

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

*Police researchers have highlighted the importance of gaining a measure of trust and acceptance from the police officers they study. Reflexive ‘tales from the field’ have stressed the need to consider whether one’s own personal characteristics may shape the research relationship and impact on the quality of data collected. Little attention, however, has been paid to the implications for trust and acceptance of the way in which police officers conceptualise their own role. In the case study discussed below, significant attempts were made by some police officers to avoid being observed for the purpose of the research. One explanation for this was that the researcher’s biography—a young, black, male, university student—may have heightened the usual concerns about allowing outsiders to study police behaviour. The problem with this explanation—made clear throughout the ethnographic process—was that 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. There was no evidence to suggest that those who were receptive to the research held less-problematic views about the researcher’s personal characteristics. It seemed instead that the more comfortable police officers were with their particular policing role, the more willing they were to being researched. This leads to the conclusion that reflexive accounts of police–ethnographer field relations, should attend to how police officers conceptualise their intuitional role.*

### **1. Introduction**

The desire of social researchers to understand police practice and culture has led many to adopt or combine different methodological tools in an effort to do so. Some policing studies have been based on interviews with police officers, whilst other work has relied almost entirely on the analysis of records, statistics and documents relating to policing efforts. Both approaches generate data rooted in accounts offered by police officers themselves. Of course, this does not mean that such accounts are less valuable or relevant to the researcher, but the methods do hamper the ability of researchers to examine information that the same participants might prefer to dissimulate. This makes ethnography an attractive technique, particularly for those increasingly concerned with 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’ (Smith and Gray 1985, Young 1991, Chan 1997, Dixon 1997, Waddington 1998, Westmarland 2001, Loftus 2009, Reiner 2010, Cockcroft 2020)). Observing police officers can serve as an 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 (Cram, 2016, Loftus 2009, Van Maanen 1973, Bacon, 2018).

One problem that the ethnographic approach raises is that the presence of an observer can alter the behaviour of the police. If so, it is most likely to do so in the direction of suspicion and introversion among participants (Skolnick, 1966). Both reactions have broad implications for the quality of data and potentially the validity of the study (Reiner and Newburn 2008). Thus, it is of little wonder 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. But how does one go about securing the requisite degree of trust and acceptance from a body of research participants whose job it is to be suspicious? For answers

one might turn to the reflective accounts of police researchers. These tales from the field (most often in the form of after-the-fact, written, representations of the fieldwork experience) conclude that trust between the police and researcher is unlikely to ever be complete. They emphasise that particular factors, including personal biography and the researcher's presentation of self, impact in varying 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). My own experience of observing police officers confirm these assumptions, but also highlight an additional concern that should form part of the reflexive practice of police ethnographers – the role officers carry out within the police organisation.

Ethnographic studies of police culture have produced evidence of the discrete ways in which police officers conceptualise their role (Reiner 1978, Young 1991, Marks 2005, McConville *et al* 1991). Take for example, the constructed structural divides of 'them' (managers) and 'us' (street cops) that exist within the hierarchy of the police institution (Reuss-Ianni, 1983), or the softer distinctions linked to the 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)). The predominance of spatial and temporal constructs within the police institution has a bearing on how police officers of different ranks and roles interact (Young 1991: 64, Reiner 1978). Building on this point – and returning to the problem of trust and acceptance faced by ethnographers of the police – it is plausible that this form of role conceptualisation may also shape police-researcher interactions and offer an explanation for exclusionary (or indeed inclusionary) practices of police officers, during the research process.

The basic structure of this chapter is as follows. It begins with a brief historical overview of the importance of ethnography to police research. This is followed by discussion of the problems of access, trust and validity of data, common in observational police research. Barriers to accessing the police organisation can be overcome and trust built with participants through relational work. However, there is also a need to reflect on one's positionality within the research field because of the mediating role of the researcher in the generation of data (Daly 2007). It is not my intention to venture into debates about the difficulties associated with getting over the hurdle of gaining official approval from those who control access to police research sites. Rather, attention here will be firmly upon my own and other researchers' experience of achieving trust and cooperation from those in the research site after formal access has been granted. A particularly 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. At the end of the observation period, I carried out 44 interviews with IOM workers and offenders. Police interviewees included, nine police offender managers, two patrol officers, one police inspector, one police offender manager supervisor of the rank of sergeant and one assistant chief constable. IOM involves the police working alongside Prison and Probation services and Criminal Justice Intervention Teams, to reduce offending by prolific offenders. Some of this work consists of traditional policing methods carried out by uniformed patrol officers, but also a more novel aspect of policing: police officers, operating as plain clothed 'offender managers', engaging in rehabilitative work with offenders. I wanted to explore empirically what type of policing was taking place within the framework of IOM and to theorise about what was shaping police decision-making during interactions with IOM offenders. 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 police officer's institutional perception of self. This is the main argument of the chapter, of which the latter sections are used to develop this empirical position.

