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Police Culture: Histories, Orthodoxies and New Horizons

The idea of police culture has dominated academic and practitioner debate for the past half-century. This might appear, at one level, remarkable given the degree to which wider society, police organisations and policing itself has changed over this time. That said, the enduring appeal of police culture, as a concept, might be relatively straight forward to explain. The general principle of the concept, that specific yet informal values emerge amongst police officers and that these impact on how police work ‘gets done’, allow it to be applied to a broad range of areas of policing. It is, arguably, as relevant to contemporary debates about police education and training as it was to explaining police race relations in the 1980s. Furthermore, its popularity as a concept might also be explained by the fact that, for later iterations at least, it allows for the notion of cultural change. This idea that it is possible to modify, mitigate or reduce the culture and its impact has done much to make the concept attractive to police leaders, rather than just academic audiences. In doing so, it also tells us much about the new social and managerial contexts against which (or through which) police organisations operate. Increasingly, and as the papers in this special issue illustrate, scholars continue to find that police culture provides a helpful tool with which to understand these complexities associated with 21st century policing. Of interest here, however, has to be an understanding of how the context through which knowledge about police culture is generated has evolved over the last 50 years.

As a starting point, it is quite interesting to note the historical emergence of police culture as an area of *academic* interest. Whilst, the early work of Westley can lay claim to being the first substantive piece of work in this area, Banton’s (1964) work can be viewed as heralding the

tentative beginnings of research in a period that would stretch from just before the mid 1960s to the present day. As has been noted previously (Cockcroft, 2012), Banton's work whilst providing a much adopted blueprint that shaped much of the work that followed, differed in one significant way from later iterations. Michael Banton's motivation to study police organisations was somewhat unique, given the subject area, driven as it was by his belief that such organisations were *successful* rather than *defective*. In this respect the tone of his work was largely optimistic. Whilst elements of Banton's methodological strategy (most notably the observational, rather than the comparative) were often drawn upon to study police culture over the coming years, the orientation of later works was often 'reformist' in nature. That is, the gaze often cast upon the police was one that essentially saw practices, processes and outcomes of policing as negative. In the United States, for example, much of the early work centred on the notable tensions that arose between the police and the emerging civil rights movement and on the related area of police discretion (see, for example, LaFave 1962). In the United Kingdom, as in the United States, interest coalesced around issues of (inappropriate) use of police discretion at a time when the so-called 'Golden Age' of policing was coming to an abrupt end and when, to quote Robert Reiner, the police descended into the, "cockpit of controversy" (1995, p.74). This transitional time for policing provided a relatively rich vein of material for more traditionally sociological accounts of policing which drew heavily on the concept of labelling. Labelling theory had emerged from the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism to show the ways in which members of state institutions had the power to attach labels to the vulnerable and for those labels to impact negatively on subsequent behaviour. In particular, the work of Howard Becker (1963) detailed the process whereby labels were applied to those engaged in deviant or criminal behaviour and his work quickly found favour amongst those sociologists who were critical of the ways in which

police exercised their power. In particular, by highlighting police stereotyping, prejudice and use of discretion, this perspective brought the ‘informality’ of police work, and its culture, under increased scrutiny.

Traditionally, therefore, much of the excellent early academic work focussed on what might be viewed as the sociology of policing with policing as the context against which sociological themes were explored. Unsurprisingly, such research and commentary focussed on the relationship between the individual and the state and, in doing so, highlighted ideas surrounding discrimination, accountability and the class-based elements of much police work. It is probably true to say that this focus was the result of a culmination of factors including the greater visibility of policing, an increased media focus, some well-publicised scandals and a gradual erosion of deference towards traditional forms of authority. The net result of this is that, for a long time, police culture appeared as an issue of concern for criminologists rather than for the police themselves. In many respects, this was understandable. For the majority of academics writing in this area at that time, Nils Christie’s (1971) call for academics to engage in problem-raising rather than problem-solving had been embraced with the net result that much academic focus criticised police practice rather than providing solutions. And whilst the work of Christie and others reminds us of the real importance of criticality in our research into policing, we must likewise be aware that there is a need to be clear that criticality has become a somewhat contested term. In particular, the notion of criticality has, over recent decades, decreasingly been used as a way of describing balanced and objective evaluation but instead become part of an explicitly politicised agenda. This tendency of ‘criticality’ to become conflated with what Narayanan (2005) termed ‘reformist’ sociological agendas has provided some interesting tensions for the study of organisational and occupational culture. These,

