Researching Challenging Issues: The Case of Policing Diversity

Policing diversity has in recent years become one of the key issues within political and public discussion. Various events have influenced public perceptions of policing legitimacy: for example, the kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a police officer serving in the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) in March 2021; the exposure by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) of a culture of racism, sexism and homophobia in Charing Cross police station in MPS in 2022 (IOPC, 2022); and the uncovering of 'systemic' racism and misogyny in the MPS by an independent review in the same year (Casey, 2022) have all significantly dented trust and confidence not just in the MPS but in policing more broadly (CSEW, 2020). Nearly 25 years on from the publication of the Macpherson Report into the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence (Macpherson, 1999) – supposedly a watershed in the policing of diversity – negative aspects of police occupational cultures that were present pre-Macpherson still are clearly present to this day.

It therefore seems prescient to turn attention to researching the policing of diversity once more. This is a particularly challenging aspect of policing to research though, and this chapter introduces readers to some of the key themes and difficulties of conducting fieldwork in this area. First, it draws attention to the task of generating data that represents the values, attitudes and behaviour of police staff in relation to how they understand and implement diversity policing. Aspects of this challenge link to accessing, in the broad sense, issues that some research participants might rather not reveal. This is similar to wider challenges of negotiating access to institutions which might prefer issues to remain hidden, something which might be a particular problem for those wishing to study attitudes toward race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality and so forth within policing (Jones, 2015). Moving beyond formal institutional access, there is also the challenge of recruiting research participants to divulge their attitudes towards topics that may be sensitive in the 'culture wars' of contemporary policing. That is to say, the opposing stances of those within the service who support the adoption of a progressive agenda with regards to policing diversity, seeing all of the positive benefits with regards to policing relations with minority communities that such a stance can bring, versus those who reject such an agenda, fearing it clashes with the practicalities and realities of everyday policing (McLaughlin, 2007).

Second, it draws attention to conceptual problems. The notion of 'diversity' itself is often poorly understood and tends to be treated simplistically and in terms of discreet categories. This

becomes an even more significant challenge since current policy debate sometimes focuses on the need to promote 'diversity of thinking', which goes beyond recruiting a workforce with certain identity characteristics and instead directs attention to the need to change organizational practices. This might be a sound position, but it raises even more difficult problems for the researcher. While there are some unique challenges for academics researching these aspects of policing, many of the difficulties associated with researching diversity within policing reflect more general issues that need to be addressed in order to produce effective research into law enforcement and criminal justice. Much of the discussion in other contributions to this book will therefore be rehearsed in the review of police diversity research developed below. This discussion will focus on key reflections from a series of research projects conducted by the authors, sometimes alone and sometimes with colleagues, into policing more broadly but especially into police diversity (Rowe and Garland, 2003; Rowe, 2007; Rowe, 2012; Bullock, 2015; Bullock and Johnson, 2018; Bullock and Garland, 2019). These studies have incorporated a variety of research methods and have been conducted in different contexts and within a range of police services over a 25-year period. In what follows we consider first how policing diversity can be understood and second issues related to researching diversity in policing, drawing on personal experiences.

Understanding policing diversity

Broadly there are two broad aspects related to policing diversity – the first related to the demographic make-up of police personnel and whether it is reflective of the communities that they serve and the second to the operational benefits that this may bring.

The demographic make-up of police personnel, and especially sworn officers, within the service has long been a concern for communities, police services, and the government in the UK and beyond. The seminal report into the disorders in Brixton in London in April 1981 (Scarman, 1981) specifically drew attention to the issue of the under-representation of Black and minority ethnic citizens within the police service as an issue. Scarman noted a 'widespread agreement that the composition of our police forces must reflect the make-up of the society they service' (Scarman, 1981: 76). His report noted how ethnic minorities were still very significantly under-represented in the service and called for 'vigorous action is the police are to become more representative of all the community they serve' (Scarman, 1981: 77). Later, establishing an officer profile which is reflective of the community that they serve and so less male and less White (especially in large conurbations) was seen by Macpherson (1999) as being crucial to reassuring the public that the police service was changing for the better. Since then, focus has also been on increasing the

numbers and visibility LGBTQ+ officers in the police, too (Jones, 2015).

