STORYTELLING AT THE POLICE STATION

The Canteen Culture Revisited

MERLIJN VAN HULST*

Police storytelling is an understudied aspect of police culture(s). In the literature, two views can be found. One view is that storytelling helps officers to learn the craft of policing. Another view is that storytelling is merely part of a 'canteen culture' that deals with the lack of excitement in real police work. On the basis of a two-year ethnographic study in a Dutch police station, I claim that the practice of storytelling is a crucial part of everyday police station life. However, the work police stories do and the forms they have differ from one backstage context to the next.

Keywords: storytelling, police culture, narrative, ethnography, backstage

Introduction

Police culture, as the ensemble of values, beliefs and practices that police officers share, has been an important research topic in studies about police over the last 40 years. Many contributions to the literature over the last two decades have been devoted to summarizing and criticizing what Sklansky (2007) called the 'Police Subculture Schema'. This image has been built up from classic police studies from a first generation of researchers, like those of Westley (1970), Skolnick (1966/67), Rubinstein (1973) and Van Maanen (1974).[1] If this image would be summarized yet again, these two sentences might do: police officers see themselves as crime fighters on a mission in a dangerous environment. Gradually, they have turned into cynics who make up their own informal rules (cover-your-ass, lay low and avoid trouble), as the exciting work they thought they had and the respect they thought they deserved only sporadically came their way.

The work of another group of researchers, some of them belonging to the same and others to a second or even a third generation of researchers, argued and showed that that culture is not monolithic, that there is variation across time and space. Various researchers stressed the existence of various styles of policing in different environments and among different officers (Bittner 1967; Wilson 1968; Cain 1973; Muir 1977; Punch 1979; Reiner 1992/2010). Others asked attention be given to the subcultures within the police culture, pointing for instance at differences between street-level officers and managers and between white heterosexual ('macho') officers and female and gay police officers (Reuss-Ianni and Ianni 1983; Fielding and Fielding 1991; Fletcher 1999; Foster

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* Dr, Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration, Tilburg University, PO Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands; m.j.vanhulst@uvt.nl.

[1] Reiner (1992/2010) was one of the first to bring this literature together in an overview chapter on police culture.

2003). In short, saving a baby is not arresting an offender or talking to a drunk; the United Kingdom is not the United States nor the Netherlands; the countryside is not an urban area; the 1950s are not the 1990s; and Officer John is not Officer Frank or Judy.

Recently, Loftus (2008; 2010*a*; 2010*b*) pointed out that, even though changes have taken place through time, one might wonder whether these have really changed the culture and whether there isn't also a rather solid core to police culture (see also Chan 1996; Paoline III 2003; Sklansky 2007). We could posit that police culture is still a contested terrain that deserves more attention (O'Neill *et al*. 2007). In this article, I take a look at an important but theoretically and empirically understudied aspect of police culture: police storytelling.

The early ethnographers followed in the footsteps of the sociologists of the Chicago School, observing police officers at work in order to find out what they really do (Rubinstein 1973; Manning and Van Maanen 1978). Later on, the effort to separate fact from fiction might have led some researchers to be critical of police officers' own descriptions of what they experienced. Others who have taken part in the culture debate have nevertheless shown an interest in these descriptions. What can be called 'police storytelling' has become a theme in itself. In the literature, two opposing views of police stories and storytelling can be found. There are researchers who view police storytelling as an important or even constitutive aspect of police practice, and there are those who view it as ephemeral to police practice. The first category of researchers, notably Shearing and Ericson (1991), have argued that storytelling is all around and that stories are a crucial tool for police officers to learn their craft. More recently, Waddington (1999) became the best-known researcher in the second category after he described the 'canteen culture' (following Fielding 1994), in which stories are used as palliatives that distract officers from boredom and repair their identities.

The concept of a canteen culture and the attention given to the police storytelling associated with it unfortunately did not lead to a more sophisticated treatment of police storytelling in the literature. An important part of the problem, in my view, is the fact that police storytelling has been poorly conceptualized. Much narrative research has been done throughout the social sciences (Riessman 2008; Gubrium and Holstein 2009 for useful introductions), but its concepts and findings have hardly been used in studies of the police. In the debate on police culture, contributions from empirical studies of police storytelling have been few and far between. Therefore, I conceptualized story and storytelling, and conducted an ethnographic study of storytelling in a Dutch police station. The empirical fieldwork focused on the somewhat forgotten backstage of police work, all those moments when police officers are with each other doing 'police talk'.[2] In police stories and storytelling, we can find values and beliefs that police officers uphold. At the same time, we might still learn something about police practices from police stories. Taking police storytelling seriously should help distance us from the naive assumption that what police officers say they do truly equals what they *really* think or do. The reason for this is that police storytelling is a practice in itself. It is practice that is not merely meant to represent reality, and inherently brings with it a perspective on reality. We should see storytelling, as it takes place in the various contexts that make up police work, as a cultural practice. Stories can do all *kinds of work* (Forester 1993; Gubrium and

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[2] I focused this study on patrol officers and, because of that, unfortunately reproduce some of the limitations of the old studies of police culture.

Holstein 2009). The meaning of policing, the identity of police officers and the people they run into, just as well as what happened yesterday when John accidentally shot a drug addict, can all be (re)constructed through a single story.

