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Researching Diversity in Policing: a Users Guide to Philosophy and Practice

Many of the challenges 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 be rehearsed in the review of police diversity research developed below. The discussion will focus on key reflections from a series of research projects that I have conducted, sometimes alone and sometimes with colleagues, into police diversity (Rowe and Garland, 2003; Rowe, 2007; Rowe, 2012). As might be expected these studies have incorporated a variety of research methods and have been conducted in different contexts and within a range of police services. The focus below is not on particular challenges but rather a reflection of emerging themes that might represent limitations on research methods. The discussion here focuses on two related problems for those interested in researching diversity in policing. First, a significant methodological task needs to be overcome in terms of gathering valid data that authentically represents the values, attitudes and behaviour of police staff in relation to diversity. This is presented here as a problem of access in the broad sense of investigating issues that research subjects might rather not reveal. Some of this problem is similar to wider challenges of negotiating access in institutional terms of trying to 'open up' subject matter that powerful interests might prefer remain hidden. This is a problem for those wishing to study attitudes toward race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality (Jones, 2015) and so forth within policing but it is similar to those challenges faced by social scientists interested in corruption and malpractice in law enforcement (Rowe, Westmarland and Hougham, 2015) or sex in prisons, as a recent Howard League project discovered (Howard League, 2014). The issues moves beyond formal institutional access, however, to incorporate the challenge of enabling, encouraging and persuading individual research respondents to divulge their subjective attitudes towards topics that are highly sensitive in the contemporary 'culture wars' of contemporary policing (McLaughlin, 2007). It is argued that observational methods can offer advantages in terms of getting meaningful access to the subjectivities of police work that is more difficult to establish using other methods. The second broad set of problems considered below is conceptual and applies to all methods since the nature of 'diversity' itself is often poorly considered and tends to be treated simplistically in terms of discreet categories. Before reflecting on the ontological status of diversity and the impact that has for research methodology the issues of access and validity is considered.

Access all areas?

A common challenge for all social researchers is that of access to respondents. Much of the research methods literature provides guidance on strategies to secure access in official institutional terms (. Often having formal agreement for access to research subjects is a pre-requisite for funding applications and university and criminal justice research ethics committees are also likely to seek assurances that researchers have access arranged in these terms. This might be considered macro-level access; negotiated at a high level and subject to contractual and legal rules relating to matters such as data protection and intellectual property rights. Political, institutional and other factors contribute to a climate in which the negotiation and confirmation of access might often be beyond the control of the researcher or their counterpart in the police service or other party to the intended study. 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. Changing management priorities, budgetary considerations or the arrival of new personnel can put access to research subjects in jeopardy.

During the final few weeks of a period of months in which I had been negotiating macro-level access to a police service a television documentary was broadcast revealing police officers gambling while on duty, ignoring public calls for help and generally behaving badly. The footage had been taken surreptitiously using covert methods that university (and other professional) researchers would have found very difficult to get cleared by an ethics committee (see Skinns et al in this volume)[i]. In this particular situation the broadcast of the documentary did not scupper the research I had been negotiating, at least not in formal macro-level terms. The police service concerned did not seek to renegotiate or withdraw the access we had agreed before the media storm had broken.

Access, however, must also be negotiated at meso- and micro-levels and in these terms, the research may have been made more difficult because of the TV exposé. This particular project had as a research objective to better understand the routine operational decision-making of frontline police officers. For this reason there were many police officers in the research project who were subjects from whom informed consent had to be sought. In a sense, 'access' to each of them had to be secured, if I was to understand what shaped their decision-making. While formal authorised access is an important pre-requisite for much police research it is also clear from the literature, and my experience bears this out, that access needs to be constantly renegotiated and

renewed. At the meso-level this means that getting meaningful access to subjects and data requires negotiating with gatekeepers in middle-management positions. Even with formal macro-level access agreed other staff must understand and feel inclined to facilitate what is required. The one-time formal requirement might be a time-consuming and frustrating challenge, but access is not 'done' once the official authorisation is granted by a senior officer. That the Chief Constable has authorised access at the macro-level might actually make it harder to achieve access at a meso- or micro-level should suspicion be raised that the researcher has been sent by remote senior leaders in pursuit of a hidden agenda. The much-noted tension between frontline and management cops is revealed in the suspicion with which the former respond to researchers perceived to be 'time and motion' researchers or workplace psychologists deployed by HQ. Each research event (interview, survey, observation, etc.) requires establishing access on a micro level in an effort to overcome negative preconceptions.

