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Ethnography and the Evocative World of Policing
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Introduction

Ethnography has proved to be a crucial methodology for entering and understanding the world of policing. Recent developments in the fields of policing, and within police organisations themselves, have expanded the prominence of the police and other social control professionals, inviting new avenues for ethnographic research and debate. Within criminology and the sociology of policing, there has always been a recognition that the police are one of the most powerful institutions in society - not least because a defining feature of their role is the potential for the use of state sanctioned violence (Bittner 1970; Fassin 2013). But, as Manning (2014a, p. 24) notes, the symbolism and cultural significance of the police reaches further since they are 'connected to state legitimacy, tradition, social order, law, morality, national pride and visible state function' (see also Loader and Mulcahy 2003). Police officers across most societies are bestowed with discretionary powers to stop, search, arrest and detain members of the public (Skinns 2019; Weber and Bowling 2014). They are also permitted to undertake covert and intrusive surveillance against those people suspected of having committed - or are in the course of committing - crimes (Marx 1988; Loftus *et al* 2015; Bacon 2016; Loftus 2019). Brodeur (2010) conceptualises these powers as 'extralegality in policing', in that police officers are authorized to use diverse means that are 'generally prohibited by statute or regulation to the rest of the population' (p. 130). Police powers, in other words, are what separate police officers from other members of society. Since (uniformed) police symbolise and represent the body politic, the practice of policing invariably provides members of the public with their most tangible experience of the state itself (Waddington 1999a). The police are also typically the first agency that suspects come into contact with and, in this sense, heavily influence who enters the criminal justice system and potentially comes to wear the label of criminal (McConville *et al* 1991). It should be noted, however, that the collective identity of the police has been challenged by the arrival of other actors who are providing policing services. The contemporary 'pluralised' policing field comprises a multiplicity of public, private and voluntary organisations, a development which raises questions for governance, accountability and ethics (Johnston and Shearing 2003; Brodeur 2010).

It is generally for these reasons that scholars from a range of disciplines have sought to uncover, document and understand policing from within. Ethnographic studies of the police span decades and continue to enrich knowledge and debates about their role and social impact. From Westley's (1970) pioneering study of *Violence and the Police*, to Manning and van Maanen's (1978) classic collection, *Policing: A View From the Street*, to the recent volume by Fassin (2017) on *Writing the World of Policing*, it is clear that ethnography retains its place as a vital scholarly enterprise and the signature of methodologies for illuminating policing cultures and practices in a variety of settings. It is against this background that the rationale for this special issue, and the next, emerged. The impetus, however, was the *Being There: Ethnography and the Study of Policing* conference, which took place 18-19th January 2018 at the University of Liverpool and provided an opportunity for inter-disciplinary dialogue about the value of ethnographic approaches for enhancing our understanding of policing. This dialogue continued a year later when Northumbria University hosted a follow-up conference on *Policing Ethnography: The Role of Narrative in Researching and Writing About Policing.* Prompted by the popularity of these - and other - events, we aim to bring together new and established scholars engaged in the sustained and close-up study of policing in order to showcase ethnography as an instrument for rendering visible the everyday realities and related meanings that lie at the heart of policing life.

The Value of Ethnography

Police ethnographies were set in motion by a series of police-citizen crises which characterised much of the 1960s and 1970s. Images of violent clashes between the police and disenfranchised sections of the public, especially minority ethnic groups, brought the coercive function of the police into a much sharper focus. At this time, theoretical developments influenced by symbolic interactionist perspectives led, for the first time, to a critical focus on state agencies. In so doing, attention was shifted away from those who broke the law to those who enforced it (Reiner 1997). This new conceptual lens was accompanied by a methodological turn towards qualitative forms of inquiry - including ethnography – which subsequently allowed researchers to witness first-hand the interior world of the police in a way previously unseen. Early police ethnographies were dominated by sociologists working within the Anglo-American context (e.g. Bittner 1970; Cain 1973; Holdaway 1983; Punch 1979; Rubinstein 1973; Skolnick 1966; van Maanen 1973; Westley 1970). Their collective findings radically demystified the police through 'thick' descriptive accounts of policing pursuits and undermined the conciliatory image of the police and the immortalised British 'bobby' (McLaughlin 2007). In terms of their legacy, it is noteworthy that many of the concepts, themes and theories that have become central tenets of the sociology of policing have their origins in the pages of these ethnographic monographs. They set the research agenda for those who followed in their wake, and remain a source of inspiration and valuable lessons for policing scholars around the world and across the generations.

The contribution of ethnography to our understandings of policing is profound, not least because it offers an unreplicable insight into the processes, structures and meanings that sustain and motivate this social group. Ethnographic approaches are crucial for exposing and documenting the behind-the-scenes values, narratives and routine activities of the police. For instance, early police ethnographies revealed an important, yet hitherto unnoticed, disparity between the way police organisations formally presented themselves to their public constituents, and the informal, lived realities of their work (Manning and van Maanen 1978; Holdaway 1983). Indeed, the concept of police culture emerged from studies of police work that 'uncovered a layer of informal occupational norms and values operating under the apparently rigid hierarchical structure of police organisation' (Chan 1997, p. 43). By immersing themselves within the police milieu, ethnographers are in the best position to comprehend the scenes they witness and experience how the social world is understood and made meaningful by its members. This close and ongoing association ensures that ethnographers can unearth invaluable information about the many different aspects of policing, including: how officers learn the craft of the job, the daily functioning of operational police work, police deviance, the informal dispositions comprising the police identity, and differential law enforcement practices (McLaughlin 2007).

While police ethnographies have principally focused on uniformed officers operating at the base of the organisational structure, a number of studies have expanded their reach to examine the working values and practices of specialist units, including detectives (Young 1991; Bacon 2016), firearm units (Westmarland 2001) and covert operatives (Loftus *et al* 2015; Loftus 2019). Other work has focused on emerging modes of police, such as the non-warranted Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) who are at the same time integral to, and marginalised from, the police organisation (O'Neill 2019). As scholars have adopted new theoretical lenses to understand the changing manifestations of policing (Shearing and Wood 2003), so too have they mapped, via ethnographic methods, the mindsets and behaviours of those other, non-state actors endowed with social control functions. From illustrative descriptions of the internal codes and heavy handed, hyper-masculine activities of the para-police in Canada (Rigakos 2002), to rich accounts of how private security officers working in the United Kingdom mark out seemingly disorderly

people for attention (Wakefield 2004; Hansen-Loftstrand *et al.* 2015), ