

“Are you crewed up with that bird from the uni?” The complexities of conducting ethnographic research in policing

Claudia Cox, University of Portsmouth

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide some initial reflections on the complexities and challenges faced when conducting observations with police officers working in response and neighbourhood policing roles from the perspective of a young, female, researcher.

Design/methodology/approach

The research consisted of 200 hours spent with operational police officers in a medium sized UK police force, predominantly in 3 cities, to explore the realities of frontline policing and policy implementation. This paper offers a reflexive account of conducting the research, as opposed to a discussion of the findings which align to the original research aim.

Findings

Conducting this fieldwork highlighted a number of complexities arising as a result of conducting ethnographic research in policing. This paper is concerned with the constructing of a researcher identity, and navigating moral dilemmas based on the culture and use of language observed.

Originality/value

Whilst this will be of interest to those engaged with similar policing research, such findings are also likely to apply to those conducting ethnography where there is conflict between their insider/outsider status, the potential for internalised moral debates, and women conducting research in male dominated settings.

Introduction

The complexities of conducting ethnographic research are well documented, particularly in relation to policing, where ethnography has commonly been used to explore the gaps between expectations and realities in policing (Manning, 1979). Despite a recent decline in police ethnographies, early ethnographic studies have become “powerful icons of the policing literature” (Manning, 2014, p. 518). Successful fieldwork in policing may be categorised by the ability to gain the trust of the participants, who then allow the researcher to be exposed to the true ‘backstage’, or private, interactions that take place (Holdaway, 1983). To develop this trust with an inherently suspicious organisation who, culturally, are often resistant to change and outsiders (Chan, 1997), is challenging. As a female researcher, these issues may be further compounded by the inherently ‘macho’ nature of police culture (Smith & Gray, 1985; Loftus, 2008).

As a 21 year old female student in 2014, I spent a year embedded within a medium sized UK police force conducting 600 hours of observations across a range of different policing functions. This research was both funded and commissioned by the force. In 2018, I returned to the same police force to conduct the first phase of my PhD research - 200 hours of observations with Constables and Sergeants working in response or neighbourhood policing roles. Much like Horn (1997) I found myself spending far less time within policing on this occasion than I had done previously now that the research was being funded by my institution, where I now worked, rather than the police. Both pieces of research centred around diversity and policing – the former was concerned with diversity *within* the organisation, whilst the latter focused on policy implementation in the policing of minority communities. As a young female researcher working in academia, concerned with issues relating to race and ethnicity, my identity was seemingly entirely at odds with recognised features of police culture.

On reflection, many of the problematic situations I encountered, such as gendered microaggressions and ethical dilemmas, were also present during my research in 2014. However, the increased level of independence from the organisation I was researching, as well as my personal development to becoming a full time academic who aligns with intersectional feminism (see Crenshaw, 1989), provided a new perspective from which I was viewing such situations. This paper will provide a reflexive account of my own experiences of conducting ethnographic research with the police, focusing in particular on my identity as a researcher, and the moral dilemmas that arose based on the culture and use of language observed. This paper will contribute to existing knowledge about the challenges associated with researching the police, and offer new contributions regarding the influence of gender on the researcher experience when conducting police ethnographies.

Police Ethnographies

Ethnography in criminological research emerged following research by Chicago School scholars in the 1940s, with notable work including Thrasher's (1942) *The Gang: A study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* and Shaw's (1930) *The Jack Roller*. A post-war resurgence in ethnographies by the Chicago School meant fieldwork became both a popular and normalised method for researching crime and justice, permissible in part perhaps due to the absence of their concern with issues of ethics and power (Jones, 2010). Within the Chicago School were scholars concerned with applying such methods to the study of policing; William Westley's ethnographic research of the police, secrecy and violence in the late 1940s and early 1950s was later published as *Violence and the Police* (Westley, 1970). Across the pond, Michael Banton's *The Policeman in the Community* (1964) detailed the role of police officers within rural communities, marking the beginning of a significant number of police ethnographies. As noted by Manning (2014, p. 518), ethnography is "the primary technique that established the foundational work in the field of police studies".

Police ethnographies have since provided insights into police culture, occupation and organisation, private policing, and digital policing (see Manning, 2014 for an overview). Marks (2004) identified ethnographic research as being essential for those seeking to understand police organisation and cultures, given that many realities of policing are shared only internally and in contexts hidden from public view. Goffman (1969) describes this as witnessing the 'backstage' activities of police officers, rather than the on-stage performance seen by the public. Giollabhui, Goold and Loftus (2016) reiterate the necessity of ethnographic research to ensure penetration of the secretive and isolated nature of police organisations. This results in some practices not being visible to outsiders (Chan, 1996), and such research therefore lends itself to a method which requires the researcher to be embedded in the day to day activities and routines of the researched group. The alternative is to rely upon accounts from police officers themselves, which may contradict the purpose of the research and fail to expose the true nature of police work and interactions (Reiner, 2000). Therefore, the complexities that will be discussed within this paper should not overshadow the significant contributions that ethnographic research has made, and can continue to make, to our understanding of policing.

Why I chose ethnography

The aim of my PhD research was to explore the realities of frontline policing and identify gaps between policy ideals and police realities in relation to policing ethnic minority communities. As previously discussed, academic literature identified that the best way to understand the realities of frontline policing is to observe it yourself, permitting an insight into actions and behaviours that would not otherwise be recorded (Emmerson, 2002). However, I also felt a sense of obligation to

spend time on shift with the police officers I would eventually be interviewing and writing about, undoubtedly rather critically at times. This stemmed from my previous experience of conducting police research, as will now be explained.

With the exception of an application to become a Special Constable as an undergraduate student, which was halted when my application for a police bursary and research role was accepted, I have no first hand operational policing experience (i.e. I am not, nor have I ever been, a police officer). I began my journey as a policing researcher as a rather naïve student who was extremely grateful to the organisation for offering what was described to me on several occasions as a once in a lifetime opportunity; as it turns out, I was the first and last external bursary student for this particular force. I was determined to seize every opportunity and demonstrate my gratitude everywhere I was permitted to go. Punch (1989) stated that successful field studies rely on naïve enthusiasm and good luck, and I certainly fit these criteria.

My efforts did not go unnoticed, particularly by frontline police officers. Many commented that I had spent more hours with them than some of their Special Constables, and that as I stood in torrential rain in a pub-lined street wearing my high-vis 'Observer' jacket one Friday night, I had quashed their negative stereotypical perception of students as lazy and work-shy. To them, I was demonstrating my dedication and willingness to experience real policing, not just the 'fun parts'. I have no doubt that this was instrumental in gaining trust and earning respect, thus allowing me to see the 'backstage' of policing in this particular force which form the basis of many of the discussions later in this paper. I was also permitted access to areas of the organisation which are typically even more secretive than policing itself, such as specialist firearms teams, which went on to be the focus of my Masters research. The findings were rather critical as one might expect when researching diversity within policing. However, this seemed to be somewhat more palatable because it was deemed that I understood policing, which also gave more perceived validity to my recommendations. It also offered benefits when accessing participants for interviews; I opted for snowball sampling (see Atkinson & Flint, 2004) and was able to conduct detailed interviews with ethnic minority police officers through word of mouth. Over half had never met me prior to the interview, but were aware of the research I was conducting and volunteered as participants.

Given that police culture is widely reported to be rooted in sexism (Brown, 2007), and moreover, is typically seen to exclude and reject outsiders (Chan, 1996; Loftus, 2010), I was particularly proud of what I had achieved in getting such unrestricted access and cooperation, especially as a young, female researcher. Doing so was not without challenges, and as will be discussed later in this paper

this often came in the form of unwanted sexualised comments, gendered microaggressions and emphasised femininity. Despite these experiences, I kept in contact with many officers who had agreed to allow me to join them on shift, with some becoming guest lecturers for my students as I began my academic career. Many became good friends who I have remained in contact with. Whilst critics may see this as a blurring of boundaries and unacceptable move away from objectivity, it is a consequence to be anticipated when one spends a prolonged period of time embedded in and interacting with a particular group, which ethnography typically involves (Gans, 1982; Gobo & Marciniak, 2016).

Therefore, when I began planning for my PhD research, I was certain that it would involve ethnography. Formally, this was again supported by the literature already covered within this paper. However, this decision now brings me back to my initial point about feeling a moral obligation to once again immerse myself within the organisation. I would now be entering this research as even more of an outsider – no longer would my work be branded with the organisations logo, and no longer could I claim to be a police staff volunteer or bursary student, leaving me with no formal ties to policing. I was also now a full-time academic working in a criminology department at a local university, and whilst decision makers may be receptive to academic research and recommendations, this is not always replicated on the frontline where there remains a battle over whether research trumps lived experiences (Moore, 2010; Lum, Telep, Koper & Grieco, 2012). Nonetheless I was able to benefit from a longstanding relationship between the policing organisation being observed and my academic institution which helped to navigate issues of trust and access (Jackson, 2019).

Conducting observations is one way of combining research with lived experience for those researchers who do not have extensive policing experience. I therefore felt that conducting ethnographic research would perhaps help me to overcome some of these barriers and prove that I wanted to continue to understand policing first hand rather than relying upon second hand narratives or perceived disconnected management perspectives (Home Office, 2019). I was also keen to avoid accusations of bias from within policing organisations if I only researched the experiences of those who are policed, as experienced by Jackson (2019). Whilst the contributions offered by police ethnographies which adopt a bottom-up approach are clear and necessary, as an early-career researcher I felt unable to put myself in a position whereby future opportunities for research or engagement could have been hampered. I also did not feel that I had sufficient

experience or understanding of contemporary policing issues to be able to offer proportionate and suitable recommendations for change if required.

