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Perceptions of me, conceptions of you: refining ideas of access to, and ‘acceptance’ within, the police organisational field

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ABSTRACT

Ethnographers of the police have long drawn attention to the importance of gaining a degree of trust and acceptance from those they study. Reflexive accounts ‘from the field’ have emphasised the need to consider how one’s own personal characteristics may shape the research relationship and impact on the validity of data collected. Little attention, however, has been paid to the implications for research access of the way in which police officers conceptualise their own role. In the study discussed here, significant attempts were made by some police officers to avoid being observed for the purpose of the research. One explanation for this is that the researcher’s identity as a young, black male may have heightened the usual concerns about allowing outsiders to study frontline behaviour. The difficulty with this explanation is that 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. There is no evidence to suggest that those who were receptive to the research held less problematic views about race. Rather, it is argued that the more at ease police officers were with their particular policing role, the more open they were to being researched. This leads to the conclusion that reflexive accounts of the police–researcher relationship need to pay more attention to how police officers see themselves.

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Introduction

Much study has been devoted to understanding issues of police discretion, deviance and accountability, particularly the range of informal values and cultural norms that appear to shape police decision-making: ‘police culture’ (Smith and Gray 1985, Young 1991, Chan 1997, Dixon 1997, Waddington 1998, Westmarland 2001, Loftus 2009, Reiner 2010, Cockcroft 2013). Ethnography is a useful way of penetrating the presentational canopy of police organisations, which otherwise shield ‘low visibility’ practices and the day-to-day culture of policing (Van Maanen 1973, Reiner and Newburn 2008, Loftus 2009). Those who use this approach to uncover the inner workings of frontline policing must nonetheless work hard to secure the trust and co-operation of an inherently suspicious body of research participants.

A preoccupation with police deviance has resulted in several highly critical and very public exposés (see for example, BBC Panorama 2003). Unsurprisingly, a sharp focus on questionable policing practices has heightened anxieties both amongst those who control access to the policing arena

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and those who are asked to participate in the research, that is, police officers. Some officers may believe that academic research is of little use and its 'results' cannot be meaningfully applied (Brown 1996). Even once formal access has been given, police researchers have generally encountered – initially at least – a good deal of suspicion and introversion amongst participants (Marks 2005, Loftus 2009). Such a reception is problematic given that it will impact upon the quality of data and potentially the validity of the study as a whole. It is important, therefore, that researchers become 'accepted' so as to secure genuine cooperation and trust from the people in the research site (Reiner and Newburn 2008).

This presents a particular challenge to the neophyte researcher wondering how to go about securing the requisite degree of trust. Assistance has been offered in the form of reflexive debates about the methodological dilemmas faced by police researchers and their efforts to 'become accepted' (see for example, Reiner 1978, Marks 2005, Loftus 2009, Reiner and Newburn 2008). Impressionistic (and, at times, startling) descriptions of the process of gaining acceptance during time spent observing police officers are pervasive throughout policing literatures (see, for example, Van Maanen 1995, Herbert 1997, Marks 2005). These discussions have added much to debates about the complex (and continuous) process of negotiating entry to the world of frontline policing. What has become clear is that certain factors, including personal biography and presentation of self, will impact to various degrees on the level of acceptance researchers gain within the police organisational field. Participant perceptions of any given researcher influence both access and acceptance and thus the generation of quality data. My own experience of police ethnography broadly supports these findings, but also highlights an additional consideration, one that appears absent from reflexive accounts of police ethnography – the role-conception that officers hold of themselves.

Police officers conceptualise their role in distinct spatial and temporal ways (Reiner 1978, Young 1991, Reiner 2000, Marks 2005, McConville *et al.* 1991). Demonstrated by the constructed structural divide of 'us' ('frontline' officers) and 'them' ('managers') that exists within the hierarchy of the police institution, this type of role conceptualisation has a bearing on how officers of different ranks interact (Reiner 1978). A further step is to suggest that in this way role conceptualisation may *also* shape police–researcher interactions and the exclusionary (or indeed inclusionary) practices on the part of police officers.

Drawing on the findings of a qualitative policing study, which included patrol observations carried out over 12 months, the present contribution moves beyond useful reconstructions of how police researchers came to be 'accepted' by the police officers they observed. Instead, it focuses on the importance to the access and acceptance process of the way in which participants conceptualise their own role within the police organisational field. Its aim is to offer fresh insights into the complex relationship between police officer and researcher and thus refine current understandings of the problems of trust, access and validity in qualitative studies of policing.

Method

This article draws on fieldwork carried out as part of a qualitative, localised study of one policing area. The research sought to examine what kind of policing is taking place under the umbrella of 'integrated offender management' and with what implications for offender desistance, procedural justice, and the proportionality of interventions in offenders' lives.

