

BLOWING THE WHISTLE ON POLICE VIOLENCE

Gender, Ethnography and Ethics

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This article highlights a number of issues related to the witnessing of 'illegal' police violence by researchers. Empirical evidence is drawn from fieldwork conducted for a larger study of police culture, which is the first examination of gender relations in the British police. This extensive ethnographic study is used to highlight the way fieldwork can lead to a number of ethically ambiguous situations. Whether to 'blow the whistle', to express disapproval, report to senior officers or some other authority on viewing violence or 'excessive force' is analysed. A number of scenarios are described which are used to reflect upon the personal ethical stance that often has to be used to resolve such issues.

It might be asked whether there is any point in spending long hours conducting a police ethnography for any reason other than to blow the whistle on their indiscretions. As this type of research may involve encounters with violence, however, it raises certain ethical, practical and theoretical problems. In this article the dilemmas faced by field workers when they witness deviance in the form of violent acts are discussed. Indeed, although being present when something 'illegal' occurs is a fairly universal problem for participant observation studies, at the beginning of a project ethnographers rarely have an instruction manual which goes further than the general methodological issues such as those raised by Ferrell and Hamm (1998), King and Wincup (2000) or Wolcott (1999). In texts such as these, numerous aspects of observational research are described, the ethical ambiguities of fieldwork are raised, but few practical resolutions are suggested.

In this article two categories of dilemma facing ethnographers who may encounter violent acts will be examined. First, the difficulty of actually identifying the phenomenon, so that during observations in the field, violence can be differentiated from legitimate force. In 'real life' research situations this is more problematic than it might seem, as Gilligan argues (2000: 91), 'there is a consensus that we lack a theory of violence adequate to enable us to explain, predict and prevent violent behaviour.' A second difficulty discussed in this article is what the fieldworker might do when violence is identified as having happened. In effect, how difficult decisions can be made despite the 'physical and bodily, as well as intellectual and methodological' immersion in the research site (Coffey 1999: 70). These two points will be discussed here within a framework which acknowledges the effects of police occupational culture, the nature of group solidarity it fosters and the 'hazards faced by whistleblowers' such as the 'cold shoulder treatment' (Chan 1996: 121).

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Inside Out

Research from which this article is drawn was an ethnography conducted for a PhD thesis over three years (Westmarland 1998). It was a study of various aspects of police everyday life concentrating upon the tensions between police culture and gendered beliefs about the nature of certain tasks. Two contrasting police forces gave permission for almost unlimited access: one was a small, rural force and the other covered a large metropolitan area. The author spent six months on patrol and within various parts of the administrative and specialist policing departments in each case. It was the aim of the research to look at issues such as differential deployment, force, strength and the embodied nature of policework in terms of sexuality, heroism and care or 'service' work.

These are, of course, relatively sensitive topics, and the validity of the findings were dependent upon observations of 'normal' everyday police behaviour, despite the presence of a researcher. Throughout her discussion of the merits of various types of police research Brown (1996: 179–86) provides some useful observations on the insider/outsider status of investigators. She argues that there are four broad categories, from full 'outsider' to complete 'insider', with a number of outside/insider and inside/outsider positions in-between. It seems that there are advantages and disadvantages associated with being a member of the group being studied or doing research from the position of a total outsider. Police officers who turn 'researchers', either during or after their first career, will have problems adjusting to a new frame of meaning and way of life. Conversely, complete 'outsiders', those who have never experienced the way of life of those studied, lack understanding of the nuances and may be self-absorbed and unreflective.

In his analysis of these permutations, Reiner (2000: 220) argues that in police research 'outsider, outsider' studies have been the most common in the past, despite continuing problems with achieving and maintaining formal access. He suggests that although individual forces have displayed an increasing openness to such researchers, the results have tended to be of a 'pragmatic kind, governed by the overriding goal of crime reduction'. What is needed, he concludes, is the 'replication of the classic observational studies of routine police work' (pp. 225–6). Although this paper does not claim to do this, as explained above, data are drawn from the first empirical examination of gender relations in the British police using extensive ethnographic research. Furthermore, although the fieldwork was conducted by a woman and situated within feminist discourse, it is located within a tradition stemming from the principles in Becker's sceptical analysis of the supposed uniformity of what he describes as the so-called Chicago School (1999: 3). Hence, there follow a number of case examples of witnessing violence whilst observing general police life.

