INSIDE THE BRITISH POLICE

A FORCE AT WORK

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Preface and Acknowledgements

When the research for this book began the police were a subject of passing interest to most sociologists. As I put the finishing touches to my manuscript a cascade of commentary was flowing over the police: some of the policy issues raised in the final chapter may be overtaken by reform. If the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill, which is presently at the parliamentary committee stage, is not drastically amended, many of the problems that I identify may be compounded rather than made available for open and honest discussion and dealt with by policy. Nevertheless, this preface is not an apologia (save that I should acknowledge here that the theoretical discussion in chapter 2 and all the references have been pared to the bone) but an opportunity to make public thanks to the many people who have given me their support and kindness. I would like to mention some of them.

The staff of the Departments of Sociology and Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster set me on my academic path. Michael Banton, Mike Chatterton, Peter Manning, Terence Morris, Maurice Punch and Paul Rock have been particularly helpful during and since the early days of research. My colleagues in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield must have wondered how they would cope with a police sergeant turned sociology lecturer. I am grateful to them for support. Some police officers who have stayed the course better than I and are doing what they can to promote change in the police service have caused me to think hard about the sort of criticism I might make of the police. Next, David Thomas, Geoff Anderson and Lynn Pocock, colleagues in the team ministry of

the parish of Gleadless, Sheffield, have frequently refused this 'worker priest' any retreat into ecclesiastical havens – for which I am more than grateful. The Trustees of the Nuffield Foundation kindly awarded me a Social Science Fellowship, which enabled the writing of this text. Chapter 1 appeared originally as 'An inside job: a case study of covert research on the police', in Martin Bulmer (ed.), *Social Research Ethics*, London: Macmillan, 1982; chapter 3 is an adaptation of 'The police station', *Urban Life*, 9 (1), 1980, pp. 79–100. Finally, my family, Hilary, Ruth, Ben, David and Peter, have taken the brunt of the pressure of work and made my survival possible.

Some readers may find this a negative work. It is not intended as such. My hope is for a new police. The script was completed during the season of Lent, which seems appropriate. In that season we try to recognize our human limitations and weakness as integral aspects of our personal growth. The trouble is that we dislike such a searching of ourselves; it is uncomfortable and at times painful, offering no escape from conflict. What is true for us is no less true for institutions like the police. If I desire anything for this book, it is that it may make a small contribution to our search for a more loving and just society and therefore a more loving and just police. It is offered with thanksgiving.

Sheffield S. H.

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Researching the Police: Methodology and Constraints

Ten years have passed since this study of policing began. A great deal has changed. I was then a police sergeant who, with about 120 other officers, patrolled Hilton subdivision, an area close to the centre of one of Britain's major cities. Hilton has changed. During my two-year posting there the extensive schemes of redevelopment were obvious to anyone who walked its streets. Rows of terraced houses had been demolished or boarded up to make way for council houses and flats. Barren sites awaiting new houses were skirted by corrugated iron murals, the work of action groups rather than of local residents.

A large population lived in the midst of this redevelopment. If you shopped in, or just wandered along, any of Hilton's main streets, you would hear the dialects of the many black British and immigrant peoples, including those of Cypriot and Irish families. They lived in houses which, frankly, neither you nor I (nor they, if there were an alternative) would choose to inhabit. Two years before my research began in the mid-1970s a social survey of the area identified its housing conditions as the worst in the borough; only about one-fifth of the 53,000 people who lived in Hilton had exclusive access to hot water, a bath and an inside lavatory. In the central area of the subdivision, it was estimated, one family in six was headed by a single parent, and 9 per cent of families had four or more children. So Hilton was one of those inner-city areas that manifested all the signs of social deprivation. It was similar to places in which riots took place during the summer of 1981 and, like those places, formed the 'ground' on which many police officers spent their working lives.

Since my time at Hilton the staff of the police station has changed over and again. Many new policies for law enforcement, community relations, patrol and training have been introduced to its officers; the chief officers of the force have begun to enter public and, at times, national political debate about the nature of policing; important reports like those from the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure (1981) and Lord Scarman's inquiry (Home Office, 1981) have advocated particular reforms for the police; social scientists have produced a string of publications about British policing. In short, we now seem to know a good deal more about our constabularies than we did before. But I remain sceptical – first, about the amount and type of information available to us and, secondly, about the effects of these changes on the constables and sergeants who work on the streets of Hilton and elsewhere in urban Britain.