This article focuses on police storytelling. A theoretical framework is needed—one that better informs us about what stories and storytelling are. What I wanted to know empirically is what stories are told where, and what work they seem to do. The following sections of this article set out to: (1) give a short review of the literature on police story-telling; (2) offer theoretical insights on stories and storytelling that are of relevance to police studies and studies of police culture in particular; (3) report the main findings of the ethnographic field study; (4) feed the findings back into the debate on police storytelling and culture; and (5) look at future research on this topic.

Police Stories and Storytelling in the Literature

It is not hard to find stories that feature police officers. Dozens of television series and thousands of books have police officers, often detectives, as main characters. And, in addition to fiction, the depiction of crimes that actually happened attracts a big audience. Our (Western) societies sometimes seem obsessed with crime and retribution. There is also an interest in stories as police officers themselves tell them. Think of book titles like *True Blue, Police Stories by Those Who Have Lived Them* (Sutton 2004) and *Cop in the Hood: My Year Policing Baltimore's Eastern District* (Moskos 2008). Many stories are told. But, although stories might be ordered into various themes (Graef 1989), the storytellers and story collectors seldom analyse the story content (exceptions are Fletcher 1999; Ford 2003; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Those who share or collect police stories have even less to say about the storytelling that takes place in police stations. The academic literature, nevertheless, has various observations and ideas to share. Here, we also find the opposing views mentioned in the introduction. The interest in police storytelling begins with the ethnographer Van Maanen (1973; 1974; Manning and Van Maanen 1978). Van Maanen (1973) wrote the following:

The novices' overwhelming eagerness to hear what police work is really like results in literally hours upon hours of war stories … told at the discretion of the many instructors. (Van Maanen 1973: 410)

Specific topics of those 'war stories' include certain persons like well-known local criminals, past events and places that are important to the department. Later on, recruits hear stories from their mentors in the field. They also are informed about the kinds of mistakes one can make and how one can protect oneself and others from making them. In sum, listening to stories and discussing them are an important way for young officers to get acquainted with and integrate into the police occupational culture.

After Van Maanen, various others have picked up the theme police storytelling. Trujillo and Dionisopoulos (1987) found that police officers know many stories and regularly exchange stories with colleagues and others. Stories can be triggered by virtually anything (Trujillo and Dionisopoulos 1987: 205): a greeting from another cop, an observer's question, a familiar building or the make of a vehicle pulled over for speeding. Indeed, the two researchers stated that 'the observer exposed only to police stories at the station might very well believe that police work involves unrelentless drama—that something dramatic happens on each and every shift' (Trujillo and Dionisopoulos

1987: 205). The stories these police officers tell do identity work as the tellers get credit for their role in the story. But the stories are not just retellings of past events; they are also future scenarios for all police. The telling of stories enacts the drama of police work, simultaneously reminding officers of the ever-present possibility that bad things can happen and the need for caution.

In a well-known article on 'Culture as Figurative Action', Shearing and Ericson (1991: 491) told us that there are different kinds of stories. These different stories are told in different contexts. There are short, condensed stories that will be told during the action on the streets. But there are also elaborate tales that will be told in a context that allows for reflection. Some stories are told only once or twice, in passing. Other stories are told over and over again. This last kind of story has become part of a mythology and these stories carry the insights and wisdom of countless officers. But stories are not meant to represent an objective reality:

In their street talk, police officers use stories to represent to each other the way things are, not as statement of fact but as cognitive devices used to gain practical insight into how to do the job of policing. For them the appropriate criteria for evaluating stories is not their truth value in a scientific sense but rather whether the knowledge they capture works. (Shearing and Ericson 1991: 491)

Like Trujillo and Dionisopoulos (1987), Shearing and Ericson (1991) ask for attention to the way stories can work as poetic forms. Stories do not offer precise instructions, but they have the ability to reveal essential features of the police world. They help officers to develop a sensibility for the work they do. In sum, Van Maanen (1973), Trujillo and Dionisopoulos (1987) and Shearing and Ericson (1991) saw police storytelling as important or even constitutive of police practice. Zooming in on the role stories have for those involved in storytelling, Waddington (1999) came to a different conclusion. He started from the assumption that storytelling takes place in police canteens, away from the action, and that this creates a certain context:

Because the canteen is the 'backstage' area, this does not mean that officers are not staging performances. On the contrary, the canteen offers one of the rare opportunities for officers, whose actions on the streets are normally 'invisible', to engage in displays before their colleagues. Here officers retail versions of events that affirm their worldview: the canteen is the 'repair shop' of policing and jokes, banter and anecdotes the tools. Essentially, therefore, police sub-culture operates mainly as a palliative, rather than as a guide to future action. (Waddington 1999: 295)

Waddington could have come to such a conclusion on the basis of observations Holdaway (1983) and Punch (1979) made in their fieldwork. The quiet times become interesting and boring aspects of police work are forgotten when stories about car chases and other forms of action fill the air of the police station. '[T]he past is transformed into a vivid present', Holdaway (1983: 56) wrote. Stories help officers to keep the idea of an exciting job alive. Fielding (1994: 54), from whom Waddington had borrowed the concept of 'canteen culture', compared stories to *pep talk* that prepares officers for the possible action that awaits them (cf. Loftus 2010*b*). Waddington (1999), however, stressed that the talk and the actual doing have not much in common. Stories do not carry the essentials of real policing; they reproduce a certain image that does not fit reality and is not helpful in understanding the real work either. Only in the canteen do we find crime fighters on a mission working in a dangerous environment. It is pure nostalgia (Punch 1979). The canteen cop culture stands in opposition to the operational cop culture.