Case examples

1. In the first type of case or category, where violence is explained as an unintentional outcome, problems associated with defining what is 'excessive' force are highlighted. A number of examples of this type of violence by the police were witnessed during the fieldwork. Many were related to assaults in the home, which seemed to be inflamed rather than soothed by the presence of police uniforms. In this particular case however, the 'domestic' had started in a public place, the centre of a city's night life area on a busy Saturday evening. Whilst

driving around the city centre a crew, including a female officer, drove past a woman whose male companion seemed to be assaulting her. The van came to a sudden halt and the woman officer jumped out to check whether she needed any help. At this point it became obvious that the woman was very drunk and she started shouting and abusing the police officer. After a warning she was arrested and physically bundled into the back of the 'cage' in the police van. Upon reaching the custody suite she sobered up somewhat, but then decided to become even more uncooperative, refusing to give her name and address. At this, the women officer who had arrested her grabbed her in a headlock, twisted her over the bench and made her scream that she would provide the required information.

2. In the second case example violence is used as a 'punishment' by the police. On patrol, early one morning at the end of a long night shift, some officers were dragging a 'druggie' out of the back of a police van, along the ground. His bare skin was being grazed along the concrete leading up to the custody suite door. He was then picked up by four of the officers, one at each 'corner', and his head was used as a battering ram to attract the attention of those inside operating the automatic doors. From most people's perspective, this would be excessive, as the emaciated heroin addict did not pose a physical threat to the much larger, stronger officers who in any case outnumbered him. His 'crime' had been to be 'lippy' to the officers who were arresting him for suspected possession of illegal substances and a refusal to submit to a body search.
3. In this case, violence is used to lighten the situation or as revenge due to loss of temper. This is illustrated with a case of an attempted suicide. A seemingly deranged young man had taken a large number of tranquillisers, climbed down an icy cliff to lie in wait for the incoming tide. In the dark and bitter cold the police officers, who were not amused at being called out of a cosy canteen, dragged the man on his back, rather than carrying him, down the steep path to the ambulance. On the way over the cliffs they were trying to revive him so that he could stand up and they would be relieved of their burden. One of the officers slapped the man's face and violently crushed his ear lobe, shouting at him to 'wake up'. When he didn't respond they bounced and slid his body down the snowy frozen sand dunes with some hilarity, making jokes about downhill slaloms and about it not hurting him a bit. Probably as a result of this treatment, as he was being lifted into the ambulance he regained consciousness a little and started protesting about the rough treatment he had received. In response the police officer received a great appreciative laugh as he turned to the assembled group of police officers and onlookers in mock amazement and announced: 'Well! You try to save someone's life and that's the thanks you get!' (Male police officer, 1995).
4. A final example of a category of police violence is enacted in the following case where the officers were acting in order to save face. It involves a failed escapee who tried to make a dash for freedom whilst in police custody. He was standing in front of the charge desk when he was informed that due to his numerous previous visits to the cells recently, police bail was being refused. Realizing that this meant a long weekend in custody he suddenly broke free from the circle of officers around him and ran for the door. Inadvertently I was standing in his path and acted as

a barrier so that the officers could catch him as we collided. As he was dragged back into the cells his personal property, shoes, belt and so on were being forcibly and roughly removed. Officers were shouting at him, as he cried out in pain and protest that it was his own fault as he had attacked 'a woman' and someone who was 'not even one of us'. Later, one of the officers, clearly embarrassed, apologised for her suspect having attempted to 'attack' someone who was an innocent bystander.

Violent Encounters

In each of the cases described above violence, or excessive force, as it might be termed in a police discipline charge or court case, is something which seems easy to identify. In his definition of the difference between force and violence, for example, Macfarlane suggests that force involves a threat if not the actuality of violence, whilst 'violence is necessary from time to time to give credibility to its threatened use' (1974: 43). Accordingly, once a suspect submits to police authority, either physical or spoken, then all further force should cease. Describing police powers in such instances, Jason-Lloyd explains that 'any force used by the police must be reasonable in the circumstances' and an assault may 'take many forms and need not involve serious injury or any injury at all' (1997: 64). Despite this black letter description, Klockars claims that police conduct is often both abusive and necessary at the same time, which means that 'there is no definition of excessive force that automatically renders it a form of brutality and escalates it to the status of a scandal' (1996: 7).

As Adams concurs, fieldworkers may find excessive or unreasonable force difficult to define due to the problems associated with agreeing on the relevant criteria for making judgments (1996: 52). In so called 'real life' situations the scale of potential injuries, or the point at which violence becomes unacceptable, is difficult to judge. Furthermore, field experiences may be so traumatic as to induce 'existential shock' because according to Robben and Nordstrom (1995: 13), 'many ethnographers who study violence have experienced bewilderment on first seeing it'. It could also be argued that the definition should include mental torture and oppressive coercion, which could be classed as the enactment of violence. Another problem, connected to deciding when the boundary line defining violence has been crossed, is a phenomenon Waddington describes as the 'invitational edge' of the use of force. He argues that this 'does not arise surreptitiously from practices that are innocuous, but is intrinsic to the activity itself' (1999a: 149). Similarly, as Uildriks and van Mastrigt suggest, 'toughness' in the police has a functional value and the use of violence as part of a code of behaviour is 'very much related to the fact that situations of danger . . . at times *require* a tough cop and the legitimate use of force' (1991: 160, original emphasis).

As this problem of differentiating between 'excessive' and 'reasonable' force shows, observing violence can be more complicated than researching other forms of deviant police subcultural behaviour. In the course of the fieldwork from which this article is drawn, many minor yet unpleasant incidents were observed, and a number of much more violent incidents took place. In the discussion that follows the focus will be upon the specific dilemma which researchers face: at what point does the violence reach the point when some action needs to be taken? In addition, as this paper is drawn from a

wider study about gender and police culture, a number of references to the importance of the researcher as ‘other’ or outsider will be made. Indeed, as policing sometimes requires the use of bodily strength to facilitate certain tasks and professional status is often associated with displaying ‘bottle’, the significance of gendered occupational roles and the notion of insider/outsider culture are especially important when considering the researching of violence. Indeed, as the research progresses, an ethnographer may move along a continuum of insider/outsideredness, slipping backwards and forwards along it throughout the life of the study.

Whistleblowing Ethics

Ethnographers potentially tread a thin line between going along with police behaviour—colluding through inaction when unnecessary force is used—and ‘blowing the whistle’. To what extent the observer becomes ‘participant’ in some violent scenarios, leading to the researcher taking part in the violence, is also debatable. Dilemmas arising from whether to disclose the use of alleged brutality are especially sensitive because the police need to maintain an image based on restraint, accountability and openness. This is of increasing importance now as the issue of ethics in public life and service is becoming more prominent. In Reiner’s discussion of insider/outsider research, mentioned above, he argues that relations between the police and academic researchers have been ‘transformed’ over the past 15 years (2000: 225) to the benefit of both parties. In general, however, public bodies are increasingly asking themselves whether their actions and policies, if exposed, would be viewed as ‘ethical’. This raises the stakes for the researcher and brings to the forefront the dilemma of when or whether to tell someone what is happening when excessive violence is witnessed. In turn it has implications for what the police hierarchy may allow ethnographers to see and do in future, in an effort to maintain their ethical organizational image. A recently introduced ‘Codes of Practice’ (1999) for police officers by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) highlights the importance they attach to this aspect of their work.