At the heart of my argument in this book is the claim that a residual core of beliefs and values, of associated strategies and tactics relevant to policing, remains a principal guide for the day-to-day work of the rank-and-file officer. This core of police work – the 'occupational culture' – is what the officers of Hilton would call common sense. Of course, they do not share this common sense in equal measure, but at Hilton it forms the basic reservoir of knowledge about police work on which variations in individual style and specialisms draw. All the resources of policing – the law, force policy and managerial instructions – are refined and reworked in this crucible (Chatterton, 1975a and b; Holdaway, 1977, 1978, 1980; Manning, 1977; Punch, 1979b).

The questions that inform this study are therefore very straightforward. How do the lower-ranked officers at Hilton understand their work, their role as police officers and the geographical area that they police? On the basis of their understanding, how do they carry out their police work? Straightforward as these questions might seem, they have led me into an extensive minefield. And they have remained unresolved. When the law is invoked by an officer who warns, summonses or arrests a person, when a police community relations policy is put into effect as a constable stops a black youth in the street, when a suspect is questioned in a police detention room, when PC 123 walks down the High Street and looks at the people and places around him, questions are begged about how all the potential resources of law and policy make their impact. If we are to understand that impact, one of the

most important sources of information will be the observation of day-to-day policing – it is necessary, as Robert Park put it, to 'get the seat of your pants dirty in real research' (Manning, 1972, p. 213).

I found fortune because I was in a unique position to carry out research; before I studied any sociology and during the course of my undergraduate and graduate work I was a police officer. As this was a situation of considerable advantage and yet difficulty, of great excitement and yet discomfort, some of the dilemmas that I encountered as a participant observer should be described before any substantive account of the policing of Hilton is presented (Holdaway, 1982a).

Researching Hilton

'Getting the seat of your pants dirty in real research' is a hazardous business. My research began after graduation, when I returned from university secondment to my force and to work as a sergeant. During my undergraduate studies I learned to conceptualize what seemed highly questionable police practices as the 'occupational culture' of policing – a term well suited to the seminar but less appropriate in the station office and charge room. Ethical problems are not solved by the theorizing of sociologists; neither is it an easy business to find a fit between theoretical inferences drawn from sociological research and possible policy initiatives. This point may seem blindingly obvious – yet in much sociology a background of utopian simplicity is obscured by theoretical complexity. I am aware that if academic curiosity is a driving force for my research, that curiosity is tempered by some moral concern to weigh police practice and, in the longer term, to change it. The issue is whether ethics are the tail that wags the researching dog; in participant observation the question is decided, by and large, contextually (Fletcher, 1966).

When I returned from university to my new police posting my 'First' was, I suspect, bristling somewhat. The senior officers who welcomed me had rather different preoccupations. They did not seem to know much about where I had been during my absence from operational policing; neither did they know or think much about my subject. If I was glowing with academic pride, the senior officer of my new station was critical about the

bristles I now sported. One greeted me with the words: 'The last thing I want is men with beards. I spend half my time telling men to get their hair cut'; and he continued, 'You will have no time for research. We have to get on with policing the ground and haven't time for experiments. What I want is people who can lead men.' I left my initial interviews with senior staff feeling intensely frustrated, hurt and not a little angry. Despite having read numerous articles on the methods of participant observation, not least on ways of gaining access to research, I found myself torn between opportunities for research and commitment to the police service, which had sponsored me at university. But such a beginning was parabolic; ethical decision-making about research is rarely a dispassionate, wholly objective enterprise.

It took me some time to perceive the pertinency of what the senior officers were telling me. When they said I should 'get into policing again' they were urging me to rediscover the 'common sense' of police work – the very theme of my research and of some current developments in the sociology of policing. The work of Cain (1973), Skolnick (1966) and Westley (1970), for example, indicates that the legal framework of policing shields a rather different practice; the lower ranks possess the organizational power to ensure that they retain a very considerable measure of discretion. I now found myself in a situation in which I could probe the occupational culture in a unique manner, adding to this body of knowledge.

