

**Austerity policing, emotional labour and the boundaries of police work: an ethnography of a police force control room in England**

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# **Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England**

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses the changing role of policing in an era of austerity from the perspective of frontline civilian police staff (call handlers and dispatchers) in a force control room (FCR). It draws on a symbolic interactionist framework and the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild 1979; 1983[2012]) in order to explore the emotional responses and strategies engaged in by staff when responding to 101 non-emergency calls and 999 emergency calls. The clash of public and police expectations, and the emotional labour expended when managing this clash, provide a valuable insight into the frontline staff perspective on the changing role of the police under austerity. Data is drawn from ethnographic fieldwork in the control room of a police force in England.

## **Keywords**

Austerity, civilianization, control room, emotion, ethnography, policing

## **Introduction**

This article contributes to criminological studies of policing and emotions by focusing on the emotional labour of civilian police staff (call handlers and dispatchers) in a force control room (FCR) in England which handled 101 non-emergency and 999 emergency calls. The clash of public and police expectations and performance of emotional labour provide valuable insights into the frontline perspective on the changing role of the police under austerity. The discussion draws on data collected during ethnographic fieldwork in a FCR in England. It adopts a symbolic interactionist perspective and the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild 1979; 1983[2012]) which has been widely employed in previous studies of emotions in organizations including policing (Schaible and Gecas 2010) and emergency control rooms (Tracy and Tracy 1998).

Emotional labour is the process of regulating feelings and expressions in line with organizational goals and involves deep acting and surface acting (Grandey 2000). Studies have observed that emotional labour can be fun, exciting and rewarding (Shuler and Sypher 2008), in contrast to merely alienating employees (cf Hochschild 1983[2012]). In literature on policing the emotional labour associated with police officers' everyday interactions has been linked to 'feelings of social isolation, suspicion, cynicism and conservatism' (Hawk and Dabney 2014: 1129). Negative aspects of police work including stress and burnout have been amplified in recent years as police in England undergo austerity cuts which include reduced budgets, staffing, and resources, against a backdrop of increased public and political scrutiny as a result of various scandals and police corruption (Holdaway 2017). Police forces have been presented as deliverers of a professional service to the public who are viewed as customers or consumers (Loader 1999; Westmarland 2016), resulting in renegotiation and

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

reframing of what constitutes police work, and of relationships with citizens. The civilianization of policing in the UK since the 1980s has also impacted on understandings of the role of policing.

While emergency communication has been widely studied by conversational analysts there has been scarce work in criminology on FCRs. Exceptions include Manning's study which focuses on the interpretive work involved in the police channelling of calls into symbolic forms. This entails a 'subtle dance' as police trace organizational needs on the demands and problems of the public (Manning 1988: xiv). Eklom and Heal (1982) explore the work of the police radio controller at an English police force, focusing on means of conserving police resources through modification of the system, while at the same time maintaining public/police relations. White (2014: 2012) explores the impact of privatization in the Lincolnshire Police – G4S strategic partnership on police functions including the FCR, and the consequences of 'introducing the logic of the market right into the heart of an institution deeply imbued with public service ethos'.

We address the scarcity of studies on police work and emotion management in FCRs, and the role of civilians in police organizations. We explore these gaps within the context of austerity policing, questions concerning the current role of policing, and by focusing on how these are experienced at the frontline. Staff in this study engaged in deep acting and surface acting in relation to boundaries of police work and non-emergency calls; the handling of emergency calls; and their use of humour as a collective coping strategy. Emotional labour was employed as a means of resisting or opposing top-down organizational requirements vis-à-vis normative emotional expectations in the face of work intensification. Call handlers and

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

dispatchers also engaged in ‘communities of coping’ (Korczynski 2003) in order to mitigate the pressures of increased public demand and reduced resources, to resist managerial pressures, and to create an enjoyable aspect to their emotional labour.

The article begins with an overview of the context of austerity policing in England. It then discusses Hochschild’s (1979) concept of emotional labour, studies of emotional labour in policing and emergency call centres, and police culture. After outlining methods, it presents findings including: deep acting and surface acting in relation to boundaries of police work and non-emergency calls; the handling of emergency calls; and humour as a collective coping strategy.

### **Austerity policing in England**

Policing in England and Wales<sup>1</sup> has undergone significant upheaval since the implementation of austerity cuts post 2008 recession. The government’s 2010 spending review enforced a 20 per cent funding reduction to police forces over the period 2011 to 2015. This amounted to approximately £2.53 billion pounds worth of savings across forces (HMIC 2014a). Police officer and staff reductions accounted for a large proportion of these savings. The number of full time equivalent police officers reduced by 12 per cent during this period (16,900 officers). The number of police staff reduced by 19 per cent (15,500 staff). Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) saw a reduction of 27 per cent (4,600 PCSOs). The commitment to continue to deliver policing under these economic conditions has required considerable workforce reorganizations, new collaborations and more efficient means of working. In 2017 HMIC raised ‘a large and deep-red warning flag’ after identifying practices of deliberately suppressing demand, not responding to crimes, and not making arrests due to

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) ‘Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.’ *British Journal of Criminology*.

a lack of resources. Austerity cuts have resurfaced questions concerning the role of policing. A lack of statutory determination of police function ‘...has constituted a miasma that has impeded the modernization of British policing, a situation that is further compounded by the current financial crisis’ (Brogden and Ellison 2013: 7).

