

## Tales from the field: problems with ethnography

1. **Title**
2. **Overview**
3. **Utility of police ethnography**
  - Policing – lots of low-visibility discretionary decision-making
  - Police accounts of events or reasons for decisions are unlikely to produce objective/reliable data.
  - Helps us penetrate low-visibility police work
  - Helps us understand the complexity of police-citizen relationships/interactions
  - Gets us close to what is happening on the street
4. **Negotiating with gatekeepers**
  - PhD Research on POCA 2002 (cash seizure)
  - Actuarial justice
  - **Question:** whether FL police officers exploit POCA 2002 to secure police cultural objectives - social discipline, communicative surveillance, stamping/reinforcing authority and so on.
  - Requires understanding decision-making practices of FL police officers.
  - Ethnography – observations / interviews
5. **Restricted access / access denied**
  - May uncover information which the police would rather keep secret
  - Police anxiety about how police researchers might represent them
  - Concerns about the disclosure of sensitive information
  - Head of department not onsite – concerns about some of the more critical aspects of the proposed research
6. **Re-working the project**
  - Conference paper / methods article
    1. SLS Conference 2011 – ‘Scouring the Shires? Frontline Policing and the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002’
    2. Howard Journal article 2012 – “Understanding the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: Cash Seizure and Frontline Policing”
  - Richard takes senior police officer for a pint
  - Retain core focus of study – actuarial criminal justice methods
  - IOM – risk-management of prolific offenders
  - Pilot study – found:
    1. Partnership working between criminal justice agencies, including the police, probation, prison services and drugs workers, with the goal of reducing crime by bringing the behaviour of these people into line with societal norms, rules and laws.
7. **IOM: Carrots and Sticks**
  - **IOM** ‘carrot and stick’ approach to the management of prolific offenders and the deployment of plain-clothed police officers as ‘offender managers’ – intelligence gathers but also involved in social support.
  - **Question:** despite the novelty do police cultural goals continue to drive the actions of police officers and with what implications for those subject to the scheme?
  - Again requires access to frontline officers
8. **Restrictive access**

## **9. Problems of trust / acceptance**

- Police tactics can deviate from the rule of law:
  1. Controversial
  2. Of dubious legality
  3. Illegal
- Can lead to behavior modification on the part of the police.
- Trust never complete, but relational work must be done to maximize it.
- Extensive periods must be spent in the police field – very labour/emotionally intensive.
- Evidence suggests that acceptance/trust partly dependent on personal biography
- Age, gender and ethnicity for example, can impact on fieldwork.

## **10. Role conception**

- Time spent with two sets of officers, each set carrying out different roles:
  1. Field intelligence officers
  2. Uniformed police officers
- Significant attempts were made by some police officers to avoid being observed for the purpose of the research.
- One biographical explanation: race may have heightened the usual concerns about allowing outsiders to study frontline behavior; however,
- Different groups of police officers exhibited markedly different responses to the project, ranging from those who ducked and weaved their way out of participating to those who enthusiastically ‘created’ opportunities for the researcher to observe police–citizen interactions.
- No evidence to suggest that those who were receptive to the research held less problematic views about race.
- Rather, the argument is that the more at ease police officers were with their particular policing role, the more open they were to being researched.
- Uniformed officers, confident in their sense of righteousness and mission, welcomed the opportunity to tell their story and demonstrate their capabilities to me as an ‘outsider’.
- Minority of field intelligence officers’ that had adapted well to the novel role of offender manager (woolly/ deviant in the cultural sense), were readily open to being observed.
- Those field intelligence officers who were uneasy in their role and departed from it in practice (deviant in a double sense), were much less open to being researched.

## **11. Concluding thoughts**

- Policing ethnography useful
- Access/trust/acceptance can be difficult to achieve
- The process is labour/emotionally intensive
- Lots of important factors to consider
- Role conception adds an important lens

## *Securing access to the police research field, as a PhD student*

*POCA 2002 – access denied*

Research on Proceeds of Crime Act 2002

Actuarial justice – risk-averse criminal justice strategies – disruption of crime

Whether frontline police officers would exploit POCA powers to secure independently defined police cultural objectives –

Required understanding of the decision-making practices of frontline police officers

### METHOD

*Theory*

Hawkins's theory of criminal justice decision-making: socio-political / organisational context.

