e.g., 'thief takers' (Young 1991: 65)) and those operating within despised or avoided areas of operation (e.g., 'scum cuddlers' (Nash 2016, Smith and Grey 1985)).

Spatial and temporal constructs within the police institution have a bearing on how police officers of different ranks and roles interact (Young 1991: 64, Reiner 1978).

But it is plausible that this form of role conceptualisation may also shape police-researcher interactions and explain exclusionary (or indeed inclusionary) practices of police officers, during ethnography.

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Presentation structure

1. Brief historical overview of the importance of ethnography to police research.
 - Brief discussion of the problems of access, trust, and validity of data, common in observational police research.
 - Attention on my own and other researchers' experience of achieving trust and cooperation from participants after formal access granted.
2. Useful case study for analysis here, is an ethnography of policing that took place between September 2012 and October 2013 when I carried out four hundred hours of observations of specialist police officers who formed part of an Integrated Offender Management (IOM) Unit within one English police area.
 - The account of the fieldwork provides striking evidence of the need for ethnographers to pay particular attention to a previously little attended to dimension of reflexivity, when it comes to interpreting the behaviour of participants: the policeman's institutional perception of self.

3. First, consideration is given to the extent to which one's personal characteristics may structure the research relationship.
 - Whilst this is well-trodden ground within the dimensions of reflexive practice, the claim that the policing role can overwhelmingly shape exclusionary/inclusionary practices, on the part of police as they face researchers, cannot be convincingly made whilst the question of biographical differences between the researcher and the police is left unanswered.
4. I show that just as important to the trust and acceptance process was how these officers conceptualised their role within the police organisation.
5. Conclusions: reflexive accounts of the police–researcher relationship should move beyond useful reconstructions of how police researchers came to be 'accepted' by the police officers they observed, to also consider how police officers see themselves.

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From frame to field: the ethnographic imperative

- Police-citizen relationships can be complex, even adversarial, in nature.
- Front line officers remain largely in control of their own work situations
- Loose supervision provides officers with significant scope to pursue independently defined objectives, some of which may have little to do with enforcing the law (Allen 1982, Lipsky 1969).
- Later reports of incidents, or reasons for behaviours or decisions can also be framed and presented to supervisors as authoritative versions of events (Reiner 2000: 219).
- 'All methods [other than participant observations] rely on some sort of account offered by the police themselves ... the veracity of which is often precisely the question being studied'. (Reiner (2000, 219)
- Observations, therefore, are a powerful methodology; they allow ethnographers to penetrate the fog of 'low visibility' decision-making that is frontline policing.

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Police ethnography and the problem of data validity

- Spano's (2005: 523) - observers have the potential to become part of the context of observed behaviour and 'contaminate observational data and undermine its reliability and validity' (also, Glense and Peshkin 1992, Fine 1993, Schwalbe 1996).
- A problem further intensified in police research.
- Aspects of police culture – particularly social isolation / solidarity with colleagues (Skolnick, 1994; Punch, 1983) result in a suspicious body of participants, reluctant to provide ethnographers with access to 'back-stage performances' (Goffman 1972) lest they reveal misconduct or unethical practices.
- But 'observer effect' can be lessened where a rapport is established between researcher and participant (see, e.g., Cain 1973, Van Maanen 1978, Smith and Gray 1985, Ericson 1982).
- Transition from being 'granted formal access [to] the accomplishment of social access on an everyday interpersonal level' (Loftus 2009: 202)
- If achieved, research subjects are likely to begin to offer meaningful (even enthusiastic) cooperation with the project.
- The question of how ethnographers of the police can become 'accepted' in this way is, therefore, an important one.

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Perceptions of us: how police react to our presence in the field

- 'Confessional tales' (Van Maanen 2011: 74)
- Negotiation of 'mountains' and 'molehills' (Rowe 2007)
- Brief illustrative examples, from my own study (and the works of others), are used to explore the range of ways in which the personal attributes of researchers can shape police responses to their presence in the field.

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Social positioning

- Perceived class/status characteristics are likely to colour field relations and information uncovered as a result
- Brown (1996) has usefully developed four typologies (e.g., 'inside insiders', 'outside insiders', 'inside outsiders' and 'outside outsiders') to help us sort through this inevitable part of the ethnographic process.
- From the outset of my study, it was known by most of the officers I observed that I was a research student from a university. Thus, in the closed 'them' verses 'us' / 'insider' verses 'outsider' world of policing (Lee and Punch 2003: 235; Reiner 2000), this knowledge firmly cast me as an 'outsider', but also generated a perception that I was a member of an elite group.
- Reinforced by comments made during the fieldwork.