Having now completed this research phase, the benefits of conducting observations have been two fold. Firstly, it highlighted a number of subtle changes to policy implementation that were clearly having an impact on day to day policing, thus addressing the aim of the research. Secondly, it has made facilitating interviews and seeking participants' far less cumbersome in the same way it did for my Masters research now that many new officers who have joined in recent recruitment rounds are also familiar with my research activities.

Several officers expressed their surprise at my return, asking if there was anything left for me to see that I had not seen before, which reaffirmed my position as someone genuinely interested in observing and understanding policing. However, there was still an air of suspicion, certainly more so than before. Despite reading the participation information sheet and signing the consent form, one officer spent the entire shift in the station, leaving his colleague single crewed with myself as an observer. I was later told that this was because they were untrusting of me and did not want to be observed (see Cram, 2018 for other possible explanations). Despite signing consent forms declaring that they understood my findings would be used for research, others then insisted that '*what is said in the car, stays in the car*'. Where access was granted by officers who had since been promoted, there seemed to be suspicion as to whether I was colluding with management to spy on whether they follow policies appropriately, with some officers challenging me on the nature of my research to this extent. Whilst not quite as an extreme reaction as that experienced by Horn (1997), there are certainly some commonalities to our experiences.

Whilst this may be indicative of me not fully gaining the trust of all my participants, I hypothesise that some of these issues were also caused by the practical constraints that now existed. As Punch (1989) observed, fieldwork is a personal commitment which academics will need to balance with family commitments and academic responsibilities. However, the gendered nature of organisational structures and hierarchies means that those who appear committed to their employment will hold more responsibility and power than those who must juggle multiple commitments (Acker, 1990). I no longer had the luxury of studying and research being my full time occupation, and fitting observations around teaching timetables, meetings, and my personal life, meant night shifts were almost impossible to commit to. I would sometimes have to leave the shift slightly early or join late. I tried to keep this to a minimum and only with officers who I was already familiar with, knowing

that those who were not would likely see this as a lack of commitment and dedication to the profession given the value placed upon working long hours to demonstrate commitment and ability within policing (Silvestri, 2005). I was very aware that I now risked becoming viewed as another academic disconnected from the realities of policing. As a result, discussions about my previous experiences of fieldwork would often take place early on, almost in an attempt to prove that I had already immersed myself in policing before and that what they were seeing was only a snapshot of a wider dedication to observation and understanding.

My approach to this fieldwork and the subsequent analysis was also influenced by my increasing alignment with feminism, particularly intersectional feminism. Feminist ethnographies were traditionally concerned with researching a groups approach to gender and the construction of gender within different social contexts (Aune, 2009). Whilst the aim of this research was not associated with gender, the construction of gender within police culture has inevitably influenced my experiences, findings and analysis as this paper will explore. None the less I still sought to be cognisant of the criticisms often directed towards ethnographers by feminist scholars and the findings of other reflexive accounts by feminist ethnographers. Ethical decision making in ethnographic research is an ongoing process which requires decision making and reflection during the research, not just before (Ferdinand et.al, 2007; Iphofen, 2013; Belur, 2014), and Wasserfall (1993) identified ongoing reflexivity as being essential for ensuring an ethical approach to research, particularly in relation to the power differences between the researcher and participants. This is compounded by the lack of clear guidance or instructions for such researchers, who are likely to experience 'ethical ambiguities', described by Westmarland (2001, p. 528) as "situations where behaviour is witnessed that leads to feelings of discomfort". It was in situations such as these where my identity as a young, female researcher became most apparent, as many of my feelings of discomfort and decisions about my perceived identity and positioning came from the 'backstage' conversations I observed. Issues relating to both identity and ethical ambiguities – which I refer to being 'moral dilemmas' – will now be discussed in turn.

Researcher identities

In justifying my decision to engage in ethnographic research, I have already discussed my belief that I needed to show my dedication to understanding the realities, complexities and challenges of policing, in order to attribute some credibility to my findings. Whilst I had continued to work with the organisation since completing my Masters research, significant organisational change also meant

that in many areas I would be starting from scratch, once again trying to prove myself in order to gather a true insight into the challenges currently being faced by frontline officers and any explanations for policy implementation gaps.

Brown (1996) identified four different status' of police researchers; those who are police officers (insider-insider), external researchers (outsider-outsider), those who work for police organisations but who are not police officers (inside-outsiders) and researchers who have previous experience of working within the organisation, such as a retired police officer (outsider-insiders). During my Masters research I was an 'inside-outsider', affording me unparalleled access to the organisation but with some constraints on what could and could not be researched. Much like Horn (1997) it also provided me with a degree of credibility. However, according to Brown's definitions, my PhD fieldwork was conducted as an outsider. In principle, this should mean restricted access and limited cooperation. As has already been discussed, this was not always the case once my previous role and research had been discussed, and in part due to existing relationships between my academic institution and the police force being observed. For this I was grateful, given inherent police scepticism about outsiders (Reiner, 1992). This may have also had a positive impact on the validity of my findings should it have made officers more likely to share 'in-house' knowledge (Marks, 2004).