First, however in section four, consideration is given to the extent to which one's personal characteristics may structure the research relationship and impact on the validity of the data generated. Whether, for instance, my identity as a young, black male, university student, amplified the usual police concerns about allowing 'outsiders in' to study the behaviour of frontline police officers. Each characteristic is explored, in turn, through the lens of fieldwork moments, in which my identity was brought into sharp focus – either complicating or easing issues of trust and acceptance. 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. As will become clear, personal traits did play a role in framing police officer responses to my presence in the field, although not to the extent anticipated.

In the fifth and final empirical section of the chapter, however, I show that just as important to the trust and acceptance process was how these officers conceptualised their role within the police organisation. The chapter thus closes with the conclusion that 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. Sharpening the focus in this way, helps us understand better the complex relationship between police officer and researcher that arises whilst doing police research. This is particularly germane, however, in the specific the context of ethnography, because of its emphasis on sustained participant observation, and the extended social interactions this requires.

## **2. From frame to field: the ethnographic imperative**

Oscillating between criminal investigation, order maintenance and social service-type functions (Mawby 2014; Bowling *et al.* 2019; Patterson and Swan 2019), the police have a broad mandate to encroach on the day-to-day lives of the public. This precipitates police-citizen relationships that can be complex, even adversarial, in nature. Those that study the police often seek deeper understandings of these relationships, but this can be difficult to achieve due to the circumstances with which researchers are often confronted on entering the policing field. Everyday policing (typically involving uniform patrol work and plain-clothed investigation) tends to be conducted away from the immediate oversight of organisational supervisors and whilst some evidence suggests that technology (e.g., body-worn cameras) has improved the visibility of some police activity (Koslicki 2019, White 2014), front line officers remain largely in control of their own work situations. This 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).

It is the potential for disparity between what officers said they did and what they actually did that makes ethnography an invaluable technique for uncovering police practice and culture, which might otherwise remain obscured from the immediate purview of researchers (Fassin 2013: 21). Instead, ‘total immersion’ (Goffman 1989: 125) in the police field has enabled ethnographers to uncover the working values, craft-rules and routine activities of the police in a variety of settings. Studies have focused on the talk and actions of uniformed patrol officers (e.g., Westley 1953 and 1970, Banton 1964, Skolnick 1966, Cain 1973, Van Maanen 1973, Punch 1979, Holdaway 1983, Smith and Grey 1983, Heinsler, Kleinman, and Stenross 1990, Chan 1997, Brown 1997, Choongh 1998, Loftus 2009), whilst other research has captured the operational practices and cultures of specialist police, like detectives (e.g., Hobbs 1988, Young 1991, Bacon 2016), firearms officers (Westmarland 1991), covert operatives (Loftus *et al.* 2016), police offender managers (Cram 2016 and 2018), private policing (Diphorn 2012) and non-warranted, police community support officers (e.g., Cosgrove 2015, De Camargo 2018, O’Neil 2019). These ethnographic works provide valuable insights into police–citizen encounters, interactions between police officers themselves, along with deep theoretical understandings of ‘the processes, structures and meanings that sustain and motivate this social group’ (Bacon *et al.* 2020: 2).