Even if the various authors seem to agree that storytelling is interesting as such and that the (objective, scientific) truth of stories is not their strongest point, we have bumped into an interesting disagreement. One view is that storytelling is an important part or even constitutive of the practice of policing. Police officers learn how to police and what it means to be an officer through storytelling. Sharing stories, officers gather valuable 'common sense knowledge' (McNulty 1994) that helps them understand themselves as members of a group and do their work. The opposing view is that police storytelling is ephemeral to policing practice. Storytelling is 'merely' a canteen ritual to deal with the lack of excitement in real police work. What police officers say in the canteen is not what is really going on during their street work. The canteen is the repair shop where an image of policing is drawn that has no counterpart on the streets.

Now, how do we find out which view makes more sense? Or, is it possible to find some truth in both of them? Fletcher (1999) pointed to the later direction when she stated the following:

Police organizations are filled with storytellers. Members recount to each other stories about what they encounter on the job as a means of entertaining each other, of making sense of their experience, of coming to terms with often troubling/traumatic situations, of warning others about the dangers inherent in police work, and of initiating and maintaining group identity and cohesiveness. (Fletcher 1999: 47)

If we interpret this to mean that stories—as Shearing and Ericson also proposed—do different things at different moments, the disagreement in the literature might be at least partly resolved. Both views are right or, alternatively put, both views are incomplete. The problem here is that not even Fletcher, nor Shearing and Ericson for that matter, has helped us to understand when, where and how stories can work this way. Even Fletcher (1996; 1999) really only reported on the stories she gathered through interviewing. To make the more general point: what the studies to date lack is a narrative theory that is suited to studying police storytelling. In addition, not many researchers have done thorough empirical work on this topic that would enable us to choose between the alternative views. Let us turn to the theory issue first.

Stories and Their Work

Early police ethnographies are filled with stories (e.g. Rubinstein 1973; Punch 1979). It is not too strange that ethnographers gathered a variety of stories. Those who are willing to learn about interviewees' experiences, intentionally or not, invite them to tell their full stories (Mishler 1986). Stories also became a major part of the data display. Through stories, you get a sense of both what police officers encountered on the streets and how they made sense of situations. We can recognize stories by the fact that they contain at least three elements: a set of events, actors involved in these events, and a setting in which these events take place (Chatman 1978; Polanyi 1985). Take this story from Punch (1979), for example:

My very first night duty I nearly shot someone dead. Not intentionally though! Suddenly there was a call that a man had been seen creeping into a school. My mentor was a constable first-class, fifty-three years old, a really great bloke, and we went into the school to carry out the search. The school had separate toilets, all the toilets were in rows, and you had no idea what you might come across. I saw my mentor pull out his pistol and I did the same. I'm not usually frightened, but if you walk through a

dark school at night it is not like sitting at home eating fish and chips. Suddenly I pulled open a toilet door. Nothing. Another door. Again nothing. Then the next door, with your pistol in your hand and your finger on the trigger, and there sat the bloke. I shit myself. I felt a muscle-cramp shoot through my finger and, dammit, if the thing had been cocked then the bloke was a goner. But I jumped out of my skin. (Punch 1979: 105)

This story is the kind of story that many police officers are able to tell. Police stories like this one contain events like getting a call and confronting suspects; actors like the officers themselves, their colleagues, suspects and victims; and settings like the empty school described above.

Whether the storyteller is aware of it or not, whether the storyteller wants it or not, stories do certain kinds of work. First of all, stories report events that have taken place in the past (Forester 1993). Witnesses in court, for instance, are asked to tell their story and judges are trying to find out the truth on the basis of these stories (Bennett 1979). That, of course, does not mean that their stories are true or complete. In everyday life, the truth and completeness of a story that one person tells another are often not as important as the question of whether what is reported seems lifelike in the way they depicted what happened (Bruner 1990). Stories also work to order reality. As the organizational scientist, Weick put it: 'When people punctuate their own living into stories, they impose a formal coherence on what otherwise is a flowing soup' (Weick 1995: 128). Stories give meaning to events and construct the identity of actors talked about (Riessman 2008). Stories help storytellers and listeners alike to give an explanation (possibly partial) for the way things went as they did (Gabriel 2000). The inspector who told the story shared above attributes his almost shooting a person to the fact that he was inexperienced ('first night duty'), the obscure setting ('dark school at night', 'no idea what you might come across') and the surprise that overtook him ('I felt a muscle-cramp shoot through my finger'). What the listener comes to see is *the plot* that drove the events (Czarniawska 2004).