The second aspect of policing diversity relates to operational benefits. For example, police organisations are unlikely to generate the information that they need to solve crimes without public support, which necessitates the development of effective police-community relationships (Jones and Rowe, 2016). Equally, since the actions of police organisations play a crucial role in the protection of liberty, promotion of social and economic opportunities, and the ability of individuals to determine and develop their lives, fostering effective relations with diverse communities is a facet of social justice in democratic societies (Jones, Newburn and Smith, 1994: 1).

Policing diversity successfully then is of foundational importance both to the operation of police organisations and to the experiences of the communities they serve. However, progress on these issues has been slow, with policing practices still the subject of criticism. For example, in the summer of 2021 the Home Affairs Committee published the findings of its review of the progress made against the 70 recommendations contained in the Macpherson Report of 22 years before, and, worryingly, identified 'persistent, deep rooted and unjustified racial disparities' in key areas of policing, including stop and search, the recruitment and progression of BME officers, police misconduct and discipline, the handling of racist incidents and the comparative lack of confidence that BME communities have in the police service in comparison with their White counterparts (Home Affairs Committee, 2021: 5). Meanwhile, the world-wide Black Lives Matter protests, re-ignited in 2020 by the murder of African American George Floyd by a white police officer in the United States, illustrate the consequences of the failure to develop positive relationships between police organisations and the diverse communities that they serve.

Over the last twenty years or so an increasingly important aspect of policing diversity has been the way that the police respond to and deal with incidents of hate crime. This has been an issue that, since Bowling examined it in relation to the policing of racist harassment and violence (Bowling, 1999), has grown in scope to include the policing of faith hate, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and the disablist hate too. It persists as a controversial issue though, with Pickles (2020), Hardy and Chakraborti (2020**) and ** all highlighting significant contemporary problems with how the police record and process hate crimes and how they deal with victims. Such problems are attracting increasing interest from scholars, and it's to conducting research in these areas that this chapter now turns. What follows are reflections on issues related to researching diversity and some personal recollections from the authors of their time researching

the police which can hopefully illustrate some of the issues and problems discussed here and how they played out ‘in the field’.

Researching policing diversity

Gaining Access and Fostering Trust: Lessons from the Field

A challenge for all social researchers is gaining access to participants. The research methods literature provides guidance on strategies to secure access in official institutional terms (see Gilbert and Stoneman, 2015). Having formal agreements (such as letters of support for the research and data sharing agreements) with institutions may be a prerequisite of access. For the university researcher, graduate schools, legal offices, ethics committees, and health and safety regulations might be involved in establishing the conduct of a study in discussion with their counterparts in police services. Access should not be assumed: political, institutional and other factors contribute to a climate in which the negotiation and confirmation of access (often be beyond the control of the researcher or their counterparts in the police service or other parties to the intended study) may play a role. Changing management priorities, budgetary considerations or the arrival of new personnel can put access to institutions and potential participants in jeopardy.

Box 1:

Karen Bullock, Jon Garland and Mike Rowe: On Researching a Politically Sensitive Issues

One of the most significant policing research projects we've been involved in related to the politics of researching the police at a particularly difficult moment for the institution – the aftermath of the publication of the 1999 Macpherson Report. Between us we were involved in two research projects that were undertaken in the wake of the publication of the Macpherson Report in 1999.

The first project (conducted by Garland and Rowe) had received Home Office funding to evaluate the diversity training that was being rolled out to all in the police service in response to recommendations in the Macpherson Report. With issues of 'race' and police institutional racism in the public eye and very high on the political agenda at the time, it was realised that this was a very sensitive area for the police. What wasn't fully appreciated by the research team beforehand though was how resistant some forces were to this project and to the appearance of a research team that was keen to shine a light on such a highly-charged and controversial topic. The project experienced resistance, suspicion, and obfuscation from some forces at almost every turn, making our job even harder. Often the research team felt caught between the twin behemoths of the police service on the one hand and the Home Office on the other, with the former trying to obstruct access for the research team which was merely trying to follow the instructions of the latter. The team felt like very small fry caught between the political battles of those two institutions, and often didn't emerge from these skirmishes unscathed.