### **3. Police ethnography and the problem of data validity**

Ethnography has made an important contribution to our knowledge of police action and culture, but concerns have also been raised about the validity of the data generated through the method. Ethnographers may for example influence those they are observing and be influenced by the people and the events being observed. Skolnick (1966: 39) signed (as a witness) several confessions given by suspects in his presence while the suspect was interrogated by a detective, whilst Rowe (2007: 41-42) (after some internal deliberation) discretely informed the police officers he was observing that a suspect in their custody had “surreptitiously put something in his mouth and swallow[ed] it”. The officers thanked him but took no action, deciding instead that it would be best to “keep this between ourselves”. The need to navigate ethical dilemmas during fieldwork is an inevitable aspect of ethnography and I offer no simple solutions to this enduring problem. Yet the experiences of Skolnick and Rowe do provide support for Spano’s (2005: 523) insistence that 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).

That ethnographers may disrupt and/or influence the talk and actions of those they observe is a problem further intensified in police research. Central to the police officer’s working personality are feelings of social isolation and a resultant sense of solidarity with colleagues (Skolnick, 1994; Punch, 1983). These twin, intertwined aspects of police sub-culture reflect a tendency among officers to perceive the media as increasingly hostile and the public devoid of understanding when it comes to what officers’ face day-to-day (Reiner 2010, Loftus 2009). The result is a suspicious body of participants, reluctant to provide ethnographers with access to ‘back-stage performances’ (Goffman 1972) lest they reveal misconduct or unethical practices. Even where researchers are granted formal access to the police organisation, efforts may be made by the officers they observe to minimise their intrusion, shield them from certain activity, and/or colour what they see (Van Maanen 1988: 89, Punch 1979, Smith and Gray 1985: 299, Reiner 2000). These dynamics present a particular challenge to ethnographers seeking to unearth representative patterns of police culture and practice, but there remains cause for optimism. Evidence does suggest that

this type of ‘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). Loftus (2009: 202) describes this as the transition from being ‘granted formal access [to] the accomplishment of social access on an everyday interpersonal level’. If achieved, research subjects (both those who are the focus of the research and gatekeepers) 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.

#### **4. Perceptions of us: how police officers interpret and react to ethnographers in the field**

For decades now, accounts of police ethnography have contained ‘confessional tales’ (Van Maanen 2011: 74) on how such works came into being. Fascinating narratives document the difficulties, uncertainties and barriers faced by ‘outsider’ (Reiner 2000, Brown 1996) researchers as they negotiated with hesitant gatekeepers and engaged in the routine activities of the police in a bid to gain access to and become accepted by officers they encountered (e.g., Skolnick 1966, Punch 1979, Cain 1973 and 1989, Hoyle 1998, Marks 2005, Loftus 2009, Souhami 2020). Reading these accounts not only reveals the messiness of ethnographic fieldwork, it can also be instructive in shaping one’s expectations of the ethical ‘mountains’ and ‘molehills’ (Rowe 2007) police researchers may be required to navigate on entering the policing milieu. At the core of the advice is an identifiable thread, also apparent in the discussion that follows. Gaining the trust and acceptance of the officers we observe, requires complex relational work and a reflexive awareness of how officers interpret and react to the characteristics of observers in ‘culturally prescribed ways’ (Hunt 1984: 283). In this section, 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.

##### **4.1 Social positioning**

To be reflexive about social positioning is to consider how our class/status characteristics may be perceived by frontline officers, for any assumptions are likely to colour field relations and the information uncovered as a result (Smith and Gray 1985: 305, Rowe 2007, Marks 2003). 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. This position was implicitly reinforced several times during general conversations with officers, but one particular exchange springs to mind. Whilst walking through the local town centre with a police offender manager, we passed two men in the street. I recognised one of the men as a service user of a charitable organisation with which I had previously worked. The man nodded towards me and said “Hello”. After we walked on by, Mike turned to me and asked in feigned ‘posh accent’, whether the two men were “golfing buddies of mine”. Although, such comments may be seen as consistent with researcher-participant joking, common in police research (see e.g., Loftus 2009: 206, Souhami 2020) the character and implication of Mike’s question was clear: golfing is a pastime associated with the elite – a group of which he perceived me to be a part.