Stories can provoke emotions in listeners and storytellers alike (Riessman 2008). A story can make people laugh because they see irony in what happens or become sad because of the tragedy they encounter in it. Seen as instruments in everyday and organizational politics, stories can be used to promote a certain point of view. Storytellers, such as witnesses in a trial, can willingly and strategically obscure and hide certain events they know took place, in order to make themselves or their associates look good (or better). Stories can, in other words, be used to mislead. But it would be naive to expect neutral stories in the first place. A certain perspective is inherent to storytelling. Other stories could have been told. Storytellers give their evaluations of events through the way they 'dress' reality with a plot, but also with the help of explicit comments (Labov 1972; Polanyi 1985; Riessman 1993). Finally, stories often carry a moral message or a point, making clear how the storyteller judges what has happened (Polanyi 1979).

Storytelling in Contexts

Stories can do various kinds of work, but how do we know what kind of work a certain story does? To understand the way stories work, we first have to realize that the various kinds of work can overlap (Riessman 2008). Stories that make people laugh might

have a strong moral lesson attached to them as well. We also have to realize that stories are not understood in the same way by every listener. What one listener finds funny, another might find tragic. The same listeners might also have different interpretations of a story when they hear it for the second time. At the same time, there is a limit to the interpretations that various listeners within one (organizational, occupational or even societal) culture will have of a story. With these variations and limitations in mind, it is time to focus our attention on story*telling*.

A story does not tell itself; it has to be told. That is why stories and story*telling* go hand in hand. To understand the work of stories, we therefore also have to look at the context of their telling. However, a crucial issue that precedes the actual storytelling is whether a story gets told in the first place. This is the issue of *tellability* (Labov 1972; Robinson 1981; Polanyi 1985). Telling a story takes up quite some time. Someone who wants to tell a story has to claim the floor and others have to give up their right to talk for a while. This is why storytellers often start with a short summary that will catch the attention of the audience. If someone says 'I just saw a man killed on the street', nobody will respond with 'Who cares!' (Labov 1972: 370). The story provided above is also a good example of this: 'My very first night duty I nearly shot someone dead.'

Various researchers (Labov 1972; Van Dijk 1975; Polanyi 1979; 1985; Bruner 1990) have argued that storytellers will claim that what is depicted is strange, odd, unusual or uncommon. Storytellers will have to catch the attention of their audience with something out of the ordinary. Stories do not depict everyday life, but exactly those things that deviate from it. Storytellers who misjudge what is worth telling a story about too often, Polanyi (1979: 211) stated, 'will be considered boring, overly talkative, or generally socially inept'. Robinson (1981; cf. Polanyi 1979; Ochs and Capps 2001), however, argued that expecting only unusual experiences to be candidates for storytelling would seriously misrepresent everyday discourse. Tellability is relative to the relationship between people involved. In relations of intimacy, such as between spouses, ordinary experiences are shared through storytelling all the time. In other words, the context of an intimate relationship allows more storytelling.

If a story gets told, the context of the telling also helps to give shape to the story and helps to determine the work that it does. Storytelling is a practice that is usually part of a more encompassing practice, like having lunch or coffee together with one's friends or colleagues. Competent storytellers manage very well to adapt their stories to a context and, more specifically, to the knowledge and interests of their audience (Polanyi 1985). Van Dijk (1975) uses the example of telling a tale about a robbery. Witnesses of a robbery will tell a different story to their friends than they will tell at the police station. Storytellers will try to focus on what they and their audience find interesting or important about what happened. Each verbal rendering of a story will differ therefore, at least to some extent, from a previous one (Georges 1969).

Storytellers and story recipients normally do not have a relationship in which the storyteller is the one who is totally in charge during the time it takes to tell the story and who determines the meaning the story gets. Conversations as such are all about coproduction, as it is normal, for instance, that listeners indicate to tellers that they are paying attention to what is being said (Sacks 1992). Even if actors are allowed the opportunity to hold the floor for an extended time period in order to tell a story, listeners might ask for more information and the message of the story is often negotiated (Polanyi 1979). It is also possible that other members of the audience have first-hand

experiences of the events that are talked about. Storytelling, therefore, is often a joint performance (Georges 1969; Boje 1991; Ochs and Capps 2001). In practice, stories might not be as fully rendered as a story purist would like them to be, with clear beginnings, middles and ends. This is exactly what the organization scientist Boje (1991) discovered in his ethnographic research on storytelling in an office-supply firm. In fact, Boje encountered very few fully rendered stories. Organizational members would generally tell 'terse' stories, expecting colleagues to be able to fill in the blanks.

In organizations, storytelling 'fresh' events about ongoing situations might be a way to make sense of and diagnose these situations. Organizational members will ask themselves the question (Weick *et al.* 2005: 410): What's the story here? Subsequently, stories can become the building blocks of rules for (organizational) action (Weick 1995). Orr (1996), for example, who studied technicians who repair copy machines, observed that these actors told each other stories about previous repairs in order to get a grip on the present problem. The phenomenon of telling multiple stories in a row can also be found in everyday conversations when there is no particular problem to be solved. Sacks (1992) called this phenomenon 'second stories'.[3] In conversations, participants often told stories that built on the theme of a previous story. Storytelling done this way brings us to the work that storytelling itself does: that of bringing people together and connecting them.