When the research team did have access to a force, attending the diversity training sessions fascinating. Some were conducted very well by the trainers and were attended by willing participants. Others, however, were delivered less well and/or met with resistance by some officers who not only resented having to attend the sessions (attendance was compulsory for everyone) but who also bitterly resented Macpherson's accusations of institutional racism in the police (which many misinterpreted as accusations of individual racism, and thus felt unfairly 'picked upon'). These sessions could sometimes proceed very problematically, but for a researcher, they were a fascinating insight into the mentality of some officers. Much was learnt from those sessions about the culture of the police, and the worries and concerns of officers, than we did from the ones that proceeded smoothly and without issue.

The second project (conducted by Bullock) linked to the recommendations set out in the Macpherson Report which related to stop and search. Stop and search is one of the most contentious areas of policing – given its impact on personal liberty and its disproportionate

impact on young Black men. A number of recommendations of the Macpherson Report linked to stop and search. Recommendation 61 required that all 'stops' and all 'stop and searches' (made under any legislative provision) were to be recorded. This record was to include the reason for the stop, the outcome, and the self-defined ethnic identity of the person stopped and a copy of the record was to be given to the person stopped. This recommendation was amongst the most controversial of the Macpherson report – police services and officers alike raising concerns about the impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of police work. A consequence of this was that Home Office researchers were dispatched to conduct an evaluation of this proposal and specifically to review the time that it took to record stops and stop and searches in this way and to otherwise to garner the opinions of officers and other police personnel in doings so before the recommendation was accepted. A member of the Home Office research staff, the nature of the problems described above were less acute. Access had been negotiated at a high level and arranged in advance and, as representatives of the Home Office, less affected by any subsequent political battles of between the police and the Home Office. Nonetheless, on the ground, whilst doing the field work relationships between the researchers and officers certainly could be difficult. In ways similar to those described above, the research team experienced resistance and suspicion from some officers which was driven by the heightened political sensitivity of the subject matter and by a degree of resistance to the label of 'institutional racism'. Nonetheless, ultimately the field work did proceed well and important issues into the way that stop and search was being recorded and perspectives on this were gathered.

Presentation of the self

Much noted in the literature is the need for social researchers to develop methods and techniques that can get beyond the 'representation of self'. This is whereby participants – even those not consciously seeking to mislead or obfuscate – maintain an impression of their professional perspective that is perhaps what they feel the researcher might wish to hear, or perhaps reflects established institutional policy and 'tows the company line'. As Reiner and Newburn (2007) noted, police officers are often engaged in eliciting information from reluctant suspects, and in gathering, marshalling and presenting evidence to form narrative accounts for forensic and other purposes. The researcher has to overcome significant challenges to gain meaningful data from respondents who, wittingly or otherwise, choose not to disclose information that might cast them in a bad light. In the project mentioned in Box 1, for example, Garland and Rowe found that officers were often unable to acknowledge that diversity training

had impacted on them since that seemed an admission that they had, prior to the session, been racist in some way and this was too fraught and controversial to discuss. In that context we had to ask general questions that did not provoke a defensive response. Similarly, in researching police ethics, Rowe et al (2015) asked officers about their perceptions of how their colleagues, in abstract terms, *might* behave in certain hypothetical circumstances rather than directly asking about their own personal conduct.