On a further occasion, another police offender manager suggested that once finished I should “pop back in in the future and say hello ...you know – when you’re in the House of Lords or something”. Such comments indicate that unlike Loftus (2009: 207), who suggested that her ‘working class background’ enabled her to avoid ‘stereotypes officers may have held of a pompous university graduate’, my status of research student (or “our colleague from the university”, to which I was sometimes referred), led officers to perceive me as elitist and out of touch with their experiences at the ‘sharp end’ (see also, Lee and Punch, 2007, Tornquist and Kallsen 1994, Susman *et al.* 1989). Unfortunately, many officers seemed reluctant to educate me into the ‘realities’ of their work (see further below), which led me to reflect on whether aspects of my identity, such as age, gender and/or race, were also disrupting the process of negotiating day-to-day access.

#### 4.2 Age and gender

Reflexive accounts of police ethnography make clear that age and gender shape the experience of police researchers in the field. For example, the work of Westmarland (2001: 10) has emphasised that being young and female restricted access to aspects of the ascendant male and heterosexist culture of policing (also, Loftus 2009). Anna Souhami (2020: 211), noted the ‘continuous sexualised banter’ she was subject to during her observational study of policing in the aftermath of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, whilst Loftus (2009: 207) lamented moments where male officers made sexual advances towards her. But there were also times where female ethnographers have found their gender to be more advantageous than disadvantageous.

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’. Loftus (2009: 206) again offers revealing reflections on her positionality as a woman in a male dominated environment: ‘I was viewed as naturally trustworthy and unthreatening. Officers confided in me about problems they were experiencing, in their working and personal lives, and these moments were crucial for developing rapport’ (also, Huggin & Glebbeek, 2003, Horn 1997). The rank-and-file police officers I observed during my study on IOM were overwhelmingly male and in their mid to late 30s. This meant that my age and gender (early-30s male) should have left me well-positioned within the IOM organisational field; and to an extent it did. An affinity for sports and an interest in nutrition proved useful in developing positive relationships with some of the younger male officers similarly concerned with men’s health and fitness. This led to one officer putting together a variety of fitness videos on a ‘USB data stick’, also suggesting we become ‘friends’ on a well-known social media platform, so we could continue the fitness knowledge exchange. On a further occasion, after I expressed an interest in the progress of the local football team, a police offender manager diverted from the usual route back to the office and instead drove to the club training ground. Together we spent the next 40 minutes watching the players work through routines, sharing opinions on their individual abilities. 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.

### 4.3 Ethnicity

Reports of the fieldwork process are most often constructed after the event, thus placing ethnographers back in the police milieu as reflexive witnesses to the ways in which the ethnographic data was generated. But the process of reflection also involves the examination of one's own preconceptions, biases, and motives (Van Maanen, 2011: 93). Before entering the field, I perused the ethnographic records of other police researchers. I found evidence, which reinforced my own preconceived assumption that white police officers (as I suspected IOM police officers would be), operating in a historical and social context of where they are under scrutiny, and might interact differently with researchers whose ethnicities they shared, against mine that differed to their own. For example, Huggins's work on danger, violence and secrecy in Latin American Policing led her to the conclusion that 'pale Anglo-whiteness', in a socio-cultural system that values light skin and associated physical characteristics above the darker ones, helped her secure interviewees and promoted somewhat greater willingness among them to disclose valued secrets about theirs and others' police atrocities (Huggins & Glebbeek 2003: 373). 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. On the one hand it seemed to smooth initial negotiations with senior gate keepers and provided 'a point of identification for the [minority] white members of the unit [who Marks felt] would otherwise have refused any access to their subcultural existence in the unit'. Yet at the same time, Marks sensed that African members of the unit 'engaged ... less openly, in formal interviews than members of other racial groupings'.

It can be seen from the above review that experiences of the research process and the quality materials obtained from participants may be partly dependent on the ethnic background of the researcher. 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. A voluminous literature points to the historical (e.g., Westley 1953, Banton 1964, Skolnick 1966, Hunte 1966, Smith and Grey 1985, Foster 1989) and contemporaneous (e.g., Barrett *et al.* 2014, Hargreaves 2018, Gaston 2019) mistreatment of ethnic minorities. However, black men in particular have been subject to racially disparate policing, underpinned by prejudicial and negative assumptions. 'Blackness' is a symbolic marker for suspicion, threat and criminality (Bell, 2018).