Despite the benefits that not always being viewed as a 'genuine' outsider provided, I did find that I was more critical in my observations now that I was no longer formally attached to the organisation. Miller and Miller (2015) note that ethnography should be engaged with from a non-judgemental position, and the metaphorical distance afforded by my new identity made this more do-able. However, in my reluctance to be viewed entirely as an outsider in the interests of being accepted and generating useful and valid findings, I again found myself empathising with policing the more I immersed myself in it. Officers regularly aired their frustrations at the organisation and the impact their job was having on their personal life; moving to regional hubs rather than local stations meant longer commutes and less family time, changes in promotion processes meant more hurdles to overcome for promotion, a reduction in specialist units meant fewer opportunities for lateral progression, assaults on officers were increasing, and officer numbers were decreasing. It is difficult to listen to such experiences and not feel both sympathy and gratitude for the work being done. This inevitably impacted my interpretation of what I observed at times, as evidenced in the following paragraph.

On one occasion I was with a single crewed officer who engaged in a vehicle pursuit after a report of an assault and theft. The pursuit resulted in an arrest for several offences, no members of the public were injured, and no property was damaged. The positive impact of this incident, viewed as a rare

engagement with 'proper policing', on the morale of both the officer and the rest of the shift was clear. When I returned to the same shift a week later, the criticisms that had been received from senior and middle management in relation to this incident were shared with me. It was incredibly difficult to not share in their frustrations at the critical management response, despite being all too aware that I had of course only heard, and seen, one side of the story, and knew very little regarding the details of the criticisms received. It was only when I reflected upon my field notes a few days later that I noted I had not considered the content of the critique, but just that it existed in the first place, and that I had viewed it as a mechanism to damage morale. This provided support for the importance of continued reflection throughout the course of the observations.

Despite starting as an outsider, my researcher identity developed throughout the course of the research. This identity also varied dependent on who I was observing. Ringer (2013) noted that research participants, in this case the police officers being observed, will shape the role and identity assumed by the researcher. Some of my participants seemed keen to reinforce my identity as an outsider, for example through the completion of risk assessment forms, briefings, and narratives explaining the basic aspects of their role and decision making despite being aware of my prior research experience. Others encouraged a blurring of boundaries; they purchased my dinner using police discount, allowed me into areas of restricted access, added me to the biscuit and cake purchasing rota, and gave token gifts on my last observation shift. This created an element of anxiety when joining a new team or officer for a shift, as it was challenging to anticipate how I would need to position myself in order to be trusted and accepted. This generated a finding in itself, demonstrating the nuances in police culture within one particular policing organisation.

As well as my researcher identity, it is also pertinent to consider how other parts of my identity, namely being a young female, impacted on my experience and findings. Scott (1984) identified that female researchers in male dominated arenas will need to navigate and negotiate their own experiences as a researcher, the expectations and assumptions made about her by the group being observed, and power differences between them and the researched group. First, I will consider the assumptions made about me and power differences as a result of my identity.

Young female researchers in male dominated environments, particularly where masculinity is embedded within the organisational culture, can be perceived as non-threatening and naïve (Gurney, 1985; Brewer, 1991; Marks, 2004). On the one hand, this can be beneficial; if not deemed to be a threat, the researcher may gain better access to the realities of the organisation. However, if the naivety is assumed as a result of gender, this can result in paternalistic and sexualised behaviour from those being observed. Hollis (2014) describes this as manifesting in her research as

supervisors making gendered comments about the potential risks of going on patrol with officers and being patronising of her knowledge and capabilities. This reflects the somewhat historic belief from both the police and the public that policing is a job for men due to the masculine traits associated with effective policing (Morash & Haarr, 2011). Female researchers also widely report being on the receiving end of sexual innuendo, unwelcome advances and sexual harassment (Lumsden, 2009; Diphorn, 2012; Hollis, 2014) which consequently places the researcher in 'an inferior or devalued position' (Guerney, 1985, p. 12). Such behaviour may be commonplace within the organisation meaning the researcher is witnessing the true nature of that organisations culture, and evidence suggests sexism to be commonplace within policing and police culture (Hunt, 1990; Miller & Bonistall, 2011), but it is also possible that the presence of a female in a male dominated environment causes such behaviour to become amplified (Kanter, 1977). Therefore, assumptions of naivety and the projection of masculine cultures through sexism results in a clear power differential between the female researcher and the (predominantly) male participants.