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Age and gender

- Male and heterosexist culture of policing (also, Loftus 2009).
- Anna Souhami (2020: 211), 'continuous sexualised banter'
- Loftus (2009: 207) - male officers made sexual advances towards her.
- Marks (2004: 881) reported that 'flirtatious undertones' to some of the relationships that she established with the male police officers she observed 'may have played a minor role in facilitating the research'.
- IOM Police overwhelmingly male and in their mid to late 30s. This meant that my age and gender (early-30s male) – to an extent left me well-positioned within the research field

- Shared interests in sports and nutrition proved useful in developing positive relationships with some of the younger male officers similarly concerned with men's health and fitness.
- Yet whilst personal aspects of my biography seemed to generate good field relations with some of the officers I encountered, my ethnicity (Black British) was incongruent to the entirely white profile of IOM police officers. These cross racial dynamics, therefore, served as a further point of reflexive practice.

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Ethnicity

- Research subjects may interact differently with ethnographers whose ethnicities they share, against those with backgrounds distinctive from their own.
- **Mike Rowe (2007: 40)** observed uniformed police officers, as part of a study into what shaped officers' decision-making and exercise of discretion. He noted that as a white mid-30s male he was 'well placed' within the dominant ethnicity of the police organisation.
- For **Marks (2004: 882)**, however, 'whiteness' proved to be 'more complicated than being a woman' during her study of the transformation of a specialised police unit in South Africa.
- For me, as a black male observing predominantly white police officers, it was therefore important to evaluate the extent to which my ethnicity may have affected the levels of trust and acceptance I secured within the field; an inquiry made more urgent by the consistent and recurrent themes of racism within criminological research on frontline policing, at that time.
- I witnessed examples of racial stereotypes unproblematically applied to men of minority ethnic backgrounds. On one occasion, for example, a patrol officer, I encountered, referred to a man of apparent Pakistani origin as 'Mo' (reflecting a racist notion that men of Pakistani origin are called Mohammad (The Guardian, 2014)), despite later conceding that he did not in fact know the man's name.

- That I witnessed episodes of racialised policing seems to indicate either that IOM police paid little attention to my ethnicity or that this obstacle had in some way been overcome. The result was that I was viewed predominantly as a naïve researcher, rather than a suspicious Black man and not frozen out of situations where I might otherwise have been.
- These fragments of my fieldwork experience expose the at times disorderly process of police ethnography, but also bring us to the principal dimension of reflexivity explored in this chapter:
- whether an obstructive and uncooperative (or enthusiastic and inclusionary) response of participants to our presence in the field may sometimes be better explained by the way officers conceptualise their own role within the police organisation, than by biographical identifiers of police ethnographers.

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Conceptualising them: the need for reflexive awareness of the policeman's role

Literature on police culture unfolds a complex picture of the differences in how police functions are understood and experienced by officers themselves.

- Roles for women (DV etc...)
- "Real police work" v "bullshit"

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Arrangement of policework in IOM

- Time spent with two sets of officers, each set carrying out different roles:

1. Police offender managers

- Plain-clothed officers, deployed as police offender managers, gather intelligence and monitor people for signs of reoffending. At the same time, they attempt to draw them away from crime, working alongside the other agencies,

facilitating access to drug services, education, employment, and stable housing arrangements – the ‘carrot’.

2. Uniformed police officers

- Where there is evidence that a person is failing to comply with licence conditions, or engage with IOM positively, traditional ‘catch and convict’ policing methods are employed by a distinctive set of uniformed patrol officers – the ‘stick’.

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Conceptualising the offender management role

- Attempting to support offenders into rehabilitative services also locates the work on the margins of the ‘crime fighting’ model of policing and its attendant cultural characteristics.
- Offender manager role can be understood as deviant within orthodox conceptions of police functions
- May also have significant practical implications for ethnographers.
- Officers that perceive themselves and their work to be outside institutional definitions of ‘normal’ –i.e., not as good cops engaged in culturally valued masculine, aggressive, traditional methods of crime fighting and protecting victims– may lack the confidence to present their role to outsider researchers.
- Some were sceptical about the chances of offender change
- Some did not carry out their role properly
- Two forms of deviance
- Offender managers might thus prove to be hesitant research participants, because not only do they feel uncomfortable in their role, but they would also be reluctant for ethnographers to document how they depart from it in practice.

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'Deviant' police offender managers: obstructive and uncooperative

- Suspicion – POMs interrogated the nature of my relations with senior management.
- Field tests
- Concerns about 'results' ending up on youtube'

- my sense was that these officers were particularly resistant to outside scrutiny because they felt uneasy in their role and often departed from it during interactions with offenders, therefore leaving themselves open to criticism.

- It was my belief that these concerns resulted in a majority of police offender managers adopting exclusionary practices during the fieldwork.

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Diversionsary practices

- Requests to accompany officers on visits, rebuffed – claims I was 'too late' (despite my presence in the office and readiness).
- Gatekeeping responsibilities sometimes delegated to one of the IOM partnership agencies, usually the probation service – subsequently refused permission.

- Officers suggested that my presence on offender visits would cause logistical problems or disrupt what it was the officers were aiming to achieve.