Integrated offender management (IOM) is a multi-agency approach to promoting desistance amongst prolific acquisitive offenders. Multi-agency, within this context, means a 'partnership' formed between four criminal justice agencies: the police, probation service, prison service and a criminal justice intervention team. Its aim is to reduce crime by identifying and targeting recidivist offenders who, according to police intelligence, are committing large amounts of crime and harming local communities (Ministry of Justice 2010). Various tactics are employed by the scheme to achieve these objectives. On the one hand, IOM places a premium on conducting targeted traditional policing interventions, for example, surveillance operations and vigorous monitoring and

enforcement of offenders' prison licence or bail conditions. On the other hand, some effort is also put into rehabilitating and supporting these offenders with the ultimate aim of promoting long-term desistance amongst the cohort.

As well as examining the experience of IOM from the perspectives of workers and the offenders they manage, a core aim of the investigation was to theorise about what was shaping police decision-making during interactions with individuals subject to IOM. The study necessitated close observations of police officers. Continuous fieldwork was carried out in five research sites across Southern England (but within one police area).

A total of 400 hours of observations were conducted over the course of 12 months. All but 50 hours of these observations were spent with field intelligence officers.¹ Further observations were conducted within a specialist unit of police officers, which acted as the 'enforcement arm' of IOM.² At the end of the observation period, 44 formal semi-structured 'exit' interviews were conducted with IOM workers and their clients. The interviewees included nine field intelligence officers, one field intelligence officer supervisor holding the rank of sergeant, six probation officers, two probation managers, two criminal justice intervention workers and one criminal justice intervention team manager. Other available senior representatives from the major stakeholders in the scheme were also interviewed. These interviewees included one Assistant Chief Constable, one Probation Chief Executive Officer and one Senior Prison Officer. Twenty offenders (10 in custody and 10 undergoing community supervision) were also interviewed. This article draws directly on the field notes and interviews recorded throughout the study as a foundation on which to theorise about role conceptualisation and access to the police research field.

Ethnography and police research

As Flood (2005, p. 47) observes, if we want to understand the complexity of relationships (in this case between police officer and citizen) we need to know what happens in those interactions, which means, in turn, that we need to observe them and watch them play out. Some authors (Loftus 2009 and Reiner and Newburn 2008, for example) point to a set of circumstances peculiar to police work that researchers are confronted by on entering the policing field. The lower ranks of the police service remain loosely supervised and generally control their own work situation. This gives officers significant scope for independent, 'low visibility', discretionary decision-making (Lipsky 1969, Allen 1982). Police officers' accounts of events or reasons given for decisions are unlikely to be questioned or challenged (other than perhaps by suspects themselves – individuals who, in any event, are likely to be discredited due to their general lack of social capital (Box and Russell 1975)).

'Total immersion' (Goffman 1989, p. 125) within the policing arena has allowed police researchers to provide us with an authoritative tapestry of thrilling and, at times, startling 'insider' accounts of police–citizen encounters, as well as reconstructions of interactions between police officers themselves. Notable ethnographic works (Banton 1964, Skolnick 1966, Wilson 1968, Westley 1970, Heinsler *et al.* 1990, Mastrofski and Parks 1990, Brown 1997, Choongh 1998, Burnett and Appleton 2004, Loftus 2009, Skinns 2011) have been hugely useful both in documenting police behaviours and in the development of a theoretical understanding of the 'values, norms, perspectives, and craft rules, which inform police conduct' – or 'cop-culture', as Reiner (1992, p. 109) puts it.

But the validity of police observational data has been criticised. Primarily, the challenges have centred on the potential for observers to influence those they are observing and to be influenced by the people and the events being observed. Spano (2005, p. 523), for example, argues that observers become part of the context of observed behaviour and can therefore 'potentially "bias" or contaminate observational data and undermine its reliability and validity' (see also, Glense and Peshkin 1992, Fine 1993, Schwalbe 1996). Moreover, the possibility that an observer might have a disruptive influence on the behaviour of frontline police officers may be heightened by 'cop-culture'. Core policing literature (Waddington 1998, Crank 1998, Reiner 2010, Skinns 2011, Reiner and Newburn 2008) suggests that the police feel isolated from a perceived hostile public and media. This is unsurprising

given that policing research has largely focused on issues of deviance resulting in criticism of police practices. Street policing can be a highly charged and dangerous setting. Dispersing 'rowdy youths', stop-search, and arrest will frequently and sometimes necessarily involve the police using force. The tactics used by the police to achieve these aims may be of 'dubious legality or clearly illegal' (Reiner and Newburn 2008, p. 353).