During observations of IOM police officers, 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. In a further instance, two black men (of Caribbean and Somalian heritage, respectively) occupying a passing car were mocked by patrol officers mimicking accents and making gestures stereotypically associated with Black Americans. I should emphasise that

events of this type were uncommon during the fieldwork, but such instances did raise the possibility that the police officers I observed also imposed certain personal characteristics onto me as a result of their broader framing of Black men. Nevertheless, I found little evidence throughout my time with either offender managers or uniformed patrol police that these officers transferred any traditional police constructions of race onto me. 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. This finding is at odds with assumptions that can be drawn from the reflections on cross-racial research dynamics discussed above. My ethnicity should have blocked (or at the very least significantly reduced) opportunities to witness the type of conduct documented above; it did not (Cram 2016).

Nevertheless, securing the trust and acceptance of the police officers I observed was a process of continuous negotiation and never fully achieved. There was no open hostility toward me or my study, but as the fieldwork progressed it became apparent that some officers were actively preventing me from observing IOM police work. Some police offender managers, for example, ducked and weaved their way out of participating, avoiding pre-arranged observations by leaving the office earlier than planned and before I had arrived. Others responded to my requests to watch particular activities by suggesting that what they were tasked with would “not be of much use to the study”. Once I arranged to accompany a police offender manager as he attended the local prison for a ‘pre-release visit’ with an IOM offender, only to arrive at the prison at the designated time to find the visit had taken place at an earlier time. 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 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.

## **5. Conceptions of a police role: the need for reflexive awareness**

Research has identified cultural differences within police organisations, in particular between management and rank-and-file officers (Reuss-Ianni 1983, Horn 1997, Reiner 2000, Hendriks & van Hulst 2016). But the literature on police culture also unfolds a complex picture of the differences in how police functions are understood and experienced by officers themselves. Silvestri (2017) points to a ‘cult of masculinity’ within policing, emphasising (male) strength, stamina and physicality as cultural prescriptions of the ‘ideal police worker’. The result can be a gendered arrangement of police work, where women (perceived (falsely) as unpossessed of these characteristics) are marginalised to roles deemed more suited to femininity (e.g., dealing with rape victims and child abuse (Atkinson 2016, Westmarland 2001)).

Other distinctions are evidenced in value judgements made by officers on the ‘quality’ of police work. Loftus *et al.* (2016), interviewed police officers working on dedicated surveillance units, as part of a study into the working culture of covert policing. The responses they received suggested the officers were ‘acutely aware of their special position within the police organization [and felt] both apart from, and superior to other uniformed police officers’. Similarly, police working within specialist squads (e.g., those concerned with burglaries, or robberies) often view their particular ‘jobs’ as ‘quality work’



(McConville *et al.* 1991: 31) and in turn view others like theft or domestic violence as ‘bullshit’ (Loftus 2009: 95, Heidensohn 1995, Hoyle 1998). The value (as perceived by police officers themselves) of the policing activity carried out seems to be important in the construction of police identities, with the highest value ascribed to work focused on catching and convicting serious criminals.

How then is the value of a participant’s role relevant to reflexive awareness (on the part of police ethnographers) and the negotiation of problems of trust and acceptance in the police research field? These are the subjects of the final section of this chapter and best addressed by returning to the setting in which these insights were generated: IOM.

## 5.1 Arrangement of IOM police work

IOM forges close links between criminal justice organisations with the objective of preventing crime and reducing recidivism. How these aims can be achieved is guided by principles provided by the Home Office (2015), rather than detailed mandatory specifications. This allows each IOM police area to devise unique methods in response to local structures, needs and priorities. The IOM unit which formed the focus of my observational work brought together the Police, Prison and Probation services and Criminal Justice Intervention Team (a team of drugs workers, who are enlisted if the person in question has a history of substance misuse problems), in a bid to change or control the criminal activities of prolific acquisitive offenders. This is done through a mixture of rehabilitative and restrictive/enforcement-orientated interventions. Within this framework, the police take a ‘carrot’ and ‘stick’ approach to the management of IOM offenders. 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’. 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’.