Protecting vulnerable people which includes for instance domestic abuse, safeguarding children and mental health, is a priority. In the contemporary context an attendance to this priority requires a different skill set and a time consuming response, as risk assessments need to be conducted, vulnerability indicators need to be identified, and intelligence needs to be stored. HMIC (2017) note that police forces have shown improvement in responding to vulnerability but this has been at the expense of local policing and crime prevention. Police researchers drew attention to the social work (Punch 1979) and peace-keeping (Banton 1964) aspects of policing in studies from the 1960s. Although policing has always consisted of this softer element, the external perception of policing has tended to focus on a masculinised reactive law and order culture(s) (Reiner 2010). Research has also shown that whilst officers spend relatively little time responding to incidents with a criminal element, they still see their role as crime fighters and catching offenders is their justification for policing (Loftus 2010).

Policing in England has also experienced a rise in consumerism. In the late 1990s and early 2000s policing underwent a form of privatisation, while the ‘functionality, governance and control were retained by the State’ (Westmarland 2016: 2). The Blair Government were concerned with giving more power to the people with policing priorities decided by the local communities the police serve. Policing faces the dilemma of meeting targets while also focusing on meeting customers’ needs (Westmarland 2016). The police have therefore been

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) ‘Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.’ *British Journal of Criminology*.

presented as deliverers of a professional service to the public who are conceived of as customers or consumers (Loader 1999).

The growth of the 'extended police family' (Neyroud 2009) via the civilianization of policing gained momentum in England and Wales in the 1980s. Large police pay awards created a financial environment in which civilians were cheaper to employ than officers (Dick and Metcalfe 2001). In 2016 a total of 200,922 workers were employed by the 43 police forces of England and Wales. Of these, 61,668 (31 per cent) were FTE police staff (Home Office 2016). Civilians perform functions including front office counters, administration, communications, information technology, call handling and dispatch, analytics, investigation, forensics and human resources, in addition to the role of the PCSO. The continuing civilianization of policing is demonstrated in the Direct Entry Superintendent Programme in which professionals from other sectors can apply for entry at Inspector or Superintendent level. Civilian oversight of the police also took place via the introduction of Police Crime Commissioners (PCCs) in 2010 which changed how police forces in England and Wales are governed. PCCs set the objectives, allocate funds and hold police accountable on behalf of the electorate.

The force control room (FCR) is a function performed mainly by staff. In England and Wales in 2009 13 forces had more than 90 per cent of their FCRs staffed by civilians, with a force average of 85 per cent (Boyd, Geoghegan and Gibbs 2011). Call handlers are the first line in the investigation process (HMIC 2017). They identify where evidence needs to be preserved, issues of vulnerability and safeguarding, and the priority level that calls needs to be ascribed. Given the increase in the number of calls and the decrease in resources, call handlers are not

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

always given the appropriate guidance and are increasingly dealing with calls over the phone rather than sending a response officer. There are no national targets for police response times to emergency and non-emergency calls. However, of the 38 forces that have set a local target, over half are failing to meet that target (HMIC 2014b).

### **Theoretical framework**

In order to study the role of FCR staff and their handling of emergency and non-emergency calls and dispatch we draw on a symbolic interactionist perspective and the concept of emotional labour. The interactionist perspective is useful for acknowledging the role of social relations and contextual pressures in shaping emotions (Morris and Feldman 1996). It is through our interactions with others that the self is defined (Shuler and Sypher 2008). A dramaturgical approach (Goffman 1959) enables us to focus on how emotions are performed as a consequence of the demands of social structure and situations (Fine 1993). The concept of emotional labour was introduced by Arlie Hochschild in her study of flight attendants, *The Managed Heart* (1983[2012]), and has been influential in studies of emotions in organizations (van Maanen and Kunda 1989; Korczynski 2003). Hochschild (1979) uses the term emotional labour to refer to emotion work which is done for a wage, highlighting how emotion management can become a 'saleable commodity' (Bolton and Boyd 2003: 290). Emotional labour entails the management of feeling to create a display which adheres to situational and contextual expectations and 'produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild 1983[2012]: 7). We become aware of emotional labour via the 'pinch between a real but disapproved feeling ... and an idealized one' (Hochschild 1983[2012]: xi). 'Feeling rules' guide emotional labour which includes 'deep acting' and 'surface acting' (Hochschild 1979). Broadly in the emotional labour literature, the methods of deep acting and surface

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.



acting can be understood as ‘ways of regulating feelings or manipulating expression’ (Grandey 2000: 102). This emotion work can be conducted by the ‘self upon the self’, the ‘self upon others’, or ‘others upon oneself’ (Hochschild 1979: 561-2). Surface acting is where an individual displays an emotion which differs from their ‘real’ feelings. According to Hochschild when an employee engages in surface acting they do so via cynical performances which result in alienation from one’s ‘true self’ (1983[2012]). Deep acting involves ‘altering one’s self’ via the invoking of sincere performances. In both forms of acting, feelings are ‘transmuted’ and belong ‘to the organization and less to the self’ (1983[2012]: 198). Hochschild’s work focuses mainly on the negative outcomes of emotional labour. The management of emotions results in workers becoming alienated from the aspect of self which is used to do the work. Studies of the performance of emotional labour by service providers also highlight the negative aspects of emotional labour including stress, burnout and emotional dissonance (Grandey 2003).

There are many critiques of Hochschild’s concept of emotional labour. Wouters is critical of her focus on the alienating aspects of emotional labour arguing that emphasis on the costs leads to a ‘one-sided moralistic interpretation’ and overlooks the joys that the job might bring (1989: 116). Surface and deep acting are processes that can have positive or negative results (Grandey 2000). Schuler and Sypher (2000) also identify emotional neutrality as a source of emotional labour. The requirement to remain calm speaks to the emotional management rules of organizations like emergency call centres (Tracy and Tracy 1998). Call handlers are expected to observe the institution’s emotional expression rules of being clear and calm but also the internal feelings rules of not getting emotionally attached or involved. Adhering to these rules in the face of emotionally demanding emergency calls is a form of ‘double-faced

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) ‘Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.’ *British Journal of Criminology*.

emotion management' (Tracy and Tracy 1998), in which the emotions of both the caller and the call handler must be managed by the latter.