Disparaging accounts of street policing tactics have become commonplace within policing literatures, with researchers frequently unearthing questionable policing tactics which are pervasive throughout the rank-and-file (recent contributions include Loftus 2009 and Skinns 2011). Unsurprisingly, therefore, allowing 'civilians' the freedom to document complex police-citizen interactions provokes considerable suspicion amongst the police. Indeed, police officers find (perhaps most) members of the public to be suspicious (Van Maanen 1978, p. 4). Suspicious police officers are going to be reluctant to provide researchers with access to 'back-stage performances' (Goffman 1972) in case they uncover questionable practices or gain dangerous knowledge. Officers might be evasive, refrain from certain activities or shield certain practices from researchers (Van Maanen 1978, p. 89, Smith and Grey 1985, p. 299). They may provide 'official line' (Rowe 2004, p. 40) answers to questions in something of a pre-packaged manner (Spano 2005). Evidence does, however, suggest that participant 'reactions' to researchers can be largely overcome by establishing some form of rapport with those being observed (Cain 1973, Van Maanen 1978, Ericson 1982, Smith and Grey 1985, Loftus 2009). If this can be achieved, over time, participants may begin to act naturally and spontaneously, rather than presenting something of a false front (Lyng 1990, Gottfredson 1996). What is required, therefore, is that researchers 'become accepted' within the police organisational field.

Tales from the field

Contained within most works of police ethnography is an examination of the methods by which information was gathered throughout the study and the processes involved in gaining access to the field. To use Reiner's (2000, p. 222) typology, police researchers most often approach the field from the standpoint of 'outside outsider'. These individuals lack occupational and cultural capital and face great barriers in gaining and maintaining formal access to the police organisational field. Tales of often-complex and continuous negotiations with 'gatekeepers', of 'research bargains' (Becker 1970) struck with senior managers and of participation in the critical activities of research subjects, with a view to 'becoming accepted' by the lower ranks of the police organisation, are the mainstay of reflective accounts of ethnographic policing studies. Indeed, the structure, challenges and the nature of gaining trust within the police field are well understood and documented by those who have conducted empirical policing research. What is clear from these narratives is that relational work similar to that required of other qualitative researchers (Goode 2002, Thompson and Jason 1988, Taylor 1987) is needed and police researchers must be diligent in their efforts to secure the trust and real cooperation of police officers.

'Our colleague from the University'

Turning to my own study, I begin by examining what Daly (2007, p. 189) describes as the 'mediating role of self' in the generation of research data. Whilst this is well-trodden ground within the dimensions of reflexive practice, it is important here to sort out the question of the extent to which certain biographical features played a role in shaping police officer responses to my presence in the field. The behaviour of participants must be interpreted with an understanding of whom they perceived their audience to be.

As Hunt (1984, p. 283) observes, a researcher brings with him/her traits, which subjects interpret in 'culturally prescribed ways'. The 'class' of the researcher as perceived by participants therefore may have a significant impact on 'acceptance' (Smith and Grey 1985, p. 305, Rowe 2004). When accompanying Mike (a field intelligence officer) to an appointment, we passed two men in the street.

One of the men, with whom I was acquainted, nodded and said 'Hello'. A short time after, mimicking a 'posh accent', Mike enquired as to whether the men were 'golfing buddies' of mine (Fieldnote – Southside), whilst this might appear to be an attempt, on Mike's part, to initiate a friendly conversation, the tone and the implication of his question were clear: golfing is a pastime of the elite – a group of which he perceived me to be a part.

On a further occasion – on the last day of observing field intelligence officers – one officer appealed to me to 'pop back in in the future and say hello ... you know – when you're Lord Fred or something' (Fieldnote – Southside). Such comments indicate that my status of research student, or 'university lecturer' (as I was sometimes referred to), led officers to perceive me as elitist and out of touch with their general day-to-day experiences 'on the job' (Susman *et al.* 1989, Tornquist and Kallsen 1994). Unfortunately, many officers showed a marked reluctance to educate me into the 'realities' of their work (see further below), which led me to wonder whether my identity as a young, black male was proving something of an obstacle in the process of gaining day-to-day access.

A 'black' researcher

We know that the age and gender of researchers variously impacts on their experience in the field. Loftus (2009) and Westmarland (2001, p. 10) report that being young and female within an overwhelmingly male environment restricted access to aspects of the ascendant male and heterosexual culture of policing. Work by Reinharz and Chase (2002) indicated that women doing research on male athletes were commonly excluded from key 'back regions' in men's worlds. Christine Williams and Joel Heikes (1993) both conducted studies interviewing male nurses. The responses they received varied dramatically depending on whether participants were talking to a female or male interviewer.

White police officers, as IOM police officers overwhelmingly were, might also interact differently with researchers whose ethnicities they shared versus those that were different from their own. Rowe (2004, p. 40) recalls how his personal characteristics, a white mid-30s male, rendered him 'well placed' within the dominant ethnicity of the police organisation. The reflections of other white police researchers – Huggins and Glebeek 2003, Marks 2004, and Loftus 2009, for example – reinforce Rowe's ideas. I thus have to address the possibility that my status as a black male may have affected the levels of 'acceptance' I secured within the field. What makes such an inquiry even more pressing is the abundant evidence that much policing is racialized in nature.