Traditionally of course whistleblowers have usually been a member of the company or organization about which they disclose information. Famous British cases have included not only police officers but civil servants, nurses, accountants and former employees worried about the safety of their companies’ practices (Winfield 1994: 22). More recently a former MI5 agent, David Shayler, has claimed to have information which will reveal serious crimes committed in the name of the British government. Reflecting upon his former career as a police officer, however, Holdaway claims he was not a ‘real’ whistleblower, in terms of a colleague who told the press that the recorded crime and clear up rates in his force were being falsified (Holdaway 1994: 190). Rather, Holdaway’s explanation of the disclosures he made, upon becoming a university lecturer, was that he was acting in a different type of public spiritedness, through the unspectacular work of academic research, as opposed to ‘a revelation brought to public attention by a sudden exposé’ (ibid.). When deciding whether to reveal some information he believed could have been politically explosive, however, Reiner (2000: 223) decided that his job, future access, and the career of his informant were not worth risking.

This suggests that the decision regarding when to blow the whistle is a compromise that sets the seriousness of the particular incident against the potential outcome. In his

discussion of police deviance, Punch asks whether he would have felt 'obliged to testify against a policeman who had been observed in violation of the law'. (1993: 196). He had argued previously that common sense, peer discussion and the researcher being 'his or her own moralist' (1986: 73) is one solution. In effect, Punch claims that as no hard and fast rules exist, and as each situation is different, it must be judged on its merits. He debates whether it is justified to use methods such as covert observations to discredit organizations that should be publicly accountable and yet engage in deceitful and illegal activities (1986: 42). Similarly, in an earlier study, Holdaway argued that he would know when acceptable limits had been crossed and that he would have to be able to live with his decision (Holdaway 1983: 79). Recounting an incidence of excessive brutality however, Norris says that he was uncertain what to do as he 'felt frightened by the thought that I had witnessed what I should not have seen' (1993: 141), although he argues against the 'moral prescription' of professional codes of ethics for researchers (p. 125).

It seems therefore that the problem of viewing police violence and when to make a disclosure regarding inappropriate behaviour is complicated by a number of factors. These include the problem of defining violence, the feelings and personal morals of the researcher, and the perceived reasoning behind the actions of the observed. This is illustrated in a study by Hunt, where she describes 'situational justifications' and 'excuses' used by the police when their behaviour is judged 'brutal', and their various motivations for each violent act (Hunt 1985: 325-7). In the absence of any other reliable guidance it seems that personal moral judgments are the only resource available to decide whether force is 'excessive' and the behaviour is violent or even 'brutal'. Such judgments usually rely upon understanding the motive behind the actors' behaviour and as one of the reported incidents from the fieldwork (case 1 above) illustrates, when the police officer twists the arrestee's neck to make her cooperate, her loss of temper could perhaps be condemned as a lack of control, but on the other hand justified as a quick and relatively unproblematic way of achieving control. On the other hand, it is harder to justify in the example where a drug user was clearly overpowered and the officers were 'punishing' him for numerous offences, such as being 'insubordinate' and 'scum' in their eyes (case 2). In this instance the violence was a 'softening up' process as the suspect had already refused to be searched and was now about to be made to submit to a strip search within the police station. Similarly, in the third case example, it is difficult to justify the use of violence upon a mentally deranged patient in order to vent officer's dissatisfaction at having to struggle about a dangerous icy cliff. As Waddington suggests, perhaps this is one instance where, in order to 'explain (and not just condemn) police behaviour on the streets, then we should look not in the remote recesses of what officers say in the canteen or privately to researchers, but in the circumstances in which they act' (1999b: 302, original emphasis).

In terms of the ethical ambiguities as a methodological tool, case 3 above, shows that researchers can face situations where behaviour is witnessed that leads to feelings of discomfort. In these situations, to complain about specific officers' behaviour means to go higher up the organization. This places the researcher in a similar position to that faced by police officers when they debate whom to trust with such information. Also, for researchers, it is difficult to reconcile 'tale telling' when your participants have been assured confidentiality. Discussing the problem of honesty and deception, Tunnell argues that his allegiance was to the 'known felons' (1998: 217) rather than law enforcement agencies. During his study of property offenders he was party to information which

would have led to the arrest of several of his ‘co-participants’. Similarly, ethnographers concerned with other ‘deviant’ groups such as prostitutes and drug users encounter problems with whether to tell someone about their activities. Describing these difficulties whilst researching the ‘sex for crack market’, Inciardi asks how far participant research should go and how the ethical problems of ‘going native’ (1993: 147) can be managed. He questions, for example, that when crimes such as rape are witnessed, how the informants and subjects should be protected if the perpetrators are reported. Similarly, in their study of street workers and their clients, McKeganey and Barnard say that although there was no ‘blueprint’ to follow, there were certain things they had decided not to do at the beginning of the study. These included not giving the respondents cigarettes or medical advice, although there were ‘ethical issues concerning the provision of means to inject illegal drugs’ (1996: 16).

In terms of the study reported here, being present when something vaguely illegal occurs places the ethnographer in a position to experience the world view of the police officers. It poses dilemmas concerning being believed and credible evidence—whether anyone would listen or take the complaint seriously. During the fieldwork, as scenarios were building into something potentially vicious it would begin to dawn upon me that I might have to ‘do something’, but having witnessed the scene and said nothing at the time, I had to wonder whether I would be implicated, either practically or metaphorically. Furthermore, in negotiating access with the officer who was to be my gatekeeper to future contacts at one of the police forces involved in the research, the first and clearly most important question from her point of view was, ‘What will you do if you see an officer assault a suspect and they call upon you as a witness?’ To do so, and not to collude with the police would probably have been the end of my access, at least in this field.

Ethics Praxis

In his recommendations for ethnographers regarding their conduct Wolcott says he does not want to be ‘teachy/preachy’ (1999: 283) as he regards advice on ethics to have become too prescriptive. In effect the argument is that discretion should be used in each situation, although harming participants should be avoided if possible. As the cases from observations in the field illustrate however, the definition of ‘reasonable’ force and the difficulty with deciding when to ‘blow the whistle’, may arise from the allegiances which researchers feel in intensive relationships with groups such as the police. Ethnographers who are taking part in potentially life threatening situations may have their view of excessive force coloured by the danger they face. Once the incident has been resolved, and the violent parties quelled, researchers may feel relieved that the officers they were accompanying acted in the ways they did. In other words, violence by the police might be regarded as self defence by the observer who is physically threatened by an ‘outside’ agent. It might seem extremely unethical to report the actions of someone you perceive to have saved your skin.

Aside from the issue of personal feelings about perceived threats to the self, some other arguably legitimate requirements for forceful authority would seem to present difficulties for a researcher in justifying objections to the potentially violent resolution of certain scenarios. If policing is seen by some officers as a normal outlet for aggressive

behaviour at work, with high status being bestowed upon those who can run, climb and fight, then to be seen to question this, even in supposedly justifiable academic and moral terms, is to challenge the very nature of policing. Indeed, with the potential for violent behaviour seemingly so fundamental to the occupational identity of many male officers and the belief in general society that men have the 'right' to physical expressions of aggression, to ask them not to act in this way is to ask them not to behave as men. In other words, the use of force on the streets being seen as a practical necessity and the defence and reinforcement of their sense of self are bound together. To blow the whistle on violence or excessive use of force could be conceived as complaining that they are acting out their 'natural' masculinities.

Furthermore, as ethnographers aim to become invisible through acceptance, to object or even comment about what appears to be rough handling, would potentially incur the ridicule of the group. As Reiner observes, 'trust needs to be continuously cultivated' (2000: 224). Even to enquire about certain actions in conversation can attract inferences about approval and justification. On one occasion during fieldwork observations a number of officers were using a plastic shield to hold an aggressive suspect in the corner of his cell whilst his shoes and belt were removed. Afterwards when asked about their reasons for using it a male officer remarked:

Yes, well what you don't realize is, that person might have AIDS or hepatitis or anything and they might bite or scratch or spit on you. I know it sounds like we're treating them like animals, but well, some of them are. (Male police officer, 1995)

Another officer, when questioned as to why he had punched his arrestee in the face, replied that he had needed to 'get the first punch in', adding that this is a difficult concept for me to understand because:

... women aren't used to it. They don't realize that a punch in the face can wind you, send you flying across the room. (Male police officer 1994)