## 5.2. Conceptualising the police offender manager role

The arrangement of IOM police work situates police offender managers in a role likely to be perceived as of lesser value (within police organisational structures) than other roles like, for instance, detectives (Young, 1991). 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. Rehabilitative activity requires carefully crafted and enduring relationships with offenders (McNeill and Robinson 2013, Bottoms 2001), but such activity is counter to the well-documented cultural desire among frontline police officers for high-octane, action-orientated policing (Caveney *et al.* 2020, Reiner 2010, Young 1991). The problem may be further compounded by police cynicism and pessimism – core traits of police subculture (Reiner 2010) – that generate scepticism among the rank-and-file about the likelihood of meaningful offender change. Offender management is thus neither a typical construction of ‘real police work’, nor a comfortable fit within the traditional police cultural frame.

For the reasons suggested above, the offender manager role can be understood as deviant within orthodox conceptions of police functions. As a result, police officers working with specialist units, inconsistent

with the traditional crime-fighting values of the police organisation, may find themselves ostracised and their status as ‘real police officers’ challenged (Garcia 2005: 77). But a police conceptualisation of self as deviant 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 ‘real’ 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. This is a controversial claim, however, and one that requires further substantiation.

During my own fieldwork it became apparent that many police offender managers viewed activity (supporting offenders) beyond that of typical crime control focused policing, both negatively and with a measure of scepticism about offender chances of rehabilitation: “Everybody’s going to slip up sometime [and] we’ll be there when they do”, one offender manager noted frankly. The result was that many of these officers were reluctant to put support measures in place for IOM offenders (or did so inadequately). These officers were thus deviant in a double sense. First, as noted above, the offender manager role can be positioned as deviant from police cultural practice. Secondly, the way in which these officers carried out the role deviated from the guidelines they are required to follow. The second form of deviance also reveals a sense of unease among these officers at finding themselves in a role that departs from the normalcy of ‘real police work’. 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. Even officers who are deviant in only the first sense would be unlikely to want an outsider observing what they do in practice, as that practice (within official guidelines) represents something with which these officers feel uncomfortable.

## 5.2 ‘Deviant’ police offender managers: obstructive and uncooperative

It is time now to look in a more concrete fashion at some of the practical issues associated with observing ‘deviant’ police officers. I shall begin with some comments about the suspicion encountered among police offender managers, evident from the beginning of the study.

In the early days of the project, most time was spent observing police offender managers. Some of these officers asked questions about the aims and objectives of the research, whilst others were highly suspicious of my presence in the unit and probed more deeply. For example, on day two of initial observations, one offender manager thoroughly interrogated the nature of my relations with senior management. It was clear from the conversation that I was regarded as a potential tool of management (Reiner and Newburn 2008) – a suspicion likely to be heightened by the role of senior management in facilitating access to IOM. This moment during the fieldwork brought into focus my status as an outsider researcher, alongside a test as to my positioning within the field. Of course, it is impossible to know whether I passed the test, but whilst I made significant efforts to explain the research and its objectives, police offender managers remained guarded and, for the most part, reluctant participants in the study.

The majority of these officers were clearly anxious about how their talk and action might be represented to other audiences. One police offender manager, for example, declined an interview in case a recording of the interview “ended up on YouTube”, whilst another officer expressed concerns that findings from my study might be sold to a private security firm. However, 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.

### 5.3 Diversionary practices

Various formal and informal tactics may be employed by reluctant and/or anxious research participants to prevent ethnographers from observing and documenting information. Diphoorn (2012: 207) was refused access to two police armed response companies for 'safety reasons', whilst Loftus (2009: 204) recalls police pairing her on shifts with 'officers who could be trusted to behave appropriately'. In similar scenarios throughout my own research, there were occasions when I was deliberately frozen out of the very police activity I hoped to observe.

Early in the study, I would arrive at the beginning of a shift to find police offender managers preparing to meet with offenders in their homes. Yet although I often requested to accompany officers on these visits, rarely was I able to. Sometimes officers would claim that I was 'too late' (despite my presence in the office and readiness). A further tactic, adopted by officers, was to delegate gatekeeping responsibilities to one of the IOM partnership agencies, usually the probation service. On these occasions the partnership workers almost always refused permission for me to attend the appointment. In other instances, officers suggested that my presence on offender visits would cause logistical problems or disrupt what it was the officers were aiming to achieve. At times, some offender managers questioned the value of me observing them, suggesting that I would merely find the planned activity 'boring'. It might be thought that police offender managers would be keen to show a researcher the more interesting aspects of their job (except, of course, for the problem of the double layer of deviance discussed above). What these instances demonstrate, however, is that most seemed eager to avoid being observed precisely when observations could have been most revealing (activity taking place away from the office).