Racism is a remarkably consistent and recurring theme within accounts of police work (see, for example, Banton 1964, Hunte 1966, Smith and Grey 1985, Foster 1989, Skolnick 1966, Whitfield 2004). Officers have been found to exhibit a 'cognitive predisposition' to ethnic minorities, one that is littered with prejudicial and negative assumptions (Crank 1998, p. 206). During my time with both field intelligence officers and IOM's enforcement branch, I witnessed examples of racism. On one occasion, for instance, a man who appeared to be of Pakistani descent was referred to only as 'Mo'. When asked whether this was actually the man's name, the officer admitted that he '[was] not actually sure' (Fieldnote – Westside). The characterisation of the man in this way was both prejudicial and a reflection of the stereotypical myth that men of Pakistani origin are called Mohammed (The Guardian 2014). Quick and at times ill-informed judgements about a person's character also fed into decisions made by officers around whether to stop and search an individual (Quinton 2011):

We passed an expensive car driven by two men. One of the men appeared to be of Caribbean descent and the other Somalian. David mimicked a black American accent, saying something on the lines of 'iaiat, - wassup'. The man in the passenger side of the car did not respond; instead he wound his window up. David immediately put the sirens on and stopped the car containing the men. (Fieldnote – Westside)

It is possible that the officers I observed may have imposed certain personal characteristics onto my persona as a result of their own framing of black men. Yet I found little evidence during time spent

with either field intelligence officers or their uniformed counterparts that these officers had transferred any stereotypical views held about 'typical offenders' onto me. Moreover, that I witnessed overt racism in relation to the subjects of policing suggests either that IOM officers gave no thought to my ethnicity or that this 'barrier' was in some way overcome. The upshot is that I was, it seems, perceived predominantly as a naïve 'university lecturer' (rather than a suspicious black man). This finding is somewhat at odds with our assumptions as researchers about police occupational culture. My ethnicity should have frozen me out of the type of 'back-stage performances' documented above; it did not.

Gaining the 'trust' of IOM workers was a process of continuous negotiation, and never completely achieved. Throughout the fieldwork, there were many times when officers actively prevented me from witnessing IOM police work. This brings me to my main argument – that such 'freeze outs' are better explained by the way in which these police officers conceptualised their own role within IOM than by my presence as a black researcher within the primarily 'white space' of the police organisational field (Loftus 2009).

Classificatory police boundaries

The police hierarchical order contains distinct and different environmental cultures. The 'clean' world of management can be distinguished from the 'dirty' world of the rank-and-file officer (Horn 1997, p. 299, Hunt 1984), just as 'plain clothes' detectives can be from their 'uniformed' colleagues (Reiner 1978, 2000). Equally, within the structures of the police organisation, there exist areas of work traditionally considered of 'low' or 'high' status.

Police roles have been conceptualised both by the police institution and officers in different ways. For instance, research suggests that certain roles, such as those within departments dealing with rape and child abuse, have traditionally been viewed as the domain of female police officers (Westmarland 2001, Martin 1996). Specialist squads, for example those concerned with burglaries or robberies, often view their particular 'jobs' as 'quality work' (McConville *et al.* 1991, p. 31) and in turn view others like 'shoplifting' or 'domestic violence' as 'rubbish work' (Heidensohn 1995, Hoyle 1998). High value appears to attach to those jobs viewed to be dealing with the most serious 'villains'. What is of present concern is whether reflexive awareness (on the part of the researcher) of the 'value' of a subject's policing role is relevant to understanding processes of access, negotiation, and becoming 'accepted'.

Conceptualising the field intelligence role

Broadly speaking, police officers working within IOM have one objective (officially, that is), to reduce reoffending through support and enforcement, referred to by some police officers as the 'gold' or 'premium service' (Fieldnote – Central). Both uniformed (response officers) and plain clothed (field intelligence officers) police officers work within the IOM framework. Uniformed cops act primarily as sentence enforcers, surveillance operatives and general disrupters of crime – all standard policing roles (Waddington 1998). Field intelligence officers, on the other hand, are responsible for building an intelligence picture that supports the wider IOM mandate of reducing crime. Police intervention within the framework of IOM is not always coercive; social support may be given to offenders in an attempt to reduce their risk of reoffending. Field intelligence officers are required to arrange 'pathway support' for IOM offenders. Pathway support is assistance, which seeks to address the crime-related problems of those subject to IOM in the following areas: accommodation, employment, training and education, mental and physical health, drugs, alcohol, finance, benefit and debt, children and families of offenders and attitudes, and thinking and behaviour.