After weighing all the options – requesting permission for research access from Headquarters and/or from my lower-ranked colleagues, resignation and so on – I decided to begin my field-work by adopting a covert strategy. From the available evidence this seemed the only realistic option; alternatives were either unrealistic or involved an element of the unethical, which would have rendered them only marginally more commendable than covert observation. Further, as a legally empowered police officer I was a member of a powerful institution of our society who would deal, though not exclusively, with the less powerful. The argument that all individuals have a right to privacy (that is to say, freedom from observation, investigation and subsequent publication based on the investigation) is strong but should be qualified when applied to the police. Research and my previous experience of police work demonstrated the power of the lower ranks, not least their resistance to external control of their work.

Any effective research strategy would have to pierce their protective shield if it was to be successful.

This problem is encountered during research of many organizations; however, the case for covert research is strengthened by the central and powerful situation of the police within our social structure. The police are said to be accountable to the rule of law, a constitutional constraint which restricts their right to privacy but which they can neutralize by maintaining a protective occupational culture. When such an institution is over-protective, its members restrict the right to privacy that they possess. It is important that they be researched.

It may be pointed out that this argument neglects the supervisory work of managerial officers. However, at Hilton this control is fairly minimal. It would have been highly restrictive simply to place one's data in the hands of senior officers, believing that they would or could straightforwardly alter the practices of policing by lower ranks (Chatterton, 1979; James, 1979; Mechanic, 1962). The covert researcher of the police has to be reminded that he is working within an extremely powerful organization which begs revelation of its public and private face by first-hand observation – risky as that observation might be. In part, therefore, my covert research is justified by my assessment of the power of the police within British society and the secretive character of the force. This does not mean that covert research into powerful groups is ethical while that into less powerful ones is not (Young, 1970); neither is it to advocate a sensational type of sociology in which rigorous analysis of evidence gives way to moral crusading. Although I came to this uncomfortable conclusion when my research began ten or more years ago, I would still argue in similar terms, despite widespread changes in police policy.

Defining the limits of research

Having made the decision in principle to conduct covert research, I had to face its practical implications and responsibilities. This was none the easier for my being a police sergeant, holding all the legal powers of that office as well as being responsible for the supervision of a large number of officers who would be working according to their 'street-wise' rules. I was not a sociology

lecturer masquerading as a schizophrenic, an alcoholic, a millenarian, a Pentecostalist or a factory worker; I was actually a police sergeant who had no idea when or if he would leave the field for other work (Festinger *et al.*, 1956; Homan, 1980; Loftland, 1961; Rosenhan, 1973; Roy, 1960).

Unlike experimental, questionnaire and other controlled methods, covert research is equivocal; those who are being researched control the situation as much as, if not more than, the researcher. When the subject of research is the police, whose job is highly unpredictable and varied (no less so when the researcher is a serving police officer), the definition of the limits of ethical tolerance is a significant matter. Codes of ethics like those adopted by the professional associations for social scientists deal with predictable and planned research, with conditions which are not present in fieldwork – indeed, their absence is the very reason why naturalistic methods are chosen (British Sociological Association, 1973).

During my first days of police duty I asked myself what I would do if, as happened in the case of another researcher of the police (Westley, 1970, p. viii), an officer hit a suspect in my presence or some other indiscretion took place. I was, I kept reminding myself, not simply a sociologist but a sergeant with supervisory responsibilities (Westley, 1970). Contemplating ethical problems which *might* arise hampered my capacity to document in detail. However, the police unknowingly provided me with a pilot study through which I was able to learn how to handle such issues – or so I thought – before being transferred to another station. My Chief Divisional Officer posted me to a small station where, with two other sergeants, I was responsible for about twelve constables. During my first week's duty I worked as station officer. I recorded the following incident:

> A man was arrested for driving whilst unfit through drink, and I dealt with the charge. He was exceedingly uncooperative, and I suspected that sooner or later he would be hit by a police officer; I took firm control of the situation. For a brief period the prisoner was alone with me, and he suddenly made a dash for the door, finding it incorrectly unlocked, and ran for the street. I shouted and gave chase, catching him and bringing him back to the charge room. As I returned him, other officers arrived.