During both of the periods of fieldwork I have described within this paper, I experienced all that was described in the previous paragraph. However, such experiences were far more common, and obvious, during my Masters research. My naivety was correctly assumed, and perhaps when this assumption was realised to be true, it was attributed to my identity as a young female, rather than an inexperienced researcher. I am certain that gender was at least a contributing factor here due to the volume of sexualised and gendered comments I experienced. Officers who I formed good working relationships with were referred to by colleagues as my 'boyfriends', I was regularly, and falsely, accused of having inappropriate relationships with senior officers, and on the small number of occasions that I accepted an invitation to socialise outside of work with officers, sexual advances were made. To begin with, these incidents were of little bother to me, as I saw them as a sign of acceptance. My actions would at times embody emphasised femininity as I sought to reinforce the assumptions of naivety that were affording me increased levels of trust and acceptance, for example through providing home baked goods to officers or through my choice of clothing (Morash & Haarr, 2011). However as my experience grew and I began identifying more as an academic than a student, it became frustrating that my jovial and complicit response to such incidents remained essential to continuing to secure access to the organisation and not be viewed as a threat. Much like Gurney (1985), I became in denial that my research was becoming compromised by my gender, and only truly accepted this quite some time after the research was completed. It was only then that I recognised I had continued to choose femininity over professionalism, and that I had viewed the two as being mutually exclusive and incompatible as a policing researcher (Rabe-Hemp, 2009).

Many critiques of ethnographic research from feminist scholars has centred on the power imbalance between the observer and the observed which can create opportunities for the exploitation of participants (Davis & Craven, 2016). During my PhD fieldwork, some officers would comment on how my salary was likely to be higher than theirs, my work benefits were more desirable, and that I appeared to occupy an advantageous social position. This disrupted assumptions of naivety and vulnerability and the volume of gendered comments seemed to reduce as a result, but this also made me acutely aware of power imbalances between myself and the officers I was observing and how this was likely to be impacting my research findings. However, I also started to recognise myself making a conscious effort to avoid such instances before they occurred, for example through discussing my relationship with my partner to make it clear that any sexual advances would be unwanted. However, this sometimes led officers to question the stability of our relationship, with some participants questioning why I would opt to spend time in the field rather than with my partner, particularly during evening or weekend shifts. This appeared at times to be an attempt to minimise or erase the barrier to making such comments or advances, yet when I highlighted that I felt observing varied and busy shifts was essential for understanding policing, this was often well received and reaffirmed my commitment to both the research and observing their true experiences.

I still experienced paternalistic and sexualised behaviour throughout my PhD research, but I was more confident in addressing it in a light-hearted manner as I had the comfort of knowing I had already established rapport and access. I had also come to be familiar with police culture and the nuances of interactions among the different shifts I was observing and could adapt my use of language accordingly. For example, whilst in a report writing room with officers, their Sergeant walked in from their office and shouted *“stop swearing in front of the young girl, it’s not appropriate!”* I responded with *“yeah, it’s really f***ing annoying!”* A moment of silence quickly turned to laughter, including the Sergeant, who remarked *“fair enough, you’ll fit in well here.”* This highlights how the response to instances where the researchers’ identity is being challenged and highlighted can also shape their experiences of trust and acceptance. However, responding in such a way is not always harmonious with the researchers’ values and can create an internal conflict, as will now be discussed.

Moral dilemmas

I start this final discussion by returning to Westmarland’s (2001, p. 528) notion of ‘ethical ambiguities’, whereby observed behaviours incite feelings of discomfort within the researcher. On one end of the continuum this may be witnessing or uncovering illegal behaviour, an occupational

hazard when conducting criminological research which causes significant ethical issues for the researcher (Finch, 2001). For Westmarland, this included the use of violence and excessive force by the police. Given the widespread acknowledgement that corruption, excessive force, overt racism and other forms of serious malpractice can and do occur within policing, to fail to prepare for witnessing such incidents is yet another form of researcher naivety (Norris, 1993). The institutional ethical review process forbid an oversight of such circumstances, and it was agreed that any forms of serious malpractice would first be discussed with my supervisor in order to determine an appropriate course of action.

However, much like Rowe (2007), I did not witness any 'serious' malpractice, such as evidence of excessive force or corruption. I use the term 'serious' here in relation to the response I would expect the reporting of such issues to receive. This is not to say these issues do not exist; perhaps I did not fully penetrate the exterior shell of policing to uncover the true 'backstage' or spend sufficient time in all areas of the organisation to really uncover such issues. Perhaps my subjective judgement of what was acceptable behaviour and what was not became blurred the more I immersed myself within the organisation. What I did witness was evidence of discriminatory language, particularly sexist and homophobic, being used routinely at times, such as during briefings or over the radio. Its widespread prevalence, often in the presence of supervisors, leads me to separate this from what I previously described as 'serious' malpractice. I am not suggesting that it is not a serious issue, but the context in which such comments were often made leads me to conclude that it is not always recognised internally as 'serious', certainly for some, and likely those who hold more hegemonic power (see Freeman & Stewart, 2020).