Field intelligence officers must engage in a role that is perhaps of 'lower value' within police institutional structures than, for example, the role of detective (Young 1991). It appears to put these police officers 'outside' the normalcy of everyday 'catch and convict' police work and the culture associated

with it. Police officers have been found to possess an inherently cynical disposition and thus are doubtful about the chances of criminals 'going straight' (Reiner 2010). Working to rehabilitate offenders is difficult to reconcile with the police officer's desire to focus on crime control orientated catch and convict strategies. The police officer's perception of self is that of 'crime fighter' and 'thief-taker' (Channel 4 Dispatches, 2012) rather than one of 'advisor', 'assistant', and 'befriender' of offenders. Indeed, some field intelligence officers I encountered in my initial research site, 'Southside', were reticent about, even embarrassed by, the 'social support' nature of their role:

The IOM sergeant Jim was discussing an impending trip to London with Mike, a field intelligence officer. The sergeant was putting the finishing touches to a presentation he was scheduled to give to some metropolitan police officers about the IOM scheme and its approach to managing prolific offenders. Jim complained that he was finding it difficult to 'fit in' the slide on IOM's role in the 'rehabilitation' of prolific offenders. 'Just take it out', Mike suggested, whilst laughing. 'I'd like to' Jim replied, 'I don't think anyone up there will be interested, in any case. Yeah. I just think I'll take it out.' (Fieldnote – Southside)

From the outside, the field intelligence officer role appears counterintuitive to police culture. What field intelligence officers do is not typical of what police officers traditionally view as 'real police work' (Young 1991, Murphy and Lutze 2009, p. 69). 'When are you coming back to the real [policing] world?', field intelligence officers were asked on occasion by their patrol officer colleagues (Fieldnote – Southside). This line of sardonic 'questioning' led some field intelligence officers to acknowledge that 'the job is seen, by some [police colleagues] as being a bit, well, fluffy let's say' (Fieldnote – Southside).

The field intelligence officer role is cast both by 'outsiders' looking in and those 'on the inside' looking out, as existing beyond the circle of normal members of the group. Becker (1974, p. 15) describes this position as 'deviant'. A conceptualisation of self as deviant could have deep practical implications for researchers. This is because those who, by virtue of their role, perceive themselves to be 'outsiders' may lack the confidence to present the role to researchers or 'outside outsiders' as Brown (1996) describes them.

Activity (supporting offenders) beyond that of typical crime control focused policing, was perceived negatively by a majority of field intelligence officers whom I encountered. Negative perceptions about the role were also supported by deep-rooted scepticism amongst officers about offender chances of change and rehabilitation: 'Everybody's going to slip up sometime [and] we'll be there when they do', one field intelligence officer remarked (Fieldnote – Southside). What this meant in practice was that many of these officers were reluctant to put support measures in place for IOM offenders (or did so poorly). These officers were therefore deviant in a double sense. Firstly, their official role can be situated as deviant from police culture. Secondly, the way in which they carried out the role deviated from the guidelines they are required to follow. Moreover, the second form of deviance indicates the unease of these officers at being placed in an unorthodox role to begin with. Broadly therefore field intelligence officers might prove to be reticent research participants, as not only do they feel uncomfortable in their role, they would also be reluctant for a researcher to observe (and document) how they depart from it in practice. Even officers who are deviant in only the first sense would likely not want an 'outsider' to see what they did in practice of course, as that practice (within official guidelines) exemplified something these officers felt uneasy about.

Watching 'deviant' police officers

Suspicion amongst field intelligence officers was evident from the outset of the study. Prior to the study it had been agreed with senior management that I was essentially to be given a 'pass' to 'access all areas' within IOM. As a senior police manager put it, 'Go anywhere, see anything; if you need formal confirmation of this then let me know' (Fieldnote – Southside). The situation on the ground, nonetheless, was a lot more complicated. Some officers sought more information about

the study, asking questions in an apparent attempt to legitimise the research in their eyes (see also Lundman and Fox 1978). Early on in the project, I was effectively 'cross-examined' by one field intelligence officer. Several issues were on the officer's mind beyond the mere aims and objectives of the research:

Following a visit to an IOM offender's house Mike suggested 'we find a café, get out of the sun, and have a chat'. We took a seat at the back of the café. Mike began by asking about my relationship with senior officers. 'How did you get access to IOM, then Fred?' I explained that I had approached senior workers within the police and probation service and presented the idea of doing some research on IOM. Mike, however, seemed to want to know more about my relationship with IOM's senior management. 'So would you come across Peter if you weren't doing this research? I mean, are you in the same social circles?' No, I'm not and it's unlikely I would have come across Peter had it not been for the research.' 'So who's [the research] for?', Mike continued. 'It's for a PhD, I explained, although, I'm sure some of the agencies will be interested in the findings.' 'And what do you want from us, IOM?' I replied, 'Just the chance to observe what's happening here, whether the agencies are culturally integrating and whether the scheme works'. (Fieldnote – Southside)

Whilst Mike seems to have been assessing whether or not I was a 'management spy' there was no way of ascertaining whether the 'test' had been 'passed'. However, despite making considerable efforts to explain the research and its purpose, most field intelligence officers, remained guarded and, at times, reluctant to engage with the study. In fact, there was a general aversion to research more broadly. On one occasion, during a research-orientated visit by British 'centre-right' think tank the 'Policy Exchange' one field intelligence officer sarcastically suggested that a sign stating, 'Please don't feed us' should be erected in the IOM office. It is also possible that, like Reiner (1992, p. 47) and other 'outsider' police researchers (Loftus 2009, for example), I was seen by officers as 'one of a growing band of at least potentially critical police watchers ... flourishing in academia and the media'.