The rules of the occupational culture direct that a loss of police control like this should be redressed by physical contact, but I did not offer that contact, and my colleagues saw that I did not. In this way I began to define the limits of their and my tolerance but recorded only the most cursory of field notes.

Three nights later I dealt with a man who had threatened his wife with a pistol. He pleaded his innocence, and a police officer kicked him on the backside, not with excessive force but just to remind him that his explanation was not acceptable. The incident was recorded, but I omitted from my notes the fact that the prisoner had been kicked; for good or ill, it was too sensitive an issue for me to accept. Similar situations arose, and I recorded in my diary:

> It is still a problem working with another police officer who has very different ideas about civil liberties – patrolling with Sergeant –, in this case. Every time we stopped someone I had to manage a situation in which the possibilities of corners being cut were real. This causes a strain for the sociological observer.

I was that impersonal observer; the realization that I was actually involved in grappling with such ethical issues was slow to dawn.

But incidents like these were not the only experiences that informed my covert research. I also gained access to, and recorded, very private and – I do not use the word lightly – precious moments of people's lives. One day a mother called the police after the sudden death of her young baby. In her grief-stricken state she made some remarks about her marriage – I did not record them. I recall wrapping the baby in a blanket and holding it in my arms as two silent colleagues drove with us to the mortuary. The mortuary attendant took the child and, in a routine fashion, placed it in a refrigerator. One of my colleagues said that he felt like 'putting one on' the attendant for the way he treated the child. I later classified the conversations about the incident as jokes and stories; they proved to be the genesis of an idea about the use of humour in managing the personal stress of police work. I should also add that incidents like this reminded me of the demanding work required of the police, and of their humanity – I needed to be reminded of that.

The first couple of months of research were exceedingly

tough. Despite support from my academic supervisor, I could not make much sense of the data that I was collecting. I applied for an academic post which, thankfully, I did not get. The PCs had noticed that my ideas about policing were rather different from their own. (When tea mugs belonging to the shift were changed we were presented with colours to suit our personality: my mug was yellow. 'Why yellow?' I asked naively. 'Because you're scared.') Senior officers found me truculent, and my chief doubted my suitability for the police service. I later complained of his insensitivity to another senior officer, who responded: 'You might disagree with Mr –, but do you disagree with 99 per cent of the officers at the station?' He explained, 'There are two important things about police work. First, policemen must be willing to cut corners or else they would never get their job done. Secondly, it's because policemen have been happy to gild the lily that the law has been administered in this country.' He was right. On these points I did indeed disagree with him, and he knew it. A new officer soon came to command my division, and he transferred me from my station and pilot study in participant observation to a new subdivision and, unknowingly, to the beginnings of a substantive research project.

My new station was much larger, and I now worked with an inspector, three other sergeants and about twenty-five constables. From the outset it seemed to me important to tell my colleagues about my attitude to the use of force and to the manner in which evidence is gathered, suspects are handled in the station and so on. This was often done by engaging them in conversation about a particular issue or job in which they were involved. For example, one of my fellow sergeants was known to use 'unorthodox techniques' when questioning suspects. When we chatted about this issue he gave me a full description of what he was and was not willing to do, citing examples to illustrate each point. His explanations proved to be very useful because I was able to compare his accounts with his subsequent behaviour and that of others. Fortunately, he enjoyed discussing such issues and drew on my opinions about sociology; he became an important informant, who was always happy to provide details of the actions of particular officers and of particular incidents.

I had began to define my limits of tolerance; immediate colleagues did not exclude me from information about their actions and enabled me to remain on the fringes of incidents which I

found questionable. It was noticeable that PCs who brought a 'dodgy job' into the charge room would, if they had a choice, ask a colleague to deal with it; sergeants also intervened indirectly – they almost protected me – if they thought that I might spoil or misunderstand a procedure they wished to control. Eliciting accounts of what was going on in these situations was never difficult. The senior officers now began to air rather different views about me, and I found that I had settled (if that was ever the case) into my police and research work as a covert participant observer.