During this (loosely ethnographic) observational study of frontline police work, which was conducted over a period of more than five months in three police stations within one police service, I had formal authorisation and photo-ID on a lanyard. My official credentials were established; I had access in the 'black letter' macro-level sense that the Chief Constable had sanctioned my work. The formal letter of authority was with my everyday of the study. In some respects, though, this was of marginal importance on a day-to-day level: indeed, not once was I asked to produce the letter to verify myself. The problem of access was much more significant in respect to other factors. At times, for example, access remained a distinct and significant physical challenge. When outside a side entrance to a police station at 5.00a.m., with the front-desk, public entrance to the station closed, I had to 'negotiate access' passed a security gate and through a locked side-entrance when the shift sergeant had not expected that a university researcher would be accompanying officers that morning. Email and other messages had been circulated widely within the service concerned informing staff of my work (this had been a requirement in terms of gaining informed consent from participants) but in practice this had not been read or was not remembered and so my work had to be explained and re-explained very frequently. In many respects this was a matter of negotiating access: research into police culture and deviance speaks of the need to get 'beyond the blue curtain' – a metaphor referring to the difficulty of revealing attitudes, value and behaviour concealed by the cultural norms of police occupation(see chapter by Westmarland , this volume). .

Suspicion, incomprehension, and a lack of trust are understandable responses and the challenge of establishing trust and rapport with those being researched is a recurring (and exhausting) requirement for those engaged in such studies. Meeting new officers, civilian staff, colleagues from local authorities and elsewhere in the CJS was an everyday experience and so micro-level access was a constant process of explanation. As I have noted elsewhere, once I discovered that I had been become known amongst officers in one station as 'University Mike', I felt that some degree of trust had been established (Rowe, 2007). However, at a later time in the same fieldwork, two female police officers who had agreed I could accompany during a shift disappeared into the station toilets 'for a quick word', they said to me, and then barely spoke to me for the rest of our time together (Rowe, 2007). This experience illustrates the complexities of access: formally in that instant it was established, I had permission from the chief constable (macro-level), the area inspector and shift sergeant (meso-level) and the two officers had consented that I could spend a shift with them (micro-level). In reality, though, I had little access that was meaningful in terms of the research objectives of the study, which related to understanding officer perspectives and decision making in respect of routine general duty patrol. Physical access had been achieved that day since I sat in the car and accompanied the officers but little meaningful data emerged (except for a better understanding of the challenges of negotiating access, I suppose).

At almost no point in the study did I hear officers using racist, homophobic or sexist language. It might be, of course, that this was kept from me and that the researcher effect suppressed such expressions. An impact of the diversity agenda within policing (see Jones and Rowe, 2015) that has developed in the wake of the Macpherson Report has been, many have argued, to heighten recognition among police and other organisations that the casual racist banter once accepted among informal occupational subcultures is no longer tolerated. Official policy, diversity statements, and disciplinary codes have combined to make racist epithets, for example, normatively unacceptable. As in other areas of society, the 'surface racism' previously evident in the police service might have become obsolete (as Law (2002) argues has happened in the media and Goldblatt (2014) has argued has occurred in relation to football fandom). Whether this signals broader progress in terms of antiracism is difficult to determine; it does mean that racism, and other forms of prejudice and discrimination, are perhaps more difficult to identify as they become less explicit. This poses challenges to the researcher that can be understood as relating to gaining valid access to data at the micro-level.

Behind the Mask? Over-coming the presentation of self

One of the difficulties specific to police researchers is that our common interest often is to understand how officers make decisions, how they interpret complex and dynamic situations, and how they communicate with professional colleagues and the wider public. All of these relate, to an extent, to the much-noted phenomenon of police discretion. One of the reasons why discretion is so significant to police work is that it exists in conditions of relative invisibility and this quality also makes it difficult for researchers to get beyond how officers choose to represent themselves and their work.

In terms of the specific challenge of researching diversity in policing yet further obstacles need to be anticipated. Much noted in the literature is the need for social researchers to develop methods and techniques that can get beyond the 'representation of self', whereby respondents – 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. Researchers who are interested in understanding the cultural and occupational values that underpin this activity have the difficult challenge that their research subjects tend to be well-versed in techniques used to conceal and obfuscate.

It is in this sense that challenges of research diversity in policing becomes a problem of access, in the sense of getting data that accurately represents the normative cultural frameworks and routine activities of everyday police work. During a series of studies conducted to evaluate the impact of diversity training in police work colleagues and I asked staff about their prior expectations of programmes. Invariably respondents reported that they felt they had not needed to undertake the training because they were not racist and treated all equally (Rowe and Garland 2003). This points to a key difficulty of getting meaningful research data about subjective perceptions, values and attitudes in areas where respondents are self-conscious about what is revealed and are keen to present themselves in what they interpret to be appropriate terms. In this context the 'when did you stop beating your wife' question becomes 'when did you stop being prejudiced, sexist, homophobic or racist?': unlikely to reveal any meaningful data.

This problem is one of access in the broadest sense; the researcher has to overcome significant challenges to gain meaningful data from respondents who are careful, wittingly or otherwise, not to disclose information that might cast them in a bad light.

This might be overcome through choosing alternative research methods, or by adopting a mixed methods approach such that the weakness of one form is compensated for by others. As many authors have noted (Reiner and Newburn, 2007; Westmarland, 2003 and 2005) it is because of the challenge of representation that police researchers have often adopted observational or ethnographic approaches. Among the classic pieces of police research have been many studies that have used such a methodology; from early groundbreaking work by Skolnick (1966) or Banton (1964) to more recent studies of homicide investigation (Innes, 2003; Bacon, 2013) or practices in custody suites (Skinns 2011). Key advantages of such approaches is that they seek an appreciative approach that is predicated on understanding policing from within, an insider-view of police work and the organisational and occupational cultures that surround it. The lived experiences of minority officers and of women have been captured by researchers who have accessed policing through immersing themselves within the service in such a way that they are able to convey multiple subjective realities of working in that environment. This work has shown, among many other things, how minority officers negotiate their identities in response to hostile police cultures (Jones, 2015).