There was undoubtedly concern amongst some officers about how their opinions and behaviours might be represented to other audiences but my argument is that these officers were *particularly* averse to being watched because they felt uncomfortable with their role and often departed from it during their interactions with offenders, thus leaving themselves open to criticism. Such worries led to the adoption of exclusionary practices on the part of the majority of field intelligence officers I came across.

Diversionsary tactics

Anxiety about non-police actors entering the policing environment is far from uncommon. As Reiner (1978, p. 13) points out, police officers have 'always been suspicious of talking to outsiders' (see also Young 1991). Some concerns exhibited by officers, however, seemed like rather desperate stratagems to keep me at arm's length. One field intelligence officer, for example, refused to be interviewed in case a recording of the interview 'ended up on YouTube'. Another officer expressed anxiety that I might 'sell the "results" [of the study] to security firm G4S'. Whilst there was no overt hostility towards my study or me, throughout the first few months of observing field intelligence officers there were several attempts to prevent observations.

Various formal and informal tactics were employed by field intelligence officers to hinder my accessing certain behaviours and documenting certain information. As an example, throughout the early days of the research, I would arrive at the beginning of a shift to find field intelligence officers preparing to visit offenders. Many times I asked officers to accompany them on these 'early doors'³ visits; yet rarely was I able to. Generally, in these situations officers suggested that I was simply 'too late' and that my presence on said visit would be logistically difficult to organise (Fieldnote – Southside). On other occasions, field intelligence officers would delegate responsibility for whether I was able to accompany them to one of the partnership agencies, usually the probation service. In these instances, the partnership workers almost uniformly refused permission for me to attend the appointment. Once, a field intelligence officer simply did not turn up to a meeting pre-

arranged for the purpose of travelling together to visit an IOM offender currently in custody. No explanation was forthcoming and no apology for the absence was made by the officer. At times, field intelligence officers seemed to question the value of me accompanying them, insisting that 'boredom' was the more likely outcome.

8am, Southside office. I asked the IOM sergeant which team of field intelligence officers I could observe today. 'Barry and Kim are around he replied; ask them what they've got on'. I turned to Kim, who, along with Barry, seemed to be heading for the exit. Before I had a chance to speak Kim said: 'I'm visiting one of my offenders this morning, to debrief them of some information, that's all; so probably a waste of your time'. Barry concurred, 'Yeah you'll just find it boring, I would think'. With that, and without waiting for a reply, Barry and Kim made what appeared to be a hasty exit. (Fieldnote – Southside)

It might have been expected that field intelligence officers would be eager to show a researcher the more interesting side of their job (except of course for the problem of the 'double bind' noted above). But, as this episode demonstrates, Barry and Kim were keen to avoid being observed at precisely those moments when observations could have been most illuminating (away from the office).

It would be easy to attribute the diversionary tactics of the majority of field intelligence officers to the general concerns that police officers have about research as discussed earlier. This would be a mistake. Other groups of police officers did not respond so negatively to the research. Although there can be no way of knowing for certain whether what I was told and shown accurately captures the full range of the natural behaviour of field intelligence officers a deeper level of acceptance for the research was found amongst that minority of field intelligence officers who had adopted a more socially orientated way of working and thinking. Informal comments made by the IOM sergeant during the fieldwork reinforce the ostensibly different outlook of these officers. Referring to a group of field intelligence officers, focused on 'helping these people [subject to IOM] find the right agency to "recover"',⁴ the sergeant suggested I '... might have a better time over at [Central] Fred. They're a bit more hands on with their offenders over there' (Fieldnote – Southside).

Interrupting the dominant frame

What I found amongst the officers situated at the Central IOM office was a conceptualisation of the field intelligence officer role that was far removed from the dominant catch and convict 'frame', historically pervasive throughout the ranks of frontline police officers. It represents an apparent drift away from the traditional orientation of the police organisation towards a more rehabilitative approach generally associated with their probation and drug worker colleagues (Garland 2001, Padfield and Maruna 2006, p. 339, Mawby and Worrall 2011, p. 83). As O'Neill and McCarthy (2014, p. 155) point out, some police officers have come to value what they consider to be a more pragmatic method of dealing with crime and disorder.

The Central office field intelligence officers appeared to have embraced this shift in policing strategy. As one Central officer, Hannah observed, 'The main side of the role that I enjoy is helping them really.' These 'liberal' minded field intelligence officers were far more open to being observed than their 'conservative' colleagues, as the following fieldnote illustrates:

Monday morning, 8am, I arrived at the Central office. Scott, a field intelligence officer, introduced himself and gave me a quick overview of his role, including (and in marked contrast to the field intelligence officers I had encountered so far) a 70% engagement level with those subject to IOM.⁵ Scott spoke of building a rapport with these people, both those in the community and those in custody. In support of this aim Scott, along with an IOM prison officer Nigel, held 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 (Scott) spent out of the office. '4 hours a day'. Do you consider yourself as proactive?, I continued. '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, Nigel 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'.