Hochschild has also been accused of ignoring the collective nature of emotional labour. Korczynski (2003) highlights the importance of communal support in call centre work, which he terms 'communities of coping'. These forms of communal support allowed call handlers to cope with negative or hostile calls. They were also forms of resistance to managerial strategies of encouraging individualised felt emotions and promoting only positive talk about callers. For Tracy and Tracy, it is the illicit nature of these forms of talk that help to reduce stress, and produce catharsis for the worker. These forms of communal talk should not be explicitly allowed or disallowed rather 'crisis organizations need to figure out how to "wink" at these communicative practices—treating them as reasonable albeit not officially legitimate' (1998: 409).

Bolton and Boyd (2003: 290) argue that Hochschild's concept of emotional labour is deterministic and absolutist in terms of its implementation and consequences, and ignores the ways in which employees can exert an active and controlling force in their relationships with management and customers. Hochschild's focus on management's attempts to ensure that employees' goals and actions are aligned with the ethos of a company, its products and customers, reduces them to 'emotionally crippled actors' (Bolton and Boyd 2003: 290). In their study of the emotional labour of flight attendants Bolton and Boyd demonstrate that airline cabin crews are skilled emotion managers who are able to 'juggle and synthesize different types of emotion work dependent on situational demands' (2003: 289). They are also adept at resisting and modifying the demands of both managers and customers which

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

contradicts Hochschild's claim regarding the transmutation of feelings. It is not always the organization which defines the 'emotional agenda'; employees have the capacity to create spaces for resistance through their emotional labour (Bolton and Boyd 2003).

### **Emotional labour and police culture(s)**

Police culture sets a high standard for the way officers manage their emotions in stressful and traumatic situations, expecting control, objectivity and distance but also authority and aggression when necessary (Pogrebin and Poole 1991). It highlights the shared norms and values that shape officers' everyday activities and decision-making (Loftus 2010). Reiner argues that in 'cop culture' officers have a sense of mission in that policing is 'not just a job but a way of life with a worthwhile purpose' (2010: 119). This moral mandate intermingles with a masculinised 'love of action' in which officers seek excitement and overlook mundane daily tasks. This exists alongside a pessimistic and cynical belief in the erosion of social order coupled with a suspicion and stereotyping of 'others' (Brogden and Ellison 2013). Officers are socially isolated but develop solidarity with colleagues while remaining politically and morally conservative (Reiner 2010).

This form of police culture inhibits reform that seeks to modernise and soften the policing image. It also encourages discriminatory practices against civilians with group loyalty and solidarity protecting officers from disciplinary repercussions (Paoline, Myers and Worden 2000). However, police culture is not monolithic and police (sub)cultures have been identified in different organizational roles: for example 'street cops' and 'management cops', uniformed and non-uniformed staff, civilians and sworn officers, and frontline and back office staff (Foster 2007). Loftus (2010) argues that civilianization, community policing and

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

a move away from a police 'force' to a police 'service' has done little to challenge traditional police culture.

The nature of frontline policing means that officers are often exposed to traumatic events and dangerous situations. This exposure requires the management of a complex interplay of emotions where some are expressed and others are suppressed (Pogrebin and Poole 1991). Frontline officers must also display a range of emotions due to the variety of incidents encountered. For example, displaying anger towards a suspect whilst providing empathy to a victim (van Gelderen et al. 2007). The complex role of an officer requires them to be 'nicer than nice' and 'tougher than tough' (Guy et al. cited in Schaible and Six 2015: 3). This can have positive emotional effects when officers are able to display genuine empathy during the course of their duties, but negative effects when having to suppress negative emotions and conduct surface acting. The ends-orientated nature of policing means that the ability to display a range of emotions is not always a liability but an asset for officers in order to achieve the objectives of each situation (Schaible and Six 2015). In their study of homicide detectives, Hawk and Dabney (2014) demonstrate how officers prioritised cases based on their typification of the 'true victim'. This allowed them to orient their work, and in relation to 'true victim' cases evoked greater emotion and cognitive dissonance.

Literature also draws attention to the gendered nature of emotion work in policing. Women entering policing can encounter gender-related dilemmas in coping with norms related to emotional labour (Martin 1999). On the street they must avoid being 'too emotional in responding to volatile situations; yet the women who conforms to emotional display rules of policing ... is regarded as unfeminine', while in interpersonal relations with other officers

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

they are expected to adopt the role of confidante, and be ‘supportive of a man’s emotional venting, but criticised for expressing similar feelings’ (Martin 1999: 124). A masculine police culture can encourage the suppression of emotions, while an inability to control feelings can represent a failure of the requirements of police occupational identity (Pogrebin and Poole 1991). Officers are socialised to be stoic, tough and detached in the line of duty (Martin 1999).

Police officers are faced with organizational stressors such as changes to their role, time constraints, staff shortages, and a lack of resources and effective communication. These can create value dissonance which refers to the incongruence between the values held by police officers about the role and function of policing, and the values officers perceive other reference groups to hold about the role and function of policing (Schaible and Gecas, 2010). Officers who hold different values from those they must express have been found to have increased levels of depersonalisation. Police reform and organizational changes may also lead to superficial acceptance and negative emotional displays (Schaible and Gecas 2010).