- Might find activities boring

- Can we link the diversionsary tactics of the majority of offender managers to the usual concerns the police have about allowing outsiders to observe frontline behaviour?

- Not in this instance.

- Other groups of IOM police officers responded much more positively to my presence in the research field.

- Four hundred hours of observations were sufficient for me to determine that greater levels of trust and confidence were exhibited by that minority of police offender managers who had adopted a more welfare-orientated culture and practice.
- Remarks made by the IOM sergeant during the fieldwork reinforce the apparently different outlook of these officers.
- Referring to a small group of police offender managers, focused on 'helping [offenders] find the right agency to recover', the sergeant suggested that I '... might have a better time over at [the Central office]. They're a bit more hands on with their offenders over there'.

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A different role conception, meant a different reception

- Observations of the 'Central office' group of police offender managers immediately brought into sharp focus a conceptualisation of the IOM police role that was distinct from dominant cultural (crime fighting) definitions of street-level police work.
- These officers had embraced a shift in police work, away from traditional policing, towards a rehabilitative approach historically associated with the probation service (Mawby and Worrall 2011, Padfield and Maruna 2006: 339, Garland 2001).
- The significance of this is that it suggests that where police officers are comfortable with their own role, they are more willing to open up themselves to scrutiny. Further supporting evidence for this argument came from time observing IOM patrol officers.

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Observing IOM patrol officers: more evidence of the importance of role conception

- IOM patrol officers appeared to be cooperative, even enthusiastic, participants:

- Common to get a mix of enthusiasm and ready cooperation on the part of some police officers (e.g., Belur 2014, Smith and Gray 1985, Hoyle 1998), alongside caution and reluctance among others (e.g., Reiner 1978, Lundman and Fox 1978, Westmarland 2001).
- But these reflections document the experiences of researchers encountering one type of police officer only (patrol officers) and inevitably they will have encountered different levels of cooperation across these different studies (or will have reached different evaluations of what may have been similar levels of cooperation across the research).
- Where the ethnographic record of my own study is distinct is that I was observing two quite different groups of officers, albeit all working in the same area of policing: IOM.
- Although, I was also able to cultivate relaxed and friendly field relations with some police officers, working cooperation was more easily achieved with officers that were both comfortable with their role and kept within its parameters (or at least that is how they would have seen it).

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Can varying levels of trust and acceptance be otherwise explained?

- Conceivable, internal cultural differences between IOM patrol officers and police offender managers may have resulted in one group exhibiting more hostility to research than the other. This would mean levels of acceptance could be specifically dependent on the sub-group of officers being observed.
- Perhaps IOM officers that were more comfortable with being observed had become desensitised to researchers due to previous exposure to and experience of police researchers. Indeed, it was evident that the IOM unit that was the focus of my study had been subject to much research – even television coverage – prior to my arrival.
- Finally, there is the possibility that variations in access may be explained by differences in supervisory tones and styles between the managers of police officers who willingly participated in the study and those that remained resistant to being observed.

- But these factors matter only if a disparity in levels of acceptance between the two groups of participants was apparent; it was not. Instead, police officers from both sub-groups were open to being studied.

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Can varying levels of trust and acceptance be otherwise explained?

- It was simply that a majority of officers (those that perceived their work as 'deviant'), within the sub-group of police offender managers, made concerted and determined attempts to prevent observation of the bulk of their work.
- The police offender managers I encountered in the first IOM office were in general far less willing to cooperate with the research than the those situated in the 'Central' office, despite the fact that both groups had been exposed to a series of researchers, both groups were managed in similar ways, both groups had the same allotted tasks to complete and both groups were aware that senior management was supportive of my study.

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Can varying levels of trust and acceptance be otherwise explained?

- The difference between the two can be reduced to the fact that the offender managers in 'Central' largely accepted and valued their assigned role, whilst those in the first office, largely did not.
- Role-conception therefore offers both a plausible explanation for the varying levels of access and trust cultivated within the IOM unit.
- It is a useful lens through which to understand participant-research field relations that as ethnographers we should adopt and use more systematically in the field.

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Conclusions: the virtues of ethnography

- These are understandings about distinctions in cooperation between two groups of police officers, along with a further significant distinction to be found in the form of a sub-grouping of 'deviant' officers within one of these groups.
- They were enabled by the ethnographic process, and that process alone.
- Disparities in participant cooperation would likely have been revealed had other research methods (e.g., focus groups and/or interviews) been utilised solely. Differences in participant enthusiasm for, and cooperation with, the project would, of course, become obvious during interviews for example, if one group of officers were much more forthcoming in their answers/contributions than another group. Less obvious, however, would be the reasons for the difference because gaining such knowledge would be dependent on the words of the officers in question.
- Participant observations allowed me to not only to focus on the words of participants (useful in uncovering the reconstruction of 'real' policework, in the IOM context), but more importantly their actions (i.e., the diversionary practices of some police officers).
- It was the latter context in which meaningful insights about the importance of role conception to the trust and acceptance process were developed.