Whilst it would be incorrect to infer that Scott was enthusiastic about my presence at the Central office, my initial experience was of someone much more receptive to both me as a researcher and the research more broadly. The immediate invitation to accompany Scott and Nigel to visit the man in the court cells was in stark contrast to the suspicious and evasive behaviour of the field intelligence officers I had encountered up until this point. Moreover, such cooperation was not just a one off instance, as I found it easier to gain access within the Central office more generally. The importance of this is that it suggests that where officers are comfortable with their own role they are more willing to open up themselves to scrutiny. Further supporting evidence that this is so came from my time with the enforcement arm of the IOM team.

Observations of IOM's enforcement branch

Uniformed patrol officers may be resistant to talking to researchers. Reiner (1978, 12), during his study of police unionism, found that a substantial number of uniformed officers harboured suspicions about the study and outrightly refused to be interviewed when approached. Having witnessed the considerable anxiety my presence had precipitated amongst the majority of field intelligence officers and other IOM practitioners I had so far encountered, I braced myself for a similar experience on beginning observations of IOM's uniformed branch. It was surprising then that uniformed response officers appeared to readily accept my presence within the office. Some were enthusiastic about participating in the study. Below is a partial extract taken from notes I made in my field diary, following the first shift.

As arranged with the team inspector, I arrived outside the Westside police station at 2.00pm. I felt slightly apprehensive. Although I had come across the district focus team inspector earlier in the observations, I had not encountered any police officers from this team. A plain clothes officer met me at the door and took me through to what I can only describe as a 'situation room'. The inspector was in there, as were several other district focus team officers; all were men. Most of these guys were sat in front of computers or putting on various pieces of body armour getting ready for the shift ahead.

The inspector proceeded, quite enthusiastically, to outline what it was the district focus team did for [IOM]: disrupt the criminal activities of priority offenders, those that were hurting the local community the most in terms of criminal activity. 'We've got something on for you today' he informed me. 'We're conducting a surveillance operation around a specific [IOM] offender. Intel suggests he's looking really rough and we're pretty sure he's at it [offending]. He's due to attend a probation appointment; probation will tell us then when he leaves the appointment. Our guys will pick up his trail and you'll be with two response officers who will make the arrest'. Whilst this was being explained to me some of the other officers came to crowd round the table. It was noticeable that the research seemed to genuinely interest officers in this team. Some officers asked questions about the research. 'What is it you're looking at Fred? 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?'

Many researchers, Lundman and Fox (1978) and Westmarland (2001), for example, have reported reticence on the part of officers they wished to observe, others like Smith and Gray (1985, p. 302) and Hoyle (1998, p. 43) were similarly received with relative enthusiasm and found ready cooperation amongst uniformed officers during their own observations. Yet these researchers are reflecting on their experiences of dealing with one type of officer only, and inevitably they will have encountered different levels of cooperation across these different studies (or will have reached differing evaluations of what may have been much the same level of cooperation across the research). Where the present study is distinct is that I was observing two quite distinct groups of officers, albeit all working in the same part of the 'field' of policing: IOM. Whilst I too was able to cultivate relaxed and friendly relationships with some of the officers I was observing, workable levels of cooperation were more easily achieved when observing officers that were both comfortable with their role and kept to it (or at least that is how they would have seen it).

Similarly to my time with the more liberal-minded field intelligence officers, the reception to both my presence within the office and the research more broadly stood in marked contrast to the mixture of suspicion and indifference displayed by the majority of field intelligence officers. These enforcement officers were 'independently' keen to display their skill sets and tell their 'stories' to an 'outsider'. Like Lundman and Fox (1978, p. 92), I was subjected to introductory tours of police districts and lectures on the nature of policing, but also officers within the team would often suggest that I accompany them on operations that they believed I would find helpful or at least interesting.

As the shift was ending Rick asked when I would be back. I explained that as yet I was unsure that I would be, as I felt I had probably spent enough time in the research field. Rick then suggested that I hang on until the weekend as a particular operation involving 'IOM working girls' was coming up; this, he suggested, would make good data for the study. 'Come for a night out', he joked, at which point he radioed through to David, who was out on patrol. 'Fred wants to come for a night out on Sat; I'm not here but you are', at which point the radio was passed to me. David came over and gave me some instructions of where to be and when, in relation to the 'night on the town', as he put it. (Fieldnote – Westside)

The presence of an observer is likely to influence what activities the police pursue during periods of observation. As Smith and Gray (1985, p. 302) confirm, 'Very often police officers [try] to think of something to do that will interest the observer'. For police officers, 'interesting' is that which is action-orientated, although finding 'real police work' of this nature may prove difficult, given that danger, action, and excitement are not typical of the realities of day-to-day policing (Waddington, 1998; Loftus, 2009). Whether or not 'action' was out there (and often it was not), the uniformed response officers I observed retained an air of dedication and confidence about their work, not exhibited (overtly at least) by the majority of field intelligence officers. It was this fact, I believe, that greatly enhanced both the levels of acceptance I was afforded and the type and quality of data I was able to record during this phase of the study.