The majority of literature on police culture and emotional labour focuses on officers, with little acknowledgement of the role of staff and how they might assimilate or contest aspects of traditional police culture. Dick and Metcalfe (2001) argue that staff are as committed as officers, and are less likely than officers to report misconduct, indicating a strong ‘code of silence’ and solidarity amongst staff. White (2014: 2012) explores the impact of privatization in the ‘Lincolnshire Police – G4S’ strategic partnership on functions including the FCR, and the consequences of ‘introducing the logic of the market right into the heart of an institution deeply imbued with public service ethos’. He highlights the emotional distress, cognitive

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) ‘Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.’ *British Journal of Criminology*.

dissonance and identity crisis caused by the replacement of 'Lincolnshire Police' epaulets, lanyards, email signatures and letterheads for new 'Lincolnshire Police-G4S' ones. He argues that civilians in frontline operations (referred to as 'street level bureaucrats') display 'similar levels of commitment to traditional police culture and practice as do uniformed warranted officers' (2014: 1013). Our study contributes to understandings of the role of civilians by focusing on frontline staff in a FCR.

### **The force control room**

The police emergency call centre is characterised in Manning's study of policing as the 'boundary through which certain events selectively pass and become ... encoded as "police-relevant,"' while 'the organization's communication center with its multiple line channel (phones) acts as a screen or mesh' (1982: 231). The call centre is responsible for sorting police work from that which is not police relevant, regardless of the view of the caller. The role of the call handler is to interpret which calls require action and direct it as such. Emergency call taking is an emotionally demanding job requiring the call handler to manage the emotions and expectations of the caller and of themselves. Emergency call handlers may be protected from the immediate physical threat and face-to-face interaction that police officers face, however they are subject to emotionally distressing calls which have been identified as producing feelings of fear, helplessness or horror (Pierce and Lilly 2012).

The emotional dynamics of customer-oriented call centre work differ from emergency call centres in that the latter offer a *public* rather than a *customer* service. Tracy (1997: 316) highlights how this form of caller interaction, particularly in public service roles, can lead to interactional issues as callers approach the conversation with a 'customer service frame',

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

specifying what they need and want, while the call handler brings a 'public service frame', requiring specific information that helps them to meet their organizational goals. The latter is related to the ends-orientated nature of policing. When there is a 'framing mismatch' in caller interactions, tensions can occur. When the frames match, the calls move along smoothly. Interactional tensions can also occur over the defining of police work. Not all calls will pass through the boundary identified by Manning (1982) and tensions may arise when members of the public believe it should. Research by Ekblom and Heal (1982: 3) in a FCR in England highlights that the majority of calls to the police consist of non-crime incidents such as plight (i.e. locked out of car or home), administrative matters (i.e. sudden death or licence renewals), disputes (commercial and domestic) and disturbances and nuisances (i.e. noisy neighbours).

Workers in emergency control rooms require a combination of technical and emotional skills which are employed as they move between calls of crisis, welfare, requests for information, and prank calls. The public service nature of performing this emotion work can have positive effects and deliver a sense of accomplishment when callers help people in times of crisis. Schuler and Sypher (2000) note that call handlers often deliberately seek out jobs which demand emotional labour of this nature and are deemed enjoyable. Enjoyable calls involve humour, the display of altruism, or create excitement as a break from the mundane.

## **Methods**

The discussion draws on findings from an ethnographic study of a FCR in England.<sup>2</sup> The study was more broadly concerned with the police response to domestic violence calls at the frontline, which included call handling, dispatch and response officers. 66 hours of

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

observation were conducted between November 2016 and February 2017. This involved a combination of day (7) and early evening shifts (6). Author 1 conducted 11 hours of observation while Author 2 conducted the majority of the observations totalling 55 hours. Ethnography allows for detailed investigation of human behaviour and the factors that influence such behaviour (Brewer 2000). We participated in the setting by listening to the calls and observing call handler and dispatch behaviours. We also conducted four focus groups with frontline officers (26 officers in total) in order to explore their response to domestic violence calls, and the relationship and interactions between dispatchers in the FCR and frontline officers on response.

Access to the FCR was granted via the manager who acted as gatekeeper and made decisions as to which individuals or teams we would sit with. We were given a head-set in order to listen to the call handlers and the dispatchers' conversations with response officers and other parties. There were no great differences in terms of the gender composition of FCR workers, however during some shifts it was observed that there were more female call handlers on the 101 and 999 call function. The majority of call handlers and dispatchers we sat with were civilian staff, although police officers were also present in the roles of supervisors, intelligence officers, and demand management teams (i.e. resolving crimes via telephone calls rather than face-to-face visits). The civilian staff identified themselves as the frontline and exhibited many of the cultural practices of rank-and-file officers. They wore uniforms, worked shift patterns, and engaged with members of the public and police officers in a variety of emotionally demanding situations. Several of the staff were special constables while others were applying to become police officers or had been so in the past. In this sense,

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.



there was not a clear division between staff and officers. The below excerpt describes the spatial organization of the FCR:

The FCR spreads across two main rooms, with smaller offices coming off them. The two rooms house the call handlers and the dispatch room which are separated by a few steps up and a door. The dispatch room is up the stairs. In the dispatch room there are three main banks of desks with a raised platform containing two additional desks looking over the room. These two desks seat the ‘oscar’, the inspectors who have responsibility of the room. The two outermost banks of desks cover the five divisional policing areas ... with either one or two dispatchers per geography. If there are two, one person tends to be the lead and the other acts as a support; writing up logs of action, making calls, looking up intelligence etc. It also includes one dispatcher dedicated to roads policing and one dedicated intelligence officer. The middle bank of desks included the shift leader for the dispatch and other staff/officers who have a more victim-centred job; making calls, keeping people informed, looking up information. (Field notes, 18 November 2016)

Short-hand notes of observations and conversations with staff were made in the FCR, either in a notebook or in a mobile phone notes function. This helped to highlight items that we did not want to forget without being intrusive. Field notes were then written up after each observation and described the setting, calls, conversations and incidents.

We adopted an iterative-inductive approach to analysis and entered into an ongoing simultaneous process of deduction and induction, of theory building, and testing (O’Reilly

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) ‘Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.’ *British Journal of Criminology*.

2005). In this approach theory is developed out of data analysis, and subsequent data collection is guided by the emergent theory. Since reflexivity and the writing-up process are inseparable (Brewer 2000), grounded theory enables an interplay between the researcher and the data, where the researcher is able to draw on their own experiences when analysing. As well as observing emotional labour during the fieldwork, the experience itself became emotionally-charged, as we were witness to and became immersed in, frustrations, anxieties, and adrenaline-charged moments, often having to manage our own emotions as we listened to calls. The emotional labour experienced by researchers is therefore an important analytical tool and emotions should also be viewed as data (Lumsden 2009).

The study received ethical clearance from the university and followed the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association (2002). Pseudonyms are used to disguise the identities of police officers, staff and callers. The police force and geographical areas have also been anonymised and any identifying factors omitted from field notes so that they do not result in the identification of the force or employees.

## **Emotional labour and communities of coping in a FCR**

### ***1. Boundaries of police work in non-emergency 101 calls***

Call handlers and dispatchers were engaged in boundary work regarding constructions and understandings of what police work should entail. There was value dissonance between how they viewed the role of policing, and how they believed the organization, other support services, and the public viewed it (Schaible and Gecas 2010). They felt that police were filling in the gaps of other organizations, such as social services. This was a source of frustration as highlighted in a conversation with a call handler who suggested that *'people*

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

*have no tolerance anymore*’ and that they *‘expect us to sort out everything’* (Field notes, 15 February 2017). Another dispatcher suggested that: *‘We don’t actually catch criminals. We just check on people’s welfare’* (Field notes, 8 December 2016).

This frustration was evidence of uncertainty regarding the boundaries of police work. As Manning (1982) notes the FCR is the ‘screen or mesh’ through which call handlers are able to filter out what is and is not police-relevant. This boundary was less clear-cut to our call handlers than Manning found in his study. For example, Ben, a call handler, described the difficulty of responding to *‘the messy stuff, the stuff in the grey area’*. By this he meant calls that were not crime-oriented (i.e. chasing suspects/offenders), but non-crime, social welfare incidents:

I asked Ben about the ‘grey area’ incidents he ... mentioned previously. He said these were the tricky jobs ... 999 calls were easy: ‘we are either going or we are not’. He said these were usually straight forward in order to risk assess ... it was the other stuff that was hard to judge because you are always thinking ‘is it the police’s job? Should we be going or shouldn’t we be going?’ (Field notes, 13 February 2017)

Ben is involved in a renegotiation of what he understands to be police work boundaries. He must balance the expectations of callers with his own understanding of police work which is not fixed but in flux. Calls would come in to the police that were *‘not for them’* but in the absence of other agencies to respond, the police would inevitably have to do so. Ben has an understanding of what he deems police work to be, but this does not align with whether they respond to the incident. This can also impact on the negotiations that take place between the

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) ‘Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.’ *British Journal of Criminology*.

caller and the call handler. We noted instances of a ‘framing mismatch’ when the end-goals of caller and call handler did not align (Tracy 1997). However, there was also a strong sense of moral duty that the police are the ‘*last line of defence*’. Call handlers and officers often referred to the ‘*5pm Friday calls*’ they would receive from social services to seek help for an incident involving a vulnerable member of the community at this crucial period before these services went into reduced or ‘on call’ staffing over the weekends.

In the context of reduced resources and heightened risk awareness, this moral duty was a source of emotional pressure. In dispatch, workers had to resource incidents in line with priority gradings which were related to risk assessments. Stress and frustration were observed when officers were deployed to incidents that were not perceived to be police work but were viewed as non-crime or social work incidents, or incidents in which the victim was known:

... an emergency call came through that was a third party reporting a domestic argument that could lead to a potential assault. The police were sent to the incident but had to be taken from a different incident that they were attending at the time. The dispatcher searched for intelligence and recognised the Injured Party’s (IP’s) name as someone who is a regular caller and someone who has a history of domestic incidents, but then fails to support prosecution. All these details were relayed to the response officers. There was a cynical indication that the IP would use the police to manage her relationship disputes. The dispatcher was frustrated that the resource had to be taken from another incident and sent to one that she felt was not going to have a satisfactory outcome and would ... happen again ... (Field notes, 22 November 2016)

The incident was recorded as a 'non-crime domestic' meaning no crime had been declared. The discussion amongst dispatchers with regards to this incident was that calls that were unresolved and which resurfaced were frustrating and detracted their stretched resources from other incidents. They reflected on having to attend incidents that were not specifically criminal but carried an element of risk for example non-crime domestics. The implication of being the '*last line of defence*' means that responsibility always falls to the police in situations like these. As the dispatcher stated: '*if anything happens [to the victim], it's on us*'. Important here is the constant reflection that the employees are engaging in around what policing is in the context of reduced resources, increased demand, and a risk-conscious environment. Trying to balance all three was a source of anxiety requiring the management of emotions in calls with the public and demonstrated their engagement in surface acting as part of the handling of calls not viewed as police work. The calls contained a customer service element (i.e. being polite and friendly) and workers were expected by management not to '*slag off the customer*'; for instance, some workers mentioned not being permitted to '*bad mouth*' the callers and the researcher witnessed a supervisor call someone out for doing this (albeit in a joking manner). The call handler also had the overall aim of obtaining the necessary information to perform the public service element of policing. Tracy (1997) observes how callers phone in assuming a customer service frame, but call handlers use a public service frame which can cause conflict. However, we found that the public service frame was no longer as clear cut as Tracy describes due to the shift in policing as meeting public expectations of providing a customer service.