Backstage in a Dutch District

As Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003: 28) said: 'Storytelling occurs naturally in all social settings, and it would be ideal, if extraordinarily time-consuming, to observe and record naturally occurring storytelling.' Luckily, some years after getting my Ph.D., I was (again) given the opportunity to do intensive fieldwork in which I could observe storytellers in action. The fieldwork took place in the period July 2010–July 2012 in the third district of the region Hollands Midden, in the middle of the Netherlands. The research topic was police storytelling. My theoretical approach to storytelling has been interdisciplinary. I have used not just the literature in studies of the police, but also theory and findings generated in, amongst others, sociology (Sacks 1992; Riessman 2008), socio-linguistics (Labov 1972; Polanyi 1979) and organization studies (Weick 1995; Orr 1996; Boje 1991). The research strategy used was ethnography, as it has been developed and used in policing studies and organizational studies (Marks 2004; Yanow *et al.* 2012; Ybema *et al.* 2009). The empirical focus was the operational ('blue') force of the central police station of the district, located in a town with about 70,000 inhabitants and a district with over 143,000 inhabitants. This police station housed the detective force of the district and a 'blue' police team of some 90 officers in various functions. The operational team included three operational managers and around ten community constables, some of whom also do relief work. The seven people working at the front desk, all women, formed a separate unit that handled customer service and intake.

The first summer, I spent more than 100 hours observing storytelling 'backstage' (Holdaway 1980) at the district's central police station and in the patrol cars as officers

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[3] Holdaway (1983: 56) described this phenomenon, but did not conceptualize it.

drove through the whole district (279.41 km²). I did not tell the officers precisely what I was looking at because this might have severely influenced the outcome of the field-work. This is not to say that what the officers said was not altered by my presence, but I merely wanted to restrict my influence as much as I could. That is to say, if officers knew that I was interested in stories, they might have—because of that—started tell-ing more (or fewer, or different) stories in my presence. In a conversation with a team manager at the beginning of the fieldwork, the manager translated my rather abstract description of the fieldwork into 'an investigation of communication on the team' and emailed this as the focus of my fieldwork to the team members. In my view, this description was not totally beside the point, and it did not interfere with the fieldwork either.[4]

On the basis of that research period, I wrote a first report and discussed my findings with several specialists in the field. A second research period started in the spring of 2011. Now I combined observations with interviews and interviewed 26 police officers on the team. During the last year of that research, I made a habit of spending a part of the day on Thursdays in the police station, zooming in on the dynamics of storytelling and the social interactions surrounding it. In the following paragraphs, I start with some general observations and then describe the storytelling as I encountered it in vari-ous contexts. It should be stressed that the results of this empirical study are limited by the scope of the fieldwork and the insights are offered with modesty.

The fact is, as many researchers have observed in the past and in other towns and cities, most police work in the district is rather uneventful, mundane or even boring for those who have been on the force for some years. In general, various storytelling patterns would be possible, even if they are not all likely, if we keep the preceding lit-erature review in mind: exciting stories are told over and over again or no stories are told, the uneventful is presented as exciting, and/or stories about the rather mundane or uneventful are told anyway and without much exaggeration. As it turns out, during my observations, stories were told in many forms and at many moments during the day. I did find differences between individual officers when it came to storytelling. Some told many stories while others told few. Some of those who told many stories were often also able to 'make' a story of what seems mundane. But, whereas some stories would remain relatively factual, all storytellers did their best to hold the attention of their audience. Some frequent storytellers, through their policing style, got into noteworthy situations more easily than others—for example, 'enforcers' got into conflict with citizens more often—and therefore had more 'exciting' stories to share. Some frequent storytellers also seemed to have a fair deal of informal leadership on the work floor. In the end, everybody engaged in storytelling in one way or another. Nevertheless, those working at the front desk and the three 'management cops' got less involved in the storytelling because they visited the shared spaces less often than the regular team members.

Storytelling clearly involved coproduction. When two officers had experienced a call first hand, for instance, they would typically tell the story of the call together. Officers often asked others to tell about a certain call, commented on a story in progress, asked the storyteller to elaborate, laughed or made remarks about what was happening in a story. As police officers deal with all sorts of calls every day and only a few 'stick out' and lead to longer stories, many sets of events led to terse retellings, namely stories of only

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[4] The influence of the fieldworker who stays around for a while is, however, not that disruptive to begin with (Punch 1993).

a couple of sentences. Furthermore, many story elements were not spelled out because they generally were officers' common knowledge and the storytellers were not about to bore their colleagues with long descriptions of what everybody knows. Nevertheless, a couple of times during the day, longer stories would be told.

Stories tended to be rather unique. There seemed to be no stories that seemed to be remembered collectively and told to newcomers. This might have to do with the size of the team and the high turnover. That is to say, there we not too many events that a larger group of officers on the team had experienced together. The team was not a tightly knit unit that has lived through many events together, which otherwise might have led to more repetitive storytelling.[5] To get a more subtle view of storytelling as it took place backstage, several contexts have been identified: the pantry, the desk area, the patrol car and the briefing room. To even better understand what kinds of stories and storytelling were encountered in these contexts, I have also compared them using a context that the research itself created: the interview.

The pantry

The space where team members had their coffee breaks, lunches, dinners, midnight snacks and celebrations is actually not a catered canteen. It is a space of 20 square meters called 'the pantry', with a kitchen on one side and a big table with 12 chairs around it on the other. It was a place to talk about all aspects of police work and about more private and general matters, such as how one spent the weekend or a holiday, or even the national or local news. To be sure, not everything that was said at the table formed part of a story and not everything concerned policing, but you could not sit at the table for 20 minutes with a group of officers without hearing at least a couple of short stories about what had happened somewhere in the district.

In fact, it was *the* natural environment in which to tell more elaborate stories. Officers in the pantry wanted to hear something new or reflect on something that had recently happened. Located between the entrance and the desk area, it was also a good spot to encounter colleagues who just came back from a call. The usual questions to ask were what happened or whether the call was 'anything interesting'. In the pantry, telling stories was mostly a group thing. That is to say, when various people were sitting together having coffee or eating something, one of them might start a story or ask someone to tell the story about this or that call he had heard about. If someone started to tell a story, it was usually told with humour and would focus on something that had caught the attention of the teller.

The topic of stories was mostly calls that had been attended to by officers on the team in the previous hours, days or weeks. The stories normally started with the call as it came in and then dealt with what happened when the police arrived on the scene. Often, the events that were talked about had not come to a definitive end. Somebody might have been arrested and brought to the station, but what was going to happen next was still unclear. People who were known to the officers because they had been in contact with the police on a frequent basis were a popular topic. The introduction to such stories took the form of a question like: 'You know who we ran into yesterday?'

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[5] The team nevertheless did live through a traumatic incident in 2011, when a young man in a shopping mall close to the police station shot seven people (including himself).

Exciting sets of events attracted more attention and more listeners. A car chase and an officer shooting a suspect in July 2010 both led to elaborate storytelling sessions. But such events were rare. If officers came back from a call that included some kind of violence or something else that had cause for excitement, officers sitting at a desk would come to the pantry to hear the story. As news travelled fast through the team, team members often asked other team members about events that they had heard mentioned. One day, for instance, a team member asked another 'So, how did it work out with that baby?', to which the other responded tersely 'It started to work again'.

Things that happened more recently were, per definition, more tellable than things that happened longer ago. But spectacular police work and encounters with people known to the local police remained tellable for a longer time. Of course, not everything was worth telling a story about. But, because the most uninteresting events hardly led to storytelling and can thus not be heard, it is harder to find out what is not tellable enough than what is worth telling a story about. An illustration from the field helps to get an idea of where the boundary lay.

One day (Fieldnotes, 3 July 2010), I was on patrol with two officers and 'we' got a call about a sheep that walked on the wrong side of a ditch. The officers tried but did not succeed in getting the sheep onto the other side. After some time, the owner came with his dog and they managed to get the sheep back with the other sheep. The next day, I sat at the pantry table and one of the officers involved in that call turned to another colleague and said: 'Yesterday we also had a sheep'. The colleague did not respond to the story abstract, and the officer did not try to force a story upon him. This can then be understood as a set of events that was offered as a possible story but rejected as not tellable enough. The fact remains, however, that many sets of events turned out to be tellable in the pantry, as was the case in the other informal contexts.

Another phenomenon that I witnessed on many occasions was the telling of multiple stories in a row. If one officer told a story, another would add a story that fit with the first one, and so on. These storytelling sessions might go on for five to ten minutes, or even more. The theme of the session would only become clear after a couple of stories, as a second or a third story would be paired with the previous one on the basis of the lesson drawn (e.g. you can never know how citizens will react), the actors involved (e.g. a known criminal or a colleague) or the kind of event (e.g. suicides by hanging or reanimations). The gruesome, heroic and humorous stories were clearly more popular than the tragic stories. The bigger the group, the 'bigger' the story had to be to attract and keep everybody's attention. Making funny remarks regarding story elements was also something that regularly accompanied storytelling sessions with a bigger audience. When no more related stories came to mind, older officers would typically draw a lesson from the stories told and then everybody would go back to work.

Other contexts

One part of the desk area consisted of desks for community constables, who each had their own desk. Often, there were only one or two constables working in this area and, as a result, not too much storytelling took place there. The relief officers' desks were often occupied by officers ending their shift by completing paperwork. Stories in the

desk area had similar topics to those in the pantry. One difference from the pantry area stories was that the desk area stories were more often triggered by the work (i.e. the cases they were working on) the officers were currently involved in than by anything else. In the overlap between shifts, various officers would often gather in the desk area to share their experiences of the last shift with the group of officers present (those just coming on duty or those who had been busy elsewhere in the district). As the relief officers were usually the less experienced ones (community constables took seats in another area) and the group normally sitting together in the desk area was relatively small, more things were tellable than in the pantry during lunch time. In the desk area, recruits could then practise their storytelling crafts.