Karen Bullock: On the presentation of the self

Several years ago, I successfully negotiated access to a police service to conduct research on the 1998 Human Rights Act. The Human Rights Act incorporates the European Convention on Human Rights into British Law. Coming into force in October 2000, it sets out the rights that freedoms that British people are entitled to. In the aftermath of the implementation of the Act, the aim of this research was to examine how officers came to implement the provisions of the Act. On arriving to conduct the interviews, I found officers and other police personnel to be somewhat nervous about taking part in the research and a little bit resistant. It soon became clear that participants were concerned that there were being 'tested' on their knowledge of the Act and the nature of the powers and freedoms that it allows for. To the extent that they told me that they had been 'revising' the rights and freedoms set out in the Act before attending the interview. Some even brought with them the guidebook that they had been given that explained to Act and its implications to police personnel, from which they had been revising! Whilst the police service and potential participants had been fully appraised of the aims of the research, it seems that participants were somewhat suspicious about the 'true' aims of the research. They felt that the research really aimed to monitor participants' knowledge of the Act and report back to the police management – potentially getting participants into trouble. The risk was that participants would not be candid about their experiences while the consequence was that I had to spend time at the beginning of the interviews reassuring about the aims of the research and trying to put the minds of participants at ease. Following on, participants were happy to participate and spoke openly about their experiences of the Act.

Problems related to presentation of the self might be overcome through choosing alternative research methods, or by adopting a mixed methods approach (e.g Reiner and Newburn, 2007; Westmarland, 2003 and 2005). Some police researchers have adopted observational or ethnographic approaches: for example, early groundbreaking work by Skolnick (1966) and Banton (1964), later studies of homicide investigation (e.g Innes, 2003; Bacon, 2013) and

practices in custody suites (e.g Skinns, 2011). There are advantages in doing so: for example, they generate an appreciative approach predicated on understanding policing from within. They provide an insider-view of police work and the organisational and occupational cultures that surround it, and they capture the lived experiences of minority officers and of women. In so doing, researchers may get 'behind the blue curtain' and provide valuable insight into the cultural and organisational practices that influence how policing is delivered in operational terms. To illustrate, Waddington's (1999) study of police subculture found that officers used racist (and other problematic) language when in the relative privacy of the 'off-stage' policing environment. This language probably would not have been used in a more formal interview situation.

Using Official Statistics and Other Data

A considerable body of statistical evidence has been accumulated through administrative monitoring practices in England and Wales, and other jurisdictions, over recent decades. The history and status of ethnic monitoring is discussed elsewhere (for example, Fitzgerald and Sibbitt, 1997; Rowe, 2012; Young, 2010; Webster, 2007). Indeed, a mass of statistical data is available to the researchers interested in diversity in policing. The police researcher can explore patterns of arrest, stop and search, recruitment, retention and promotion, complaints from the public, satisfaction with policing and a host of victim issues in terms of ethnic classifications. For example, the annual Ministry of Justice 'Ethnicity and the Criminal Justice System' reports and the underpinning online data (see, for example, Ministry of Justice, 2021) provide data that can help examine key research questions about, for example, the over-representation of minorities in stop and search practice. The annual production of the police recorded hate crime data provides statistics that researchers can use as a starting point when examining the extent and forms of hate crime that come to the attention of the police. This is especially useful when it coincides with the publication of the three-year aggregated hate crime data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, too, as this means that researchers can compare and contrast the official police-recorded data (which has a degree of unreliability due to the extent that of the under-reporting of hate crime to the police) with that from a large-scale victims' survey, which may provide a truer account of the extent of hate crime victimisation.

The Need for Methodological Caution with Data

Researching diversity in policing is facilitated by the plethora of data available, however, methodological caution remains important. The apparently authoritative data are on a series of ethnic classifications that are inherently problematic in themselves. For example, standard census categories are used. This means that, should the 2021 categories be employed, then 19 different