## **2. Emergency 999 calls**

Staff enjoyed taking a 999 call which entailed a major crime or incident as it was viewed as increasing adrenaline and relied on quick thinking and quick responses. Emergency 999 calls required more emotional investment from the workers, but this was viewed as energy '*well spent*' in allowing for the adrenaline-related buzz of these calls. One call handler (John) explained how '*horrific*' his previous shift had been – it was nonstop and had been '*hell*'. They had several big incidents (a murder and an explosion) and the calls were '*crazy*' (Field notes, 15 February 2017). John was still driven by the buzz of the previous day's shift even though it had been emotionally demanding. The team's hard work was recognised with a '*thank you*' email from the manager which pleased John and reinforced the sense that the emotional labour engaged in was justified.

Another example involved an offender who was being chased by a police officer. The officer in question called out to dispatch for back-up. The dispatcher coordinated the chase and subsequent apprehension. During this chase many officers made themselves available as a resource. This was notably distinct from the difficulty of finding resources that had characterised much of that evening. There was excitement and energy surrounding the call. The researcher asked the dispatcher about the difference in the police response to this call, as opposed to earlier calls that evening. She was informed that it was a police duty to offer solidarity and help one another. She was also informed that these more traditional forms of policing (i.e. catching offenders) were preferable to social welfare incidents or domestics (Field notes, 14 December 2016). The response to emergency 999 calls by call handlers and dispatchers entailed deep acting in which they were willing to regulate their internal feelings and expend emotional energy when it matched what they believed to be the role of the police.

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

This was especially so when there was a satisfactory outcome, evidencing the ends-orientated nature of policing (Schaible and Six 2015).

This sits in contrast to 999 emergency calls which did not meet the frame or expectations of the call handler:

A call came in on 999 from an unknown source and location and a young woman ... was ... flustered saying that her boyfriend was throwing things at her car damaging it. John asked where she was but her answers were not specific. She was in town and mentioned places she was near but John was trying to get a more specific response. He was getting annoyed at her and she was getting annoyed at him. She was saying near the high street and he was trying to pin her down. She was animated stating that her boyfriend was now driving off and John interrupted to say 'you need to understand that I am trying to help you and I need the information to help you' ... She hung up after that. They didn't have a contact number so couldn't call her back however they did send ... a response car to look for her... (Field notes, 15 February 2017)

The call handler expresses frustration and annoyance at the inability of the caller to provide the information necessary for them to respond in the most effective manner. As the call did not meet the expected 999 emergency frame, the adjustment to the emotions required in surface acting by the call handler is evident. The call handler is trying to remain calm whilst impressing upon the caller that they need more specific information and getting increasingly frustrated, thus wrangling with both emotional displays. After the call, John spent some time

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

trying to seek out a telephone number or location but to no success. There was a sense of incompleteness as John moved on to the next call. These examples show how emotional labour can be alienating and liberating (Shuler and Sypher 2008) particularly in relation to whether or not the calls follow the expected frame for the practice of emotional labour.

For call handlers, remaining calm in the face of stressful calls and/or a crisis was seen as part of the organizational display rules (Goffman 1959), particularly in a fast-paced environment. Despite the deep acting engaged in, the public face and presentational expectations related to surface acting demanded a calm demeanour. Neutrality was an additional form of emotion labour acting as a vehicle to guide the interaction between caller and call taker to reach the necessary goal of the conversation. This occurred in addition to the deep acting the call taker was already engaged in and meant that emotions may need to be managed at a later time if feelings are to re-surface during or after their shift:

Joe explained ... it could be a very emotionally draining job and operators were required to constantly be switching from one task to the next, without much time to reflect on what had happened ... the call handler who had dealt with the 999 call had done extremely well, remained calm while dealing with the incident, but ... it does affect you afterwards, and they checked she was ok, but then you have to get straight onto the next call as it is never-ending ... (Field notes, 17 January 2017)

The need for reflection post-call is acknowledged but the time available to do so makes it unlikely in practice. If there is downtime then call handlers can speak with other call handlers, however busy shifts often make the experience individualizing and prevent

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.



engagement. Remaining calm in line with the organizational display rules is therefore seen as a marker of a professional employee and a capable call handler:

Sam immediately began telling me how good Ben was at his job. He said Ben was one of the most professional call handlers and that he ranked him at the top. I asked Sam where he would rank himself on this imaginary scale. He said in the middle ... his problem was that he was too cautious and took too long, checking all the systems available to make sure they had all the information necessary before it was sent to dispatch with an appropriate grading. Sam commented that Ben never got frustrated or at least never seemed to. He never expressed such emotions. Sam said the he often got angry at the callers and that he was 'not as calm as Ben'. Ben said he had never heard Sam get angry. Sam remarked that he must just 'supress my anger' ... (Field notes, 13 February 2017)

The importance of remaining calm was reinforced through informal talk amongst staff which encouraged the control of outward expression of emotions in line with organizational display rules. This is an additional layer of emotion labour in which calmness allows for the acquisition of the necessary information to meet the institutions goals alongside the emotion labour already being undertaken in the customer service element of the conversation.