Possible explanations for the varying access

Presented above is a rich case study which culminates in the argument that how police respond when researchers play a participant observation role is as much dependent on the self-perceptions of the officers of their role and work as it is on identifying aspects of the researcher. However, the sharp theoretical focus on role-conception is not to suggest that alternative explanations for the differential experiences, outlined above, should not be considered.

It is conceivable, for example, that one set of IOM officers, because of internal cultural differences between uniformed patrol officers and plain clothed field intelligence officers, may be inherently more hostile to research than another and thus levels of acceptance could be dependent on the sub-group of officers being observed. Equally, it might be that those officers that were more comfortable with being observed had become desensitised to researchers due to previous exposure to and experience of the research process. A further explanation might be that different levels of 'acceptance' and access can be attributed to variations in supervisory tones and styles, between the managers of those officers who readily participated in the study and those that were resistant to being observed.

Even if the importance of other factors needs to be taken into account, here these arguments gain traction only if a disparity in levels of acceptance between the two groups of participants can be identified. Yet we saw that police officers from *both* sub-groups were open to being studied. It was a majority of officers (those that viewed their work as 'deviant') within the sub-group of field intelligence officers that made concerted and determined attempts to prevent observation of the bulk of their work. Field intelligence officers in 'Southside' were in general far less willing to cooperate with the research than the field intelligence officers in 'Central' despite the fact that both groups had been 'over-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 them can be reduced to the fact that

the field intelligence officers in 'Central' largely accepted and valued their allotted role, whilst the field intelligence officers in Southside largely did not.⁶ Role-conception therefore remains a plausible explanatory factor for the varying levels of acceptance and access I enjoyed within the IOM unit. That factor suggests a new lens to making sense of policing ethnographies that other police researchers might now adopt and use more systematically.

Concluding remarks

As Reiner (2000, p. 219) observes, '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'. Observations, therefore, are a powerful methodology; they allow ethnographers to penetrate the fog of 'low visibility' decision-making that is frontline policing. To this end, however, researchers also must gain some measure of acceptance from the individuals they are studying. Many typologies have been developed to help explain the complex relationship between police officers and researchers. 'Insiders', 'outsiders', and 'insider-outsiders' are but a few heralded examples. These formulations, however, have focused primarily on the occupational position, auxiliary traits and biographical attributes of the researcher. The question of the biographical differences between the researcher and the police is undoubtedly an important one. But equally important – and thus far strangely absent from reflexive accounts of policing research – has been consideration of the relationship between the institutional role of the police officer and the level of acceptance afforded to researchers. Presumptions and preconceptions shape both sides of the police–researcher relationship (Reiner 1991). My contention is that there is a credible link between the way in which police officers conceptualise their own institutional role and the levels of acceptance secured by researchers when observing police work.

Estimating the degree of acceptance of an observer is always a difficult task (Cain 1973). However, within IOM, I found a minority group of field intelligence officers who appeared to have wholly embraced the 'woolly' side of the role (Fieldnote – Southside). These officers were confident in their job despite being cast by colleagues as 'deviant' and thus existing 'outside the circle of "normal" members of the group' (Becker 1974, p. 15). They were clearly more relaxed in the company of a researcher than many of their colleagues, who were uneasy in their role and departed from it in practice. Similarly, 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'. One thing is clear, however, we must as ethnographers within the police organisation engage in continuous reflexivity as to the validity of the data we capture. A number of factors should be considered as part of any inquiry into levels of access and acceptance achieved within the police organisational field. The argument of this article is that these reflections should include the policeman's institutional perception of self.

Notes

1. 'Field intelligence officers', in this context, are plain clothes police officers responsible for building an intelligence picture that supports the wider IOM: reducing crime. Part of this role is the provision of socially orientated support by police officers. The aim is to provide people subject to IOM with a 'pathway' towards 'going straight' (Hopkins and Wickson 2013).
2. Unlike their field intelligence officer counterparts, these officers, were uniformed response officers, whose primary mandate was to return to prison those subject to IOM who failed to desist from offending. In short, this is a traditional catch and convict, policing role.
3. Fieldnote – Southside. The term 'early doors' was used by field intelligence officers to indicate either that an 'event' was happening early in the supervision process or simply that the 'event' was taking place early in the day.
4. By offering those subject to IOM support around housing, health care, drug rehabilitation, help with personal relationships, education and training – Scott interview transcript.

5. Within IOM each field intelligence officer is assigned a number of IOM offenders to 'manage'. 'Engagement rate' therefore refers to the number of the assigned offenders that are regularly engaging with the officer and the scheme more broadly.
6. It is worth adding that in the Southside office, where the field intelligence officers (FIOs) were generally both uncooperative and uneasy with the rehabilitative side of their role, the one FIO to offer a greater degree of assistance to the research declared himself in interview to be 'sold' on the idea of supporting offenders.

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