By adopting ethnographic approaches researchers can get 'behind the blue curtain' and provide valuable insight into the cultural and organisation al practices that influence how policing is delivered in operational terms. The values and attitudes that officers might hold can be related to the working environment in which they are found. A significant example of this emerged from Waddington's (1999) study of police subculture. He found that officers did use racist (and other problematic) language when in the relative privacy of the off-stage policing environment. Perhaps other research methods could have uncovered similar results but the key contribution of this study is that it reshapes understanding by presenting these attitudes as a reaction to workplace pressure and environment, rather than as an indicator of officer behaviour and practice. Interpretation of the behaviour is influenced by a better understanding of the context in which it was enacted.The false seduction of ethnic monitoring

Another major methodological challenge is associated with the considerable body of statistical evidence accumulated through ethnic monitoring practices within criminal justice in England and Wales (but not in many other societies) over recent decades. The history and status of ethnic monitoring is discussed in other places and will not be rehearsed in this discussion (Fitzgerald and Sibbitt, 1997; Rowe, 2012; Young, 2010; Webster, 2007). While the previous paragraphs above explored the difficulties of researching the subjective values and cultural formations of diversity in the police

service the discussion below is concentrated on apparently objective quantitative data. A mass of statistical data is available to the researchers interested in diversity in policing. Prior to the 1990s such information was hardly collected, and not in the systematic cross-force scale that has become the norm. Compared to previous generations that 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. The annual Home Office/Ministry of Justice s95 'Race in the Criminal Justice System' reports and the underpinning online data provide a mass of data that can resolve research questions about, for example, the over-representation of minorities in stop and search practice. Whereas accounts of the over-policing of sections of the minority ethnic population were often presented as case studies or on the basis of local studies there is no authoritative data that answers key research questions.

While those researching diversity in policing are advantaged by the plethora of data available at the click of a mouse, methodological caution remains important. The apparently authoritative data is based on a series of ethnic classifications that are problematic. Standard census categories are used such that 16 different ethnic groups are identified (plus 1 'other'). This means that data is gathered, processed, and presented in terms broadly familiar from other analysis of ethnicity and public policy, demography, health and so on. The advantage this offers is off-set, however, by some significant limitations. First, the ethnic classifications are themselves socially, historically and culturally determined. Ethnicity is not a 'natural' category but one that emerges from particular pressures apparent in particular societies at particular times. As with the catalogue of offences labelled as 'hate crime', the terminology used to represent ethnicity reflects political, social and cultural struggle 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, black Caribbean, African, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi categories are used. The latter three are often conjoined as 'Asian'; but that category does not usually include Asians from other parts of that vast continent. Chinese, Malaysian, Indonesian, and Korean people, for example are counted separately from the Asian people from the Indian sub-continent. The comparative police researchers needs to contend with the problem that the same is not true in the United States where the term 'Asian' does tend to include those from the 'far east', but might not include Indians,

Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. More methodologically problematic still, US data tends to distinguish between 'race' and 'ethnicity'; which means that comparing the experiences of African Americans (the 'black race') with Koreans (treated as an ethnic group) becomes problematic.

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. Polish or Romanian communities are amalgamated 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, it could nonetheless by claimed that at least there is some quantitative data to work with. That is not true for other elements of diversity. Gender is widely monitored, as is age, but sexual orientation and mental health are not. The reasons for this are not necessarily clear, but critical social science researchers ought to consider why these elements of diversity are not considered significant enough to warrant the same (albeit imperfect) degree of monitoring as others. There is a danger that research implicitly accepts that 'ethnicity' is a proper variable for consideration and that other factors by extension are not. The explanatory power of ethnicity is elevated in ways that might mean other factors are marginalised. Most significantly, the total absence of data relating to the class or socio-economic position of those dealt with by the police requires a fundamental debate about the role of the police and the criminal justice system in a society with enduring stratification and a panoply of related inequalities.

In conclusion, 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 all suggest that ethnographic approaches might be preferred. Certainly many classic policing texts have been based on this method, and some recent studies have successfully used this method (see, for example, Westmarland, 2002; Fassin, 2013). There are, though, several reasons to be cautious and to continue to adopt a mixed-methods approach in favour of elevating one strategy to superior status. Notwithstanding the limitations of data that seeks to represent ethnic or 'racial' identity, 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 academic researchers seeking to develop other requirements of an academic career.

In the end these are not simply questions about methodology or the technical operational challenges of researching diversity in policing. 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 social science is continued. Funding opportunities, questions of institutional access, ethics and research governance do not operate in environments elevated from these broader social foundations. Consideration of questions of methodology soon require that the researcher pays attention to these fundamental challenges.

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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)