### ***3. Humour as a collective coping strategy***

During quieter periods, call handlers and dispatchers would engage in emotional labour in the form of humorous and jovial conversations, laughing and relieving the tensions of the job.

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

Often these jokes would be about a particular call or an incident. Whilst they might seem to be in bad taste, the intention appeared to be light relief rather than anything more malicious:

When there was a lull in the dispatch due to a lack of officers there was a period of what felt like necessary humour. People were chatting and making jokes, some at the expense of callers. For example, a man had been reported naked driving his car. They tried to find a photo. There were jokes made: 'I always do this!' etc. There was an incident where one dispatcher was circulating a photo of a misper (missing person) who was a young teenage girl. They were comparing her Facebook photo with her last police photo, which were very different. They were discussing her pout and comparing it to another dispatcher. (Field notes, 18 December 2016)

These moments allowed for collective ways of coping with the stresses of the job, which were often very individualising and alienating. It reflects Korczynski's (2003) work on 'communities of coping' as way of preventing negative emotions by using those very sources of frustration as a mechanism of humour. There was recognition amongst the staff that certain comments relating to callers were prohibited, especially comments over the airwaves, but also amongst one another. However, in these moments, the strategies of managing workers' emotional expressions were subverted. Resistance to the strategies of managerialism was also witnessed in relation to workplace stress:

Towards the end of the evening an A4 piece of paper came over to the dispatch officers titled: 'Kanye to Kanye'. On it was a question 'How Kanye are you feeling today?' and then there was a scale of 1 to 10, with each stage corresponding to a

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

picture on Kanye West's head. The heads were all different from smiley down to the picture of him when he had been hospitalised because of a rumoured psychotic break down a few days prior as reported in the press. I asked about this and I was told it was a tool to measure the dispatch staffs motivation/stress levels for the shift. It was obviously intended to be facetious at the same time as showing concern for staff morale. The dispatch officers said on that shift that they were '3 Kanye' i.e. not very happy. They shouted it out as if they were talking to the whole room and people were laughing. They passed it on to the table next to us and then it got passed around the room. (Field notes, 16 December 2016)

Humour here is used collectively to parody managerial techniques of stress and emotion management (Shuler and Sypher 2008; van Maanen and Kunda 1989). Stress levels were deemed to be high, and there was an acknowledgement amongst staff that this would not change. The ability to acknowledge and publicly manage the stresses of the job was a form of emotion work that acted as catharsis for the staff (Tracy and Tracy 1998).

Call handlers also expressed frustration with callers who did not present '*all the right information in the right order*' (Field notes, 13 January 2017). They would wrangle with callers who provided additional layers of detail or not give precise information. Whilst this was a source of frustration and stress in times of emergency, it was also a source of humour:

Gemma began talking about how difficult some callers could be in terms of not giving the information necessary ... it was like 'getting blood out of a stone', in that they would tell you lots of irrelevant information but not the specifics that you need. ...

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.

She was laughing as she acted out an example call: ‘you will ask someone “where are you” and they will say “I’m at home”’ (Gemma rolls her eyes and starts laughing), “yes but where is *that?*”, “it’s in X town” (rolls her eyes even harder) “yes but where *abouts?*” ‘in (X town)’, “yes but where *abouts?*”, “in (gives a street name”, “yes but which *house?*”’ (even more exaggerated and laughing). She turned to the woman next to her and said ‘isn’t that right?’. The call taker next to her starts laughing and says ‘yeh they are always “at home”’. Gemma ... says, ‘they forget we don’t know what they know. If I ask “how tall is he” they will say “a bit taller than me”’ (Gemma laughs again) ‘and I have to say “well how tall are *you!*?”’ (Field notes, 15 January 2017)

Call handlers expressed a preference for ‘straight talkers’ (Butler 2015) – callers who would quickly and efficiently provide the call handler with the required information. Tensions arose when the stories the caller wanted to tell clashed with the information the call handler needed. Call handlers would try to steer the conversation or explain to the caller what they needed from them. In many instances they would use non-verbal signs of annoyance to manage their own emotional frustrations. For example, rolling their eyes, mouthing words about the caller, and gesticulating with their hands (Tracy and Tracy 1998). In these occasions there was a disconnect between what the call handler needed from the caller in order to perform their public service role, and how the caller needed to be treated in order to adhere to the organizationally-aligned customer-service-facing role.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The emotional labour engaged in by staff in this FCR sheds important insights into the impact of austerity policing; the role of policing; the boundaries of police work; and the relationship between civilianization, emotional labour and police culture. Although there is recognition by FCR staff of the range of social welfare incidents which police face on a daily basis, and while they spend relatively little time responding to criminal incidents, there is still an element of traditional police culture present where staff see their role as assisting officers to catch offenders (Loftus 2010). In these instances, the emotional labour of staff aligned with organizational display rules (Goffman 1959). FCR staff displayed similar levels of commitment to traditional police culture and practice as uniformed officers (Dick and Metcalfe 2001; White 2014). The central tenets of traditional police culture were alive, and call handlers and dispatchers drew on these in their daily practices. This included a moral mandate, a masculinised ‘love of action’, and a pessimistic and cynical belief in the erosion of social order (Reiner 2010). Austerity policing also impacted on their definitions of what was deemed to be ‘real’ police work, and reaffirmed traditional aspects of police culture. The financial crisis had increased dissonance concerning the role and function of policing at the frontline, and the relationship of policing to other agencies (i.e. social work) (cf Brogden and Ellison 2013).