ethnic groups could be utilised for comparative research purposes (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Whilst data are gathered, processed, and presented in terms broadly familiar from other aspects of social policy, there are some significant limitations. First, the ethnic classifications are themselves socially, historically, and culturally determined. Ethnicity is not a 'natural' category but one that emerges in particular societies and at particular times. As with the catalogue of offences labelled as 'hate crime', the terminology used to represent ethnicity reflects political, social and cultural struggles and are contested (Asutosh, 2014). Ethnicity is a fluid, multiple and dynamic concept that cannot be captured in fixed and discrete labels. The terms used in Britain reflect an imperial past and mid-20th century migration patterns as citizens of the 'new Commonwealth' settled in the 'mother country'. So, the categories of 'Black Caribbean', 'African', 'Indian', 'Pakistani' and 'Bangladeshi' categories are used. 'Indian', 'Pakistani' and 'Bangladeshi' are often conjoined as 'Asian'. However, the category of 'Asian' does not usually include people from other parts of that vast continent. Chinese, Malaysian, Indonesian, and Korean people, for example, are counted separately. Comparative police researchers also need to contend with the problem in ways that are not the same in the United States (US) where the term 'Asian' usually refers to those of Chinese, Japanese or South Korean origin, but in the UK denotes those from Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi communities.

More problematic still, US data tends to distinguish between 'race' and 'ethnicity'. This means that comparing the experiences of African Americans (the 'black race') with Koreans (treated as an ethnic group) becomes problematic as the datasets are different (Rowe, 2007). In addition, in the UK context, new migrants, some of whom face particular challenges in terms of policing and criminal justice, such as those from eastern Europe, do not feature at all as distinct groups. For example, the categories used in the 2021 census amalgamated Polish or Romanian communities into the 'white' category along with Irish, Australian and Canadian people. An indication of how complex this becomes is that people from those latter countries who are black or aboriginal would not then (presumably) count themselves as 'white' and so might end up recorded as 'black other': an ethnicity that nobody would presumably self-select.

Problematic though the statistical data collected on this basis might be, at least there is some quantitative data to work with. That is not true for other elements of diversity. Gender is also widely monitored, as is age, but sexual orientation, disability and physical and mental health are not. There are no data relating to the class or socio- economic position of those dealt with by the police in the UK. The reasons for this are not necessarily clear. However, critical social science researchers ought to consider why some elements of diversity are considered in official statistics

but not others.

The limitations of statistical representation of ethnicity (and the false assumption that an ascribed ethnic identity can be considered in isolation from other social, cultural, political and demographic aspects of identity) suggest that rounded approaches to researching diversity in policing might be desirable. Certainly, many classic policing texts have drawn on ethnographic methods, and some recent studies have successfully used this method (see, for example, Westmarland, 2002; Fassin, 2013). Adopt a mixed-methods approach in favour of elevating one strategy, may be desirable. Ethnographic or non-participatory observational studies face challenges in terms of access (as sketched above) and also in terms of generating results replicable to other environments. In addition are a host of challenges of a logistical kind: time and resources, for example, are difficult to secure. Even if the usual research funding problems can be overcome it might be difficult to reconcile lengthy periods in the research field with other demands on researchers seeking to develop other requirements of an academic career.

Conclusion

Researching sensitive issues in any field is difficult. For policing scholars, undertaking projects that require the co-operation of the police can present hurdles that need to be overcome. In the case of a topic such as policing diversity, attaining this co-operation can be even harder, with police services understandably reluctant to leave themselves open to criticism over issues that have been troubling for decades. Gaining the support and approval of senior officers and then convincing operational officers of the worthwhile nature of their own involvement that senior officers have committed them to, can also be difficult. Add to that the suspicion of outside researchers that some in the police still hold and what you have is a difficult fieldwork situation for researchers. In the end, researching the policing of diversity does not simply involve questions about methodology or the technical operational challenges of investigating this issue. Those questions are important – vital – to effective critical research but they must be understood in terms of the wider structural, power and political context in which research is conducted. This context can make the job of the police researcher harder but, as we have noted above, such problems can be ultimately rewarding, too. The researcher can learn more and see more of the 'under-exposed face' of the police than they might do in easier situations that may ultimately prove less rich and rewarding.

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[i] The strengths and limitations of university research ethics regimes are widely debated and will not be explored here (Haggerty, 2004; Hall, 2012)