It could be argued that this type of defensiveness may arise because of the researcher being female and 'other', an outsider who was perceived to be unable to understand the nature or necessity for violence. In similar scenarios Stanko reports that throughout her research into various aspects of the criminal justice system she was continuously reminded of her gender, with 'cat calls and sexualized comments' (1998: 36). She argues that special difficulties on patrol for women researchers, including harassment, are partly due to the way officers were 'welded' together due to the 'dangerous high crime area' (Stanko 1998: 38) in which she was conducting the fieldwork. In an earlier study however, Hunt (1984) seemed to embrace the challenge of being a surrogate man and police officer, regarding it as part of the 'lived' experience. In her ethnography of American police officers, for example, she reported that she was very pleased when some officers claimed she was as 'crazy' as them. She regarded this as evidence of the rapport she had developed, in spite of being a woman in a largely male environment. To establish their trust she 'had to negotiate a gender identity that combined elements of masculine trustworthiness with feminine honesty' (1984: 286). Similarly, in an observational study of the 'misogynist' world of a rugby team, Schacht reports that due to his feminist approach and being an active member of the team, he 'felt increasingly alienated from both those inside and outside of the setting' (1997: 345, original emphasis). His discomfort was due to this 'outsider within status' which meant he could not expose his

'true' identity or avoid the 'blatantly masculine behaviors I had complacently undertaken' (pp. 358–9).

It is clear from these experiences that what is observed in the field will be filtered by the feelings or beliefs held by the researcher towards the group or individuals concerned. Ethnographies are not dispassionate accounts of events and it is sometimes 'difficult to separate fieldwork from our own sense of self' (Coffey 1999: 68). Some excessive force, violence, coercion or torture, for example, may be regarded as legitimate means by a researcher who identifies with the police as enforcers of the social order. On the other hand, those who view the police as oppressors would regard minor infringements as unacceptable, and a large middle group of researchers would base their judgments on the individual circumstances of the event. In his explanation of the 'crucial turn' in the 'opening up of the ethnographic tradition', for example, Marcus claims that although the debate about self-critical reflexivity has been 'heated' there is a 'need to explore the ethical, political, and epistemological dimensions of ethnographic research' (Marcus 1998: 189). As Wolcott argues however, even detailed guidance can never take account of the ambiguities of research problems as 'lines are often blurred' in the field (Wolcott 1999: 106). Finally, these judgments are also bound to gendered assumptions about skill and expertise, because as a structurally 'marginalized' minority in the police (Young 1991) women have to fight to be equal in the police and to be regarded as 'tough' and able to 'handle themselves' in violent situations (Heidensohn 1994). Similarly, women ethnographers in a male world may be especially vulnerable to accusations of squeamishness or cowardice.

It is argued here, therefore, that observing police violence and the ambiguities associated with whistleblowing are intrinsic methodological aspects of ethnographic research. I have argued elsewhere that fear and danger in the field are important elements of research concerned with the lives of those who deal with these emotions in their daily work (Westmarland 2000). In essence, to carry out a valid ethnography with an occupational group such as the police, this sort of dilemma about what is violence, what to do about excessive use of force and when to blow the whistle, is vital to the research process. Furthermore, it is revealing to reflect upon the actors' motives for the violence and the relationship of this to the researcher's feelings about when or whether to report such incidents. Researchers may witness extreme and unnecessary violence, face the dilemma of blowing the whistle, and experience, in the true sense of the term, the 'world view' of those being researched. It is placing researchers in similar situations to those faced by the respondents themselves when viewing what they regard as 'deviant' or unacceptable acts of corruption by their colleagues. Hence it is possible to reflect on the way ethnographers become part of the world they seek to explore and become accepted by the police officers they are studying, 'going native' in the true sense of the ethnographic tradition.