On one occasion, an officer broadcast a description of a wanted male over the radio; he was described as '*wearing a wifebeater*' (a white sleeveless vest). When one officer introduced me to a colleague, they commented '*we live together, but we're not gay obviously!*', to which the officer replied '*you never know mate, its 2018, stranger things have happened*'. As per the title of this paper, during a private radio transmission, a colleague asked the officer I was observing '*Are you crewed up with that bird from the uni?*' Whilst comments such as these may seem trivial, or be entirely invisible to the privileged many, the prevalence of microaggressions in the workplace can have a significant negative impact on the mental health, wellbeing and job performance of existing employees from minority groups, and hamper attempts to recruit new staff from underrepresented communities (Sue, 2010). Given the widely recognised need to recruit and retain police officers from diverse backgrounds, I suggest that such language should be a serious concern for policing.

As a researcher, it was comments such as these which resulted in what I call 'moral dilemmas'. As Rowe (2007) explains, witnessing malpractice may be dealt with by reporting to senior management, speaking to the officer directly, or doing nothing. Microaggressions, by their very nature, are relatively minor as stand-alone incidents devoid of context. Reporting to senior officers therefore seemed disproportionate, and supervisors seemed to be accepting of such language, or did not recognise it as being problematic. This is evident in the example from the report writing room discussed previously in this paper. I am certain that many of those who made such comments also did so in ignorance, rather than with the intent to cause any harm. However, it is important to note that the lack of intent should not negate the impact that such comments can have. To dismiss their impact due to a lack of intent can result in a "...inability to address the powerful cumulative impact that the microaggressions have across the total experience of those subjected to continuous subtle attacks" (Edwards, 2017, p. 11).

The option to 'do nothing' highlighted my privilege, as it was rare that such comments were directed at me or directly impacted me. On reflection I am ashamed that there were occasions when I prioritised my need to maintain access and be trusted by those I was observing over my personal and moral values. When I felt able to do so, usually because I had developed a good rapport with the officer and had managed to construct a non-confrontational and jovial response, I would discuss what had been said with them directly. Sometimes this was as simple as asking them to explain what they meant by their comment, in the hope that they may realise the discriminatory nature of what had been said without me being viewed as critical and reinforcing concerns that I was a 'management spy'. This, however, was a rare occurrence. Sue (2010) notes that the absence of responses to microaggressions is often the result of a power imbalance between the dominant group and the marginalised group as a result of a cost-benefit analysis. When confronted with a gendered microaggression, the masculine nature of police culture and the prevalence of such comments meant the institutional power was held by those within the organisation, not myself. Had my outsider status been reinforced through challenging the nature of language that had come to be viewed as acceptable, I felt there was a risk that my reputation within the organisation could have been damaged. Whilst my privilege meant that gendered microaggressions were the only ones directed towards me, my identity as an outsider coupled with the regularity of such comments meant I did not feel empowered to speak up, despite the fact I would usually do so in other social settings.

Conclusion

Having reflected on my experiences of conducting ethnographic research in policing, there are two key areas that I believe warrant further examination or consideration. The first is for the attention

of other female academics seeking to conduct similar research in policing or other male-dominated contexts. Despite the critical nature of this reflexive paper, I have many fond memories of conducting fieldwork, and I am both certain and hopeful that I will continue to engage with similar research opportunities in the future. However, being a young female researcher in a male environment presents unique challenges in gaining acceptance and maintaining trust, and I found this to be at the expense of maintaining personal and professional values at times. The impact of this should not be underestimated – it may benefit research findings but, in my experience, it will incite feelings of frustration and disappointment in the researcher themselves. Continually reflecting on my experiences, particularly through the writing of this paper and through critical discussions with those outside of my research, provided a much needed outlet for making sense of my experiences and understanding my own decision making in the field.

Secondly, this paper highlights the difficulties faced in trying to be accepted in the world of policing due to being an outsider, being young, and being female. I see the associated issues with this as being twofold. Firstly, there is a risk that opportunities for collaborative research between academic institutions and policing organisations will be hampered by an organisational reluctance to engage fully with those who are outside the organisation, especially when their identity does not align to key features of police culture, such as masculinity. Secondly, should the pressure to gain acceptance and ‘fit in’ be experienced by those within policing, there is a danger that opportunities to recruit and retain a more diverse workforce will be negatively impacted. As I have recounted within this paper, microaggressions appear to be prevalent within the everyday language and culture of the organisation. Those who are likely to be impacted by microaggressions remain a minority group within policing and this power imbalance, coupled with the need to fit in and be accepted, is unlikely to create opportunities for empowerment and challenge. As I have already noted, this is not to suggest that those working within policing are intentionally causing harm to colleagues from minority groups, but the impact of these experiences should not be discounted and are worthy of further exploration in order to progress the creation of an inclusive organisation.