It might be tempting to link the diversionary tactics of the majority of offender managers to the usual concerns the police have about allowing outsiders to observe frontline behaviour. We should, however, give pause to this assumption. Other groups of IOM police officers responded much more positively to my presence in the research field. As police researchers we can never be sure whether what we are told and shown is an accurate snapshot of the full range of routine behaviour of the police officers we encounter. Ethnography, as a method, does, however, go some way to reducing this uncertainty, given that it is likely to result in extensive periods of time spent observing officers; and, as Smith and Gray point out, 'The longer the observer is with [the police] the more officers tend to settle back into their usual pattern of activity'. For my part, four hundred hours of observations were sufficient for me to determine that that minority of police offender managers who had adopted a more welfare-orientated culture and practice exhibited greater levels of trust and confidence. 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'.

#### 5.4 A different role conception = 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 notions of police work, away from the traditional orientation of the police institution, towards a rehabilitative approach historically associated with the probation service (Mawby and Worrall 2011, Padfield and Maruna 2006: 339, Garland 2001). Asked in interview, 'How do you view the role?', the main answers from Central offender managers were: 'helping [offenders] find the right agency to recover'; 'The main side of the role that I enjoy is helping [offenders really]'; 'My role is kind of a police officer bolt on to what probation has always done I'd imagine ... to try and offer as best I can the support that probation do to reduce offending'.

Gaining the trust of groups engaged in deviant behaviour (or work) can be fraught with methodological difficulties (Hobbs 2001; Maguire 2007), but these ostensibly welfare focused police offender managers were much more open to being observed than their more conventional colleagues. A fieldwork observation recorded shortly after my arrival at the Central office illustrates this point:

Mike [police offender manager], introduced himself and gave me a quick overview of his role, including (and in marked contrast to the [offender managers] I had encountered so far) high levels of engagement with IOM offenders. His focus was building a rapport with offenders, both those in the community and those in custody. In support of this aim, Mike, along with an IOM prison officer Peter, held what he called a weekly "surgery" within the prison walls. "This is about 'continuity' between the prison and the community. Often, I'm the only link with the community that these offenders have. Most of them don't get many visits. I act as the reactive arm for the probation service. I conduct visits they request and deliver letters to offenders, providing details of their appointments. The relationship I have with the probation service is very good." I asked how much time Mike spent out of the office. "4 hours a day". "Do you consider yourself as proactive?" I asked. "I like to think so ... I like to get out and see people in their own environment ... You'll have to come to the prison, to a surgery; we're holding one on Thursday. Today, though, Peter and me have to visit one of ours in the court cells. He was arrested last night. In fact, he was only released from prison two days ago. It would be a good case for you; come along".

This response was a stark contrast to the suspicion and avoidance on the part of the police offender managers I had encountered up until this point. Here was an IOM police officer much more receptive to both my study and presence within the unit. Such cooperation provided a refreshing change and was not just a one-off instance, as I found it easier to gain acceptance within the Central office more generally. 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.

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

Given the high levels of anxiety my presence in the IOM unit had generated amongst the majority of police offender managers I had so far encountered, I was expectant of a similar experience on beginning

observations of IOM patrol officers. It was surprising then that IOM patrol officers appeared to be cooperative, even enthusiastic, participants:

Arrived at the police station at 2.00pm. Slightly apprehensive, having not yet met any officers from this team. 'Buzzed' through the door and shown to a 'situation room'. Inspector was in there, along with other IOM patrol officers; all were men. Most in front of computers and/or putting on body armour, generally getting ready for the shift ahead. Inspector, quite enthusiastically, outlined to me where patrol officers 'fit' within the IOM structure: to disrupt the criminal activities of IOM offenders, intelligence suggests are back committing crime or breaking prison release licence conditions.