Relief officers patrolled the district in their patrol cars. A tour through the district might take up to three hours. Officers, normally working in pairs, returned to the station for a break or to do some desk work after having sat for long stretches together in the car. Storytelling in the car would focus on similar topics to those in the desk area and the pantry. The difference of course was audience size. This made the car a much more intimate venue and, as a result, personal experiences also could get more attention. Having fun, however, was less evident in the patrol car. This could be noticed when a bigger group of officers would get into one of the small vans the district owns. The atmosphere of a van is more like that of a pantry during lunchtime than that of a regular car with two officers. Another difference that being in the car made was what triggered a story: it was often what the officers saw in front of them or heard on the dispatch radio. In the car, almost everything could trigger a story, as Trujillo and Dionisopoulos (1987) also noted. Interesting to notice is that officers could tell stories about many places in the district. They knew a lot about the traffic accidents that took place and the tragic things that often happened in private houses and that not many people know about. The landscape of the district in a sense is a *story-landscape.*

Another context worth mentioning is the briefing. A briefing took place three times a day, at the beginning of each new shift. It was the most formal context observed. The briefing was led by a senior officer—the briefer—who would present the calls, persons and vehicles incoming shift officers had to keep an eye out for, and any new work rules. Storytelling was also performed during the briefing, although it was related to the briefing itself and remained more factual than in the other contexts. There were always calls that the briefer would talk about concisely. What was told contained all the elements that are needed for a story—events, actors, setting—and the briefer or another officer might suggest what drove the events being talked about. A more formal policing perspective, focusing on themes like conflict, crime and danger, would be central here. Briefings did allow for some more elaborate storytelling, such as when the officer in charge of the briefing asked the officers present to share news or asked them if someone had more first-hand information about a certain call. What was typically excluded from these tellings was the officers' more personal experiences (the same applies to narratives in police documents; see Campbell 2004). The briefings and storytelling that was part of them are first and foremost about making sense of what was going on and solving problems. Personal feelings and opinions were off topic. This does not mean, however, that jokes or evaluations of things that had happened had no place in the briefing. Nevertheless, most briefers would try to limit the elaborations and the fooling around if they occurred.

Police stories in story collections are most often the product of interviews, but we learn little about the context of interviewing when we read those stories. Through observation, I found that interviews produced clearly different types of stories from those that could be found in other, more 'natural' contexts. Stories told in the interviews were typically longer. There was also more room for intimate (i.e. personal) stories about the painful aspects of police work, like tragic car accidents, accidents involving young children or conflicts between colleagues. I do not mean to say that these stories are only told in interviews, but these sad events (fortunately) do not occur very frequently in the district under study and are not the most popular topics to describe, and thus are harder to encounter. What also became obvious in the interviews was that the interviewees were typically very capable of telling stories about the first time they witnessed human suffering (e.g. the first dead body, first hanging, first major traffic incident), but often forgot about most of the other calls they attended to. Sometimes, it was hard to trigger stories in an interview, while the same officers had stories that would be easily triggered when they heard their colleagues tell a story in the pantry.

The Canteen Culture Revisited

The empirical research was meant to enlarge our understanding of police storytelling as part of police culture: what stories are told; where and how storytelling takes place; and what work stories do. In general, storytelling in canteens, around desk areas and in patrol cars helps officers to get a sense of what is going on in the district. But storytelling takes place in various contexts, and the work stories do differs between contexts just as the form of stories differs. Storytelling seems to be a central practice in the informal spaces where officers congregate for breaks.

Sharing experiences is a crucial part of what officers do when they are not directly focusing on their policing task. More than a political activity meant to gain support for a certain view (Van Hulst 2012), storytelling at the police station is a social practice in which the group members ask about and tell each other what has been going on. Longer stories that entertain and amuse are important in these informal periods in the canteen. But stories do not only focus on clear episodes of police action. Comments and explanations of what has happened are also shared. As stories are often triggered by other stories, the meaning of police work can implicitly become a topic itself. Images of work and the environment are shaped in these interactions. When police officers work in pairs or small groups, their storytelling often seems a way to kill time and is often triggered by what the officers are busy with (paperwork) or what they see (out the window of the car) and hear (on the dispatcher). In the context of the storytelling that plays out during briefing, the stories become more factual and are mostly direct input for organizational sense-making.

Let us now look back at the literature. The difference between contexts is something Shearing and Ericson (1991) hinted at. Indeed, stories might be long or short, depending on the context of the telling. Shearing and Ericson's statement about the work of stories (helping officers to develop a sensibility) does sound a bit romantic but it turns out to be a good way to conceptualize an important part of what stories do. Their image of storytelling was right in this sense. Nevertheless, storytelling is also used in more instrumental ways to get police work done (making sense, sharing information). The

truth of stories *does*, in many instances, matter for the storytellers and their listeners. It is therefore not totally fair to all those who engage in storytelling if we suggest that they are creating a world of make-believe, as Waddington (1999) seems to suggest. His view of police storytelling ignores a part of the storytelling that goes on during 'everyday' police storytelling. There is certainly a tension between handling heavy calls on the one hand and waiting around doing routine bureaucratic work on the other. For some, this tension is greater than for others. Waddington attributes to police officers a trauma most of them do not have. Did he think that police officers are only interested in car chases and shooting? Or did I encounter only Dutch citizen-loving, soft-hearted police officers?

Waddington (1999: 302) ended his article with a plea to look at what police officers *do* and not at what they say in the canteen or to researchers. But to oppose this action and talk in a fundamental way is to exaggerate their differences and downplay their interrelatedness. Most of those who tell stories and listen to them know quite well what the difference is between action in the streets and talk in the canteen. And, even if the Dutch police culture might be 'softer' than its counterpart in many Anglo-Saxon environments, the Dutch and Anglo-Saxon research on policing styles (e.g. Terpstra and Schaap 2011; Reiner 1992/2010) still suggests that police officers are not all nostalgic enforcers. What I did observe, instead, is that the canteen and the desk area can *at times* be dominated by (mostly male) officers who like to tell tough stories. But these officers were also reported to use a more dominant policing style. So, a correlation between talk and action would indeed appear to exist, even if it is more between a police officer's own behaviour and his talk than between the story world and the 'real' world in general.