**Surround:** political setting

**Field:** police organisation

**Frames:** knowledge/experience/culture of police officers – used, by officers, to interpret and ascribe meaning to events on the street.

### **Method**

Ethnographic methods useful in this context, as they allow researchers to 'uncover and document . . . informal norms, values and practices' of frontline policing in low-visibility situations (Loftus 2010, p.201).

- Observations
- Interviews

### **Tales from the field**

Negotiating with initial gatekeepers

- Meeting with both junior and senior police managers

### **ACCESS DENIED**

- Concerns about the disclosure of sensitive information

- Head of department not onsite – concerns about some of the more critical aspects of the proposed research

### **Re-working the project**

Change the case study

- Stay within the core focus of study – actuarial criminal justice methods

DON'T WASTE THE TIME

*Conference paper / methods article*

SLS Conference 2011 – ‘Scouring the Shires? Frontline Policing and the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002’

Howard Journal article 2012 – “Understanding the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: Cash Seizure and Frontline Policing”

### **Meanwhile...**

- Richard takes senior police officer for a pint

Discussion of a new case study – whilst retaining the core focus of study

- IOM (integrated offender management)

Multi-agency management of prolific offenders – reflects actuarial criminal justice methods

### **Pilot study**

*Found*

Partnership working between criminal justice agencies, including the police, probation, prison services and drugs workers, with the goal of reducing crime by bringing the behaviour of these people into line with societal norms, rules and laws.

*Carrots and Sticks*

Novelty lies in its ‘carrot and stick’ approach to the management of prolific offenders and the deployment of plain-clothed police officers as ‘offender managers’ – intelligence gathers but also involved in social support.

*Raised the question*

Despite the novelty do police cultural goals continue to drive the actions of police officers and with what implications for those subject to the scheme?

*Theory*

Remained the same

*Method*

Getting close to police 'action'

Ethnography: Observations and interviews.

Access

Requires access to frontline officers

Access negotiations / acceptance once through the initial gate

Research proposal submitted to senior IOM managers

- Questions about method answered / refined

**IOM – ACCESS GRANTED**

400 hours of observations conducted over 12 months

*2 sets of police officers - with different operational roles*

350 hours with offender managers (field intelligence officers)

50 hours with uniformed police officers (enforcement)

**Relational work between researchers and the police**

*Continuous negotiations re access and acceptance, once 'inside'*

Policing dangerous and dirty work

Police tactics can deviate from the rule of law:

- Controversial
- Of dubious legality
- Illegal

**Resulting problems of access and trust**

**Access:** research may uncover information, which the police would rather keep secret

- Police anxiety about how police researchers might represent them

**Trust:** whether the researcher has the trust of the police

- Behavior modification on the part of the police

- Trust never complete, but relational work must be done to maximize it
- Extensive periods must be spent in the police field – very labour/emotionally intensive
- Evidence suggests that acceptance/trust partly dependent on personal biography
- Age, gender and ethnicity for example, can impact on fieldwork.

### **Role conceptualisation also important**

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

3. Field intelligence officers
4. Uniformed police officers

Significant attempts were made by some police officers to avoid being observed for the purpose of the research.

One biographical explanation: race may have heightened the usual concerns about allowing outsiders to study frontline behavior; however,

Different groups of police officers exhibited markedly different responses to the project, ranging from those who ducked and weaved their way out of participating to those who enthusiastically ‘created’ opportunities for the researcher to observe police–citizen interactions.

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Rather, the argument is that the more at ease police officers were with their particular policing role, the more open they were to being researched.

Uniformed officers, confident in their sense of righteousness and mission, welcomed the opportunity to tell their story and demonstrate their capabilities to me as an ‘outsider’.

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