in part, emerge from the politicised nature of much British sociology. Beynon (2011), for example, shows how the expansion of 1960s British sociology was largely underpinned by its close relationship with elements of the labour movement and therefore, “increasingly attractive to dissidents in cognate social science areas” (p. 8). While Beynon’s earlier work sympathetically explored the experiences of those working in private sector industries (see, for example, Beynon, 1984) his 2011 work charts the development of this politicised sociological movement and how it has developed to include a focus on the lives of those employed in the public sector and attempted to unpick these workers’ relationship with the state. Of note here, however, is that those who work in the policing sector have thus far been excluded from appreciative (or at least non-judgmental) approaches to understanding their working lives. This might be considered somewhat ironic for as Brogden (1991: 1) notes, in his oral history of Merseyside policing in the early 20th century, that police officers of that era were oppressed, like workers in other occupations, through “draconian discipline and appalling work conditions”. The police, it appears, presented a tremendous challenge to the reformist sociology movement. Whilst workplace cultures, founded in resistance and conflict, were generally celebrated, those that pertained to policing attracted almost universal condemnation.

This, I argue, has very real implications not just for the academic study of police culture but, more importantly, for police practitioners in that cultures that emerge within police organisations are seen, by sociologists, as negative. This view can however be balanced with the more positive representations of police culture that tend to be generated through work into police culture conducted by academics in disciplines other than sociology. MacAlister’s work, for instance, presents a perspective on police culture that appears genuinely appreciative of the lived experience of police

officers. He suggests that police culture exists for a reason, most notably in that it offers some advantages to those who work in such organisational environments. When one adopts such a position, elements of the police culture that might seem ‘alien’ to some academic observers begin to appear as a rational ‘survival strategy’ (2004: 181) to those who understand the challenges and pressures of police work. Social isolation from the public, for example, allows for the necessary disengagement to conduct crucial police roles unhindered by emotional attachment. This emotional distance is balanced by the social solidarity and camaraderie which characterises relationships with peers and colleagues. In this respect, MacAlister sees police culture as performing a positive and necessary role in reducing practitioner stress. Such discourses rarely penetrate the sociological orthodoxy surrounding police occupational culture where the culture is positioned as an illegitimate construct. This is unfortunate as the tendency to position police occupational culture in such a way fails to reflect the very real and valid experiences of those who work in such roles. The HMIC (1999: 29) reflected this positioning of the term ‘police culture’ when they reported that;

“The journalistic shorthand that summarises the thinking of operational police officers as being explained by ‘a canteen culture’ is as misleading as it is mischievous. It is acknowledged that the location reference is merely evocative of what is seen as a collective attitude. These very canteens witness the conversations of officers who still see service to all members of the public as an intrinsic part of their vocation. The number of officers who are nominated each year for community awards are part of this same culture”.

The tension between ‘criticality’, in its original sense, and that as used by ‘reformist’ sociologists exploring police culture arguably reveals a quite telling contradiction in that discussions of police culture often fall prey to a form of reductionist logic. These caricature the lived experience, perceptions, behaviours and values of police officers to the level of blunt and deterministic causal relationships between police behaviour and police culture. It is increasingly unlikely that such approaches provide any real basis for a meaningful understanding of the world and work of the police not least because of the increasing complexity of police organisations and the diversity of the groups who work for them. It remains, therefore, of note, if not surprising, that Banton’s outlook has not been replicated more widely by others. By this, I mean that his labelling of his pioneering work as a ‘study in *occupational* [italics added] sociology’ (Banton, 1964, p. xii) seemed to signal a significantly different orientation to many of the works that followed it. For example, in the preface to his book, he wrote;

“I have tried not to pass judgement upon how well policemen do their job; though, inevitably, many of the incidents and practices I describe here will seem to merit commendation or condemnation. Of what occupation could not the same be said? I ask the reader, therefore, to try - as I have tried - to lay aside moral judgements and seek simply to understand the policeman’s occupation in its social context” (1964: p. vii - viii).

This positioning of his work in this way, over 50 years ago, provides a refreshing reminder to us of what should be a driver behind a significant proportion of our work. And whilst there will always be a space, and a need, for the application of explicitly critical theory to the world and work of the police it is interesting to note the increasingly amicable and collegial relationships developing

between the police and the academy. This increasing synergy is largely borne from interaction between police and academics rather than from being imposed on the former by the latter. This is a welcome development and does not suggest that the 'sociology of policework' has been railroaded into a more practical orientation by police officers but that research into police culture has been facilitated (and enriched) through partnership between police and academia. At the same time, an increased focus on issues of policy and practice might, to some, position it firmly in the 'administrative' criminology camp. Whilst for many this term evokes visions of dry, worthy, descriptive and fairly uncontentious endeavour (see, for example, Young's 2004 critique of administrative criminology), it is also fair to say that such work has also impacted significantly and positively on the lives of those who work in, and pass through, the criminal justice system. And although it is true that traditional critical research into policing has provided fertile intellectual debates in the area of police culture, it is arguably the adoption of new management models and more latterly, an escalation in the politicised nature of policing, that have provided the centre ground for more recent debate in this area. The voice of practitioners is of crucial importance to our understanding of the cultural impact of these these issues and what I believe is emerging is a territory of real worth. A critical position that is academically rigorous and which, simultaneously is understanding of the realities of police work and its context. Whilst in part this reflects a very welcome breaking down of the barriers that existed between academics and police practitioners, it is also I believe a result of growing concerns around how policing is configured within socio-political contexts increasingly characterised by a shift towards neo-liberal sensibilities. Neo-liberalism has been described by Harvey (2007, p.2) as, "...a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property

rights, free markets, and free trade”. Increasingly, it has become difficult to separate debate about contemporary policing from such dominant political-economic rationalities. For example, Kaplan-Lyman (2012), in an essay addressing the impact of neo-liberalism upon the policing of New York City, notes that, increasingly, changes to policing are introduced with insufficient attention paid to wider contexts of governance, accountability, public order and public engagement. He goes on to note that these issues, if unaddressed, may impact substantially on police legitimacy, effectiveness and engagement with marginalised communities. These are, of course, core features of cultural analyses of police work.

Much of the earlier work in the area of police culture focussed on understanding the purposes and processes of policing, not least in respect of debate about its remit. Indeed, Bittner in his classic 1967 paper ‘*The Police on Skid-Row: A Study of Peace Keeping*’ noted that, since their inception, the police mandate has not been fully clear. He goes on to suggest that, “...police departments [are] generally free to determine what need to be done and how” (p.700). Nowadays, however, there is an increasing trend to explore police work through a lens which focuses less on the agency of the police but which instead accentuates their increasing powerlessness in a political context where their purpose, effectiveness and legitimacy is subjected to simultaneous scrutiny and reinvention on a regular basis. There remains much truth in Smith and Gray’s assertion (1983) that official discourses of control (taking the form of *presentational rules*) have had less impact on real world policing than the *working rules* which develop amongst groups of officers. That said, I would argue that, increasingly, external imposition of external agendas like NPM constitute a means by which the ‘working’ rules are brought into closer proximity of the ‘presentational’ rules, not least through attempts to reduce or more closely direct use of officer discretion.

Now, to some, such changes might be used as leverage through which to question the relevance of the concept of police culture to contemporary society. And at one level it is safe to say that late modernity has not been kind to the concept of police culture. Policing itself has gone through unprecedented changes linked to new social dynamics and security has increasingly become commodified and, simultaneously, facilitated and threatened by the increasing ubiquity of technology. The much vaunted post-war consensus has dissolved into the dissonance of individualism alongside the transformation of global and local communities. Increasingly, it can be argued that we have gone beyond the era of Keynesian policing which is writ heavily on our symbolic understanding of policing.

Against this backdrop, it might seem difficult to identify what, if any, relevance the rather dated concept of police culture holds in such post-Keynesian, fragmented and uncertain times. In an essay entitled 'The Future of Policing', Newburn (2003) directed our attention to those areas which might present challenges to policing over the coming years. He, sensibly, preceded his argument by highlighting the need for us to appreciate that, despite the evidence of change, there is much about policing that is marked by continuity. I think that this largely should be considered true of our approach to police culture too. The papers that constitute this special issue on police culture, whilst respecting and drawing upon the literature of the past, are concerned with issues of the present. As a whole, the papers present an objectively critical overview of police culture and one that acknowledges the challenges of policework and the very real impacts of that work upon the individuals who undertake it. Themes that are embedded within the literature of police culture are re-visited but from a viewpoint that acknowledges wider external and internal change, different

national contexts and the perspective of police practitioners. In itself, this suggests that scholars in this area are increasingly combining critical commentary with pragmatic realism and in doing so reflecting the crucial and constructive engagement that now takes places between academic and police organisations. This can only bode well for future research into policing and therefore the continued relevance of the concept of police culture.

Reiner begins the special issue with a critical commentary on what we mean by the term ‘police culture’. In particular, he draws attention to inherent and constant tensions within the concept and, in doing so, shows how police culture needs to be understood both structurally and contextually. The papers by Ballucci et al and Aakansha use police culture as a tool with which to understand, respectively, receptiveness to new policies and effectiveness of police investigation. In doing so, they allow for a more nuanced understanding of how culture impacts on how officers understand and undertake their roles in different national jurisdictions. Gundhus’ paper uses the context of Norwegian police reform as a focus through which to explore how police discretion is intrinsically linked to professionalism. This timely paper succeeds in drawing attention back to the concept of discretion and its central importance to understanding police behaviour and values. Hallenberg and Cockcroft draw on empirical data and analysis to explore the perceptions of police officers who study for Higher Education (HE) qualifications whilst in service. In doing so, they explore the role that education plays in police reform agendas and, similarly, the forms that cultural and structural support and resistance to HE take. The papers of Silvestri and Westmarland both focus on the gendered nature of policing and police work, an enduring element of police culture literature. Silvestri draws attention to the need for a more nuanced understanding of how the culture shapes representations and performances around gender, not least in respect of temporal and physical

considerations. Westmarland explores how gender differences lead to culturally framed attitudes around physical ability and the role of the body in policework. Holdaway's paper expands upon the theme of diversity that drives the previous two papers by exploring race relations within a police context. In doing so, he identifies the ways in which the emergence of 'unconscious bias' as a means of explaining police racism serves to detract attention from structural and cultural explanations. The failure of traditional conceptions of police culture to fully account for the fluidity of practitioner knowledge are addressed by Marks et al in a paper based on research from South Africa. Another paper based on South African research, by Andrew Faulls, seeks to explore the way in which police culture is constructed through contextual, organisational and self narratives. Both these papers, using very different approaches, highlight the complexity of the concept of police culture. Finally, the classic location for many early pieces of police research, the police station canteen, is returned to for two final papers, those of Hesketh and Williams and of van Hulst. The former suggest that the location of the canteen culture has in some respects been displaced by the advent of social media and that this, in itself, provides a new location for those wishing to study culture. The second draws on research undertaken in the Netherlands to show the how scheduled breaks act as a vehicle for story-telling, impact on operational work and, accordingly, help to replicate the cultural dimensions of the police.

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