Previous studies of emergency control rooms have highlighted the ‘public-facing’ nature of this work as opposed to the ‘customer-facing’ orientation of corporate call centre or service work (Tracy 1997; Tracy and Tracy 1998), which has implications for the emotional labour engaged in by employees. Our study highlights a blurring between these two policing ‘faces’ for this police organization in England which has had to adopt a customer-service framework

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) ‘Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.’ *British Journal of Criminology*.

in many elements of frontline work, in order to meet public (and political) expectations. This blurring or shift in organizational alignment from ‘public-facing’ to also ‘customer-facing’ (and from police *force* to police *service*) has implications for the handling of calls and the management of workers’ emotions.

In relation to non-emergency 101 calls, staff often expressed frustration that police were filling in the gaps of other organizations, such as social services. The boundaries concerning what constitutes police work were less certain for the call handlers and dispatchers in this study, than was previously noted by Manning (1988). The intensification of work practices coupled with a risk-aware culture impacted on definitions of policing and the emotional labour required/practised by call handlers. There was a tension in that the organizational, political and public expectations (and also those of other agencies), did not always fit with what call handlers and dispatchers viewed police work to be, and with the service that the police were able to provide to members of the public as a result of resource constraints. Staff understandings of police work did not always align with whether or not they responded to the incident. This impacted on the negotiations that took place with the caller and we noted instances of a ‘framing mismatch’ when the end-goals of caller and call handler did not align (Tracy 1997). Trying to balance these demands in line with organizational expectations and risk assessments was a source of anxiety requiring the management of emotions in calls with the public. It demonstrated call handlers’ engagement in surface acting when handling 101 non-emergency calls, including neutrality and calmness for the public-facing element, and friendliness and helpfulness for the customer-facing element.

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) ‘Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.’ *British Journal of Criminology*.

Deep acting and surface acting were evident in the handling of emergency 999 calls. Emergency 999 calls required more emotional investment from the workers, but this was viewed as energy well spent in allowing for the adrenaline-related buzz. Reactive forms of policing (i.e. catching offenders) were preferable to social welfare incidents or domestics. The response to emergency 999 calls by call handlers and dispatchers entailed deep acting (regulation of feelings) in which they were willing to expend emotional energy when the incident aligned with what they believed to be the role of the police. This was particularly the case when there was a satisfactory outcome, evidencing the ends-orientated nature of policing (Schaible and Six 2015). It also entailed surface acting (manipulation of expression) via the adoption of a calm and/or neutral demeanour in emergency call handling. This sat in contrast to 999 emergency calls which did not meet the frame or expectations (Goffman 1959) of the call handler also requiring surface acting, and when call handlers were confronted with incapable callers who did not provide the correct information.

Workers engaged in ‘communities of coping’ (Korczynski 2003) in order to mitigate the pressures of increased public demand and reduced officer resources, resist managerial pressures, and also to create an enjoyable aspect to their emotional labour. Emotional labour can be a positive as well as a negative experience (Wouters 1989), and was tactfully employed by staff as a means of resisting or opposing top-down organizational requirements vis-à-vis normative emotional expectations. For staff the biggest stressors lay in the structure of the organization, changes to workers’ role, time pressures, staff shortages, and a lack of resources.

In reviewing the literature it became clear that there is a dearth of empirical work on FCRs and the role of police staff. There are a number of reasons why future empirical studies would be fruitful. First, it is clear as noted above that FCR staff understandings and definitions of the boundaries of police work are not as clear cut as in Manning's (1988) early study of police communications. This raises questions as to the impact that decision-making concerning the deployment of resources, and risk assessments guiding their prioritisation, have on support for victims and vulnerable members of the community. Second, it would be beneficial to investigate the gendered, racialized, and intergenerational aspects of FCR work, which we acknowledge as a limitation of this study. Third, given that various police forces in England have different organizational arrangements and practices it would also be useful to have comparative case studies concerning how these impact on interactions with callers, with other workers, and their perceptions of police work and its boundaries. In England, some FCRs are privatised and run by external companies, and in some FCRs which are still run by the police there are clearer demarcations between emergency and non-emergency call handlers and dispatcher roles than was the case in our study where call handlers were responsible for 999 *and* 101 calls as they came through the system. In his study of the Lincolnshire Police – G4S strategic partnership, White (2014: 1015) notes that implementation in the FCR entailed the augmentation of 'core public good principles – a police service guided by publicly defined goals and equally accessible to all members of citizens' via the utilisation of market logic. The ongoing 'transformation of policing' may have implications for employees' practice(s) of emotional labour, the expectations of the caller, and the requirements of the police organization. Finally, the blurring of customer service with public service has implications for work practices, management of emotions, and the expectations of callers. As noted in previous studies (Tracy 1997; Tracy and Tracy 1998)

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.



callers phone in assuming a customer service frame but call takers adopt a public service frame which can sometimes create conflict. However, in this study of a FCR in England, the public service frame was under renegotiation as staff attempted to meet the expectations of the public against a context of increased demand, reduced resources, work intensification, and debates concerning the future role of policing in an age of austerity.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Policing in the UK consists of Police Scotland, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, 43 police forces across England and Wales which are administered separately, and specialized bodies hosted by regional police forces encompassing operations such as serious organised crime, major crime, forensics, intelligence, and counter terrorism. Regional policing functions are complimented at a national level by British Transport Police and the National Crime Agency.

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Lumsden, K. and Black, A. (forthcoming) 'Austerity Policing, Emotional Labour and the Boundaries of Police Work: An Ethnography of a Police Force Control Room in England.' *British Journal of Criminology*.