"We've got something on for you today" he informed me – again enthusiastically. "We're conducting a surveillance operation around a specific offender. Intel suggests he's looking really rough and we're pretty sure he's [offending]". He's due to attend a probation appointment; probation will tell us when he leaves the appointment, and our guys will pick up his trail. You'll be with two response officers who will make the arrest". Whilst this was being explained to me some of the other officers gathered at the table. It was noticeable that the research seemed to genuinely interest officers in this team. Some asked questions about the research. "What is it you're looking at? You trying to find out how these guys tick?" Jokes were also made, "What, you've turned up on your first day with no cakes?"

The ethnographic records of other observational studies of policing also evidence 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).

Like my experience with the more support-focused police offender managers, the reception to my study and presence within the unit was again in clear juxtaposition to how I had been received by the majority of offender managers. IOM patrol officers needed little encouragement to display their skills and recount experiences of their working lives to an outsider. Like other police researchers (e.g., Lundman and Fox 1978, Marks 2004, Rowe 2007, Loftus 2009), I was taken to local 'hot-spots', subjected to detailed narratives on the nature of policing and asked if there was anything I wanted to see or experience whilst in the field. On occasion, patrol officers would point to specific operations that they believed would inform the study. Various fieldnote extracts would demonstrate these points, but the following seems most apposite:

As the shift was ending, Martin asked when I would be back. I replied, suggesting that I had probably spent enough time in the research field. Martin then suggested that I hang on until the

weekend as a particular operation involving IOM ‘working girls’ was planned; this, he suggested, would make good data for the study. “Come for a night out”, he joked.

No matter how discrete observers may attempt to be, ethnographers will always to a degree influence the activities of participants during fieldwork. Accounts of police ethnographies suggest that patrol officers often seek out ‘action’ that they assume will interest the observer (e.g., Smith and Gray (1985: 302), but these officers were committed to, and self-assured about, their work in ways not exhibited (overtly at least) by the majority of offender managers I encountered. It was this fact, I believe, that increased the levels of trust and acceptance I was afforded and thus the quality of data recorded during this part of the project.

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). Meaningful insights about the importance of role conception to the trust and acceptance process were developed in the latter context.

## 5.6 Can varying levels of trust and acceptance be otherwise explained?

We have seen that how police officers respond to ethnographers may be as much dependent on the officers’ perception of their own role within the police organisation as the biographical traits of observers. However, meaningful reflexivity calls for at least a brief inquiry into whether there may be alternative explanations for differential receptions to my presence in the field. It is conceivable, for instance, that 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. It also may be that those 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.

The potential for additional field dynamics, like those noted immediately above, is high and (if present) should, of course, form part of any reflexive account of policing research. However, in this instance, 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. 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. 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, basically 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.

## **6. Conclusion: futures of reflexive practice**

As Bacon *et al* (2020: 4) observe, ‘ethnography has proven unparalleled for penetrating the inner world of police organisations and examining the working rules, tacit understandings, and underlying assumptions that operate beneath the ‘presentational canopy’’. Thus, as a methodological approach, participant observation has allowed us to gain a clear-sighted view of what the rank-and-file do, how they do it, and why. In furtherance of this aim – and in an effort to reduce the mediating role of the self in the production of research results (Daly 2007) – researchers must cultivate a measure of acceptance from participants in the study. Often this amounts to a complex and enduring undertaking and one that requires continuous reflexive examination of our position as researchers within the police organisational field. Yet these reflexive narratives mainly emphasise the identity of researchers as perceived by participants. This is, of course, an important dimension of reflexivity. However, hopefully this chapter has demonstrated the need to also consider the relationship between the organisational role of the police officer and the levels of acceptance afforded to researchers. Within IOM, I found a minority sub-group of police officers who appeared to have readily embraced the welfare-orientated nature of the offender manager role. These officers were confident in their job despite the work existing outside of the cultural structures of ‘real police work’. In this view, they were ‘deviant’ but clearly more relaxed in the company of a researcher than many of their colleagues, who were uneasy performing the same role and departed from it in practice. Similarly, uniformed officers, self-assured in their sense of righteousness and mission, welcomed the opportunity to tell their story and demonstrate their capabilities to me as an ‘outsider’.

Doing police ethnography requires ongoing reflexivity as to the validity of the data we capture. Several biographical dimensions must be considered as part of this practice. These reflections, however, should also include the police officer’s institutional perception of self.

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