References

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender and Society*, 4(2), 139-158.
- Atkinson, R., & Flint, J. (2004). Snowball Sampling. In A. B. Michael S. Lewis-Beck, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. doi:10.4135/9781412950589
- Aune, K. (2009). Feminist Ethnography. In J. O'Brien, *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* (pp. 309-311). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Belur, J. (2014). Status, gender and geography: power negotiations in police research. *Qualitative Research*, 14(2), 184-200.
- Borrett, D., Sampson, H., & Cavoukian, A. (2016). Research ethics by design: A collaborative research design proposal. *Research Ethics*, 13(2), 84-91.
- Brown, J. (1996). Police research: Some critical issues. In F. Leishman, B. Loveday, & S. Savage, *Core Issues in Policing* (pp. 178-190). Harlow: Longman.
- Brown, J. (2007). From Cult of Masculinity to Smart Macho: Gender perspectives on police occupational culture. In M. O'Neil, M. Marks, & A.-M. Singh, *Police Occupational Culture: New Debates and Directions* (Vol. 8, pp. 205-228). Oxford: JAI Press.
- Chan, J. (1996). Changing Police Culture. *British Journal of Criminology*, 36(1), 109-134.
- Chan, J. B. (1997). *Changing Police Culture: Policing in a multicultural society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- College of Policing. (2019). *Professional Profiles: Response Constable*. Retrieved from College of Policing: <https://profdev.college.police.uk/professional-profile/test-9/>
- Cram, F. (2018). Perceptions of me, conceptions of you: refining ideas of access to, and 'acceptance' within, the police organisational field. *Policing and Society*, 28(3), 360-374.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*(1), 139-167.
- Cynthia Lum, C. W. (2012). Receptivity to research in policing. *Justice Research and Policy*, 14(1), 61-95.
- Davis, D.-A., & Craven, C. (2016). *Feminist Ethnography: Thinking through methodologies, challenges and possibilities*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Dingwall, R. (2012). How Did We Ever Get Into This Mess? The rise of ethical regulation in the social sciences. In K. Love, *Ethics in Social Research* (pp. 3-26). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Ltd.
- Diphooorn, T. (2013). The Emotionality of Participation: Various Modes of Participation in Ethnographic Fieldwork on Private Policing in Durban, South Africa. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 42(2), 201-225.

- Edwards, J. F. (2017). Color-blind racial attitudes: Microaggressions in the context of racism and White privilege. *Administrative Issues Journal*, 7(1), 5-18. doi: 10.5929/2017.7.1.3
- Emmerson, R. M. (2002). Introduction. In R. M. Emmerson, *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations* (pp. 1-26). Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.
- Ferdinand, J., Pearson, G., Rowe, M., & Worthington, F. (2007). A different kind of ethics. *Ethnography*, 8(4), 519-543. doi:10.1177/1466138107083566
- Finch, E. (2001). Issues of Confidentiality in Research into Criminal Activity: the legal and ethical dilemma. *Mountbatten Journal of Legal Studies*, 5, 34-50.
- Fox, J., & Lundman, R. (1974). Problems and Strategies in Gaining Research Access in Police Organisations. *Criminology*, 12(1), 52-69.
- Freeman, L., & Stewart, H. (2020). Sticks and Stones Can Break Your Bones and Words Can Really Hurt You: A Standpoint Epistemological Reply to Critics of the Microaggression Research Program. In L. F. Schroer, *Microaggressions and Philosophy*. Routledge.
- Gans, H. (1982). The participant observer as a human being: observations on the personal aspects of fieldwork. In R. Burgess, *Field Research: A Sourcebook and Field Manual* (pp. 53-61). London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Giollabhui, S., Goold, B., & Loftus, B. (2016). Watching the Watchers: conducting ethnographic research on covert investigation in the United Kingdom. *Qualitative Research*, 16(6), 630-645.
- Gobo, G., & Marciniak, L. T. (2016). What is Ethnography? In D. Silverman, *Qualitative Research* (pp. 103-120). London: SAGE.
- Goffman, E. (1989). On Fieldwork. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 18, 123-132.
- Gurney, J. N. (1985). Not One of the Guys: The female researcher in a male dominated setting. *Qualitative Sociology*, 8(1), 42-62.
- Hammersley, M., & Traianou, A. (2012). *Ethics in Qualitative Research : Controversies and Contexts*. London: SAGE.
- Haney, C., Banks, W. C., & Zimbardo, P. G. (1973). A study of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison. *Naval Research Review*, 30, 4-17.
- Holdaway, S. (1983). *Inside the British Police: A force at work*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Hollis, M. (2014). Accessing the Experiences of Female and Minority Officers: Observations from an Ethnographic Researcher. In K. Lumsden, & A. Winter, *Reflexivity in Criminological Research* (pp. 150-161). Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Home Office. (2019). *The Front Line Review*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/front-line-policing-review>
- Horn, R. (1997). Not 'one of the boys': Women researching the police. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 6(3), 297-308.
- Hunt, J. C. (1990). The Logic of Sexism Among Police. *Women & Criminal Justice*, 1(2), 3-30.

- Iphofen, R. (2013). *Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology*. Retrieved from European Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/hi/ethics-guide-ethnog-anthrop_en.pdf
- Jackson, W. (2019). Researching the policed: critical ethnography and the study of protest policing. *Policing and Society*, 169-185.
- Jones, H. (2010). Being Really There and Really Aware: Ethics, politics and representation. In J. Scott-Jones, & S. Watt, *Ethnography in Social Science Practice* (pp. 28-41). London: Routledge.
- Kanter, R. M. (1977). *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books Inc.
- Loftus, B. (2008). Dominant Culture Interrupted: Recognition, Resentment and the Politics of Change in an English Police Force. *British Journal of Criminology*, 48(6), 778-797.
- Loftus, B. (2010). Police Occupational Culture: Classic themes, altered times. *Policing and Society*, 20(1), 1-20.
- Lumsden, K. (2009). 'Don't Ask a Woman to Do Another Woman's Job': Gendered Interactions and the Emotional Ethnographer. *Sociology*, 43(3), 497-513.
- Manning, P. (2014). Ethnographies of Policing. In M. D. Kane, *The Oxford Handbook of Police and Policing* (pp. 518-558). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Manning, P. K. (1979). *Police Work: The social organisation of policing*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Marks, M. (2004). Researching Police Transformation: The Ethnographic Imperative. *British Journal of Criminology*, 44(6), 866-888.
- Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioural study of obedience. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 67, 371-378.
- Miller, J. M., & Miller, H. V. (2015). Edge ethnography and naturalistic enquiry in criminology. In H. Copes, & J. M. Miller, *The Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Criminology* (pp. 88-102). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Miller, S. L., & Bonistall, E. (2011). Gender and Policing: Critical issues and analyses. In W. S. DeKeseredy, & M. Dragiewicz, *Handbook of Critical Criminology* (pp. 316-329). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Moore, M. H. (2010). Improving police through expertise, experience and experiments. In D. Weisburd, *Police Innovation: Contrasting Perspectives* (pp. 322-338). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Morash, M., & Haarr, R. N. (2011). Doing, Redoing, and Undoing Gender: Variation in Gender Identities of Women Working as Police Officers. *Feminist Criminology*, 7(1), 3-23.
- Norris, C. (1993). Some ethical considerations on fieldwork with police. In D. Hobbs, & T. May, *Interpreting the Field: Accounts of Ethnography* (pp. 123-143). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Norris, C. (1993). Some ethical considerations on field-work with the police. In D. a. Hobbs, *Interpreting the field: Accounts of ethnography* (pp. 122-143). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Piper, H., & Simons, H. (2005). Ethical Responsibility in Social Research. In B. Somekh, & C. Lewin, *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (pp. 56-64). London: SAGE.

- Punch, M. (1989). Researching Police Deviance: A Personal Encounter with the Limitations and Liabilities of Field-Work. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 40(2), 177-204.
- Rabe-Hemp, C. E. (2009). POLICEwomen or PoliceWOMEN? Doing Gender and Police Work. *Feminist Criminology*, 4(2), 114-129.
- Reiner, R. (1992). *The Politics of the Police*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Reiner, R. (2000). Police Research. In R. D. King, & E. Wincup, *Doing Research on Crime and Justice* (pp. 205-235). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reiss, A. J. (1968). Stuff and nonsense about social surveys and observation. In H. Becker, *Institutions and the Person* (pp. 351-367). Chicago: Aldine.
- Ringer, A. (2013). Researcher-participant positioning and the discursive work of categories: Experiences from fieldwork in the mental health services. *Qualitative Studies*, 4(1), 1-20.
- Rowe, M. (2007). Tripping Over Molehills: Ethics and the Ethnography of Police Work. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 10(1), 37-48.
- Scott, S. (1984). The personable and the powerful: Gender and status in sociological research. In C. Bell, & H. Roberts, *Social Researching: politics, problems, practice*. London: Routledge.
- Silvestri, M. (2005). 'Doing time': Becoming a police leader. *International Journal of Police Science and Management*, 8(4), 266-281.
- Smith, D., & Gray, J. (1985). *Police and People in London*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.
- Thrasher, F. M. (1942). *The Gang: A study of 1313 gangs in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wasserfall, R. (1993). Reflexivity, Feminism and Difference. *Qualitative Sociology*, 16, 23-41.
- Westley, W. (1970). *Violence and the Police*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Westmarland, L. (2001). Blowing the Whistle on Police Violence. *British Journal of Criminology*, 41, 523-535.