Perhaps storytelling is quite different in more densely populated areas with more things going on and perhaps it is quite different in other countries. Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that my findings are unique and that there will not be similar patterns elsewhere. Moreover, the empirical image that was presented here already shows quite some variation in storytelling itself. The claim is not that storytelling is one thing that is done all of the time in the same manner and with the same results. On the contrary, storytelling varies between storytellers and contexts, or should we say that it varies between various backstages? The notion of story tellability points to the fact that storytelling will never become the way to represent all one's (true) experiences to one's fellows. And what better way to convey something exciting on a boring morning, especially when you are sitting together with your buddies, than telling a story with some exaggeration? Here, Waddington indeed made a very important observation. At the same time, though, it became clear to me that police officers who spend some time with each other tend to tell each other about the more mundane events or experiences rather than keep repeating the same exciting stories over and over again. Police officers experience and hear about many events that are unusual to the average citizen. One could say that, after a while, police officers find what might be considered unusual for the average citizen not worth telling a story about to one's fellow officers. Nevertheless, police officers also build relations of some intimacy: sharing breaks from work, dealing together with sometimes violent conflicts and sitting together in cars for long periods including periods when the average citizen is not working, but with his family or in bed. They might not be spouses, but many of them probably have more 'intimate' interactions with their colleagues than with their husbands and wives. Not for nothing, the

intense storytelling that I encountered at the police station has also been encountered in an occupational environment that is a lot like that of the police: that of paramedics (Tangherlini 2000). At the same time, storytelling at the police station will be much more developed than in most other occupational environments. Boje's (1991) well-known research in an office-supply firm leading to very few elaborate stories is a clear illustration of this. Gabriel (2000: 240) even stated that 'few organizations are spontaneous storytelling cultures'. As we have seen, this is not the case for the police.

If police officers were to only talk if they had experienced something out of the ordinary, it would be awfully quiet at the police station and in the patrol cars. Officers tell each other about all kinds of things that have happened, even if some stories (e.g. about tragic accidents) are less a topic of everyday conversation than others. Nobody will say 'Yesterday I was typing a report and then nothing happened'. Tellability is an important issue in a 'social' environment like the police station. But police stories that are told bring the world of policing to life. Those who have not been on a call hear about it from their fellows and, in this way, more officers share in it. Often, what has happened becomes a next episode in the story about certain locals known to the police, what they have been up to and what happened when they ran into police.

The constant flow of first-hand experiences and the sharing of stories constitutes the police world as a meaningful one, even if no criminals got caught or no life was saved. That opposes the idea that the meaning that is given to policing backstage is the product of nostalgia. In the end, I think all those who have looked at police storytelling would agree with me on this point: being a police officer is about doing police work, but it also involves telling and listening to a lot of police stories. Even if it is mostly informal, storytelling itself is a practice among other policing practices. It is a practice that takes various forms and through which (over time) values and beliefs about the work are shaped and reshaped. That, then, is the contribution of storytelling to police culture.

Future Research

Through storytelling, police officers make sense of things that are going on in their district; through their narrative practice, police officers shape their identity, and give meaning to their experiences, work and environment. That makes storytelling an important aspect of everyday life at the police station. Some issues are important for future research. First, for future research, I see two strands that can help to better understand police culture with the help of stories and storytelling. One strand of research focuses on the stories themselves. Learning from stories means more than collecting stories and sorting them into themes. It means creating or finding a context in which rich stories are told (i.e. stories that help us understand the difficulties and dilemmas of policing) and analysing them from the perspective of professional practice as a practical accomplishment. Such research has been done before by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003), for example, and its value seems clear to me (also see Cockcroft (2005) on oral history and police culture). Within the limits of this article, I was not able to analyse what we can learn about policing from the stories themselves.

This article has mostly contributed to a second strand—one that takes observation as its basis. As I have also argued in the context of planning (Van Hulst 2012), story-*telling* should not be seen as something totally disconnected from other elements of a

practice. But, to see that, we have to study storytelling where it takes place 'naturally', in the canteens, the cars, the desk areas and even in meetings that offer little time for elaborate stories. A narrative ethnography or ethnography that is sensitive to narrative sees storytelling as something important and not as something totally divorced from police culture or the practice of policing. We might also give more attention to the way in which the building's space (where officers to their work) has an influence on their culture. Such a focus would also contribute to the recent work on the architecture of police stations (Millie 2012).

Second, an issue of importance is the role of emotions in storytelling. What was observed is that the more tragic accidents were not favourite topics in the informal backstage contexts, although they were talked about in interviews. Police organizations do, however, create their own routines for dealing with the stronger 'negative' emotions and the question is how these routines function within the police culture. Finally, in this article, I only scratched the surface of the issue of power and management that plays a role in storytelling. We should realize that stories do not always have a positive effect on group cohesion and on the way certain citizens are categorized (see, e.g. Fletcher 1999), and this also calls for more research. We could conclude, then, that, even if police storytelling was uncovered a long time ago, research has only just begun.

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