Conclusion

Researchers familiar with the ethnographic tradition of observing deviant groups from the earliest studies of the Chicago School will be prepared for encounters with ambiguity. Moral dilemmas present some of the more interesting aspects of observing social life of any group, especially a relatively elite and powerful part of society such as the

police. Ethnography is a reflexive exercise and a way of analysing behaviour and motives through the eyes of such groups. Not to be confronted with their difficulties concerning personal ethics, dilemmas, perhaps emotional and physical danger, would be to ignore the very substance of the social environment of policing. It seems obvious that to conduct a police ethnography without witnessing violence, especially one focusing on gender relations, force, strength and authority, would be barren and pointless. I should make it clear therefore that although it sometimes felt as if there was a metaphorical whistle between my teeth, as if acting as some sort of ethnographic referee, this was not really the case. In reality, when researching a topic such as the policing, it quickly becomes clear that the researchers who have reported that violence is a relatively rare event paint an accurate picture. It is not an everyday occurrence on patrol, even in the busiest, downtown night shifts and as Reiner (1992) observed, although the threat of force is always present and there is the possibility that something violent might happen at any moment, generally it does not. Consequently, when tense situations were building up during fieldwork observations, my thoughts were not of how to stop the violence or to report it, but to concentrate on watching it develop in order to record the reactions of those involved. Being honest, this is what makes police fieldwork exciting—the possibility that the unexpected might happen. Ethnographers working in unpredictable situations such as war zones have ‘confessed’ to these feelings of wanting to seek out danger. In his study of his ethnographic experience of ‘militarism’ for example, Kraska describes the way he ‘drifted back and forth between enjoyment and alarm’ (1998: 98) and others have described shootouts as ‘fun’ (Genet, in Swedenburg 1995: 29). Very often the most exciting incidents involve danger and violence and these are an intrinsic part of the scenery of the actors’ worlds. To sacrifice these elements would be to lose the charm, immediacy and appeal of the ethnographic endeavour.

This is not to say that ethnographers should be avid consumers of police violence, should never raise the issue of excessive force or collude with police oppression of vulnerable groups. Fieldworkers may be accused of doing violence whilst researching the phenomenon, in the sense that they are acting as observer participant, even in a passive sense, if others are harmed. It seems crucial however, to observe and reflect upon why certain categories of violence occur, the motivations of individual officers and the context in which these incidents occur. In addition, there needs to be a recognition of the significance of gender and occupational culture, as ethical stances are often bound up with bravery and ‘bottle’ and blowing the whistle is no exception. From my own point of view, it seems that the protection of informants from harm, physical or emotional, is crucial, whether or not we agree with their justifications for behaving in certain ways. If assurances have been made, their anonymity must be protected, even where participants request a named ‘citation’ in the final text, although their actions can be revealed. Demands for the investigation of cases as a result of publication however, perhaps by defence lawyers, as Baldwin suggests, mean that the researcher’s responsibilities are ‘far from being clear-cut’ (2000: 253).

Throughout this article it has been argued that police ethnographers may anticipate that they will see violent incidents and subsequently be placed in an ambiguous position leading to uncomfortable decisions about whether to jeopardize their access and trust relationship. Another, possibly more fundamental question has been raised here, however, concerning the difficulties surrounding the differentiation between violence and ‘reasonable’ force. Although it may be assumed that it will be easy to identify

'violence' or excessive use of force, in the event, it is quite difficult to decide at what point some action should be taken. Given the environment in which police researchers work, under the supposedly continuous threat of attack, alongside the police who are 'backed by the potential use of legitimate force' (Reiner 1992: 110), such tensions are bound to exist. To complicate matters, as officers embody the power of the state and are called upon to use their physical strength at times, policing may be regarded as one of the few remaining occupations where 'violence is an enduring, emphatically masculine, resource' (Hobbs 1995: 29). Consequently police officers sometimes have to choose whether to take part in, or withdraw from, violent encounters and this may be affected by perceptions of gender and identity. Due to the personal and professional status which is linked to physical prowess and the ability to effect arrests involving force, it could be argued that pressure to conform to police cultural standards of 'showing bottle' is a defining factor for researchers too. In conclusion, this discussion raises a number of difficult ethical scenarios which do not have a coherent or uniform solution for ethnographers. It is unlikely, given the diverse nature of such research, that agreement could ever be reached. Guidelines which propose rules and regulations will continue to be ignored, fieldworkers will use their discretion, and in reality, the final decision can only be personal, based on the moral and ethical beliefs and feelings of the individual.

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