Stress – the life blood of participant observation

William Whyte (1955, p. 317), in his account of research in 'Cornerville' writes: 'I also had to learn that the fieldworker cannot afford to think only of learning to live with others in the field. He has to continue living with himself.' Covert research and the ethical questions it raises create conditions of stress within which the sociologist has to live with himself. For example, tension resulted from working with officers who did not share my values and assumptions about policing. Such, it might be said, is the nature of a nasty world; but I had some direct responsibility for the manner in which these officers behaved. I occasionally retreated from conversations and incidents over which I had no control and which I found distasteful. At times I had to deal with an officer whose behaviour exceeded the bounds of what I considered reasonable conduct. These situations could easily get in the way of research and increased the pressure of my work.

Then the constant reflection involved in participant observation added to the pressure of working in a busy station. Gold (1958) and others who have written on participant observation encourage us to consider a continuum with overt and covert observation and participation at either end. This conceptualization is too straightforward. In my covert research a constant triadic dialogue took place between the balancing of personal ethical limits, the aims of research and my duty as a police officer. There were times when research suffered because I was engrossed in police work and times when police work took second place to the recording of detailed evidence. The resulting tension was demanding and wearing.

The risk of 'going native' was always present, and at the beginning of each tour of duty I reminded myself of my research and its themes. There were days when I was less attentive than usual; but when I became too involved in policing I was often pulled back by a particularly distasteful event. On one occasion, after hearing a conversation about race relations, I wrote in my diary:

> I reacted badly to the conversation yesterday and want nothing to do with such sentiments. I remember saying to myself, 'Underneath, these policemen are ruthless and racist'. I seem to have slipped into the mould easily during the last couple of weeks and wonder if I should have been so easy with my feelings. The balance of participant observation is one which can so easily be submerged and forgotten. Now it has been brought before me in glaring lights, and all the old issues of ethics – when to speak out, how involved one should get, whose perspective one takes on – loom large.

Finally, as a covert researcher of the police I was documenting the work of people who regarded me as a colleague. The risk of being found out was always present and I had to be sensitive to any indication that others – sometimes friends – might know what I was doing. I kept shorthand notes on a scrap of paper in the back pocket of my trousers; if I had to leave the station or charge office to make notes, I listened for approaching footsteps. Certain incidents had made me sensitive to discovery:

> While at the station I telephoned my supervisor to arrange a tutorial. After returning to the communications room a constable said to me, 'Switch that tape recorder off, sarge.'
>
> I asked, 'What are you on about?'
>
> 'Oh nothing.'
>
> I do not know what was meant and never found out, but this remark caused me considerable anxiety.

When these considerations are added to the sheer physical effort of policing – shift work, overtime, discordant leave days – the stress of covert research cannot be avoided: it has to be managed to the advantage of the researcher. I used my situation

to heighten my consciousness of what was going on around me, not least when potentially stressful incidents were likely to happen. For example, I was able to make a particular study of police use of physical force, finding that I could tolerate its use more satisfactorily if I took detailed notes. This enabled me to check officers' attitudes against their actions, while clarifying the limits of my own tolerance.

Furthermore, as Bettelheim (1943) demonstrated in a situation that was far more extreme than my own, research can be a strategy for personal survival. I remained in the police for one year after my appointment as a lecturer at Sheffield University. Knowing that I would be leaving for a base from which I could publish and perhaps influence policy, research became more central to the task of making sense of my present and future positions.

Validity and reliability

If a research method is shot through with error, it is unsuitable for the documentation of any group. If the researcher is working alone, unable to hold research conferences with colleagues in the field, and is, so to speak, an apprentice, the problems of reliability and representativeness are considerable.

I worked on the basis of the straightforward premise that as much as possible should be observed and recorded, even the seemingly routine and insignificant. Further, data would be gathered on as many officers and in as many contexts as possible. Of course, published research helped to direct my attention to specific issues. Maureen Cain's (1973) work was very helpful to me at this point, as was the fact that I spent two years on fieldwork and did not have to complete a 'smash-and-grab' ethnography. Documenting over a considerable period of time enables the comparison of attitudes and actions in apparently unconnected but, in the light of subsequent analysis, interrelated events.

Rhetorical questions became very useful tools of analysis. If I was working on a particular theme, I would test my interest by questioning a number of officers:

> One Sunday night I was patrolling with a colleague when a call to a fight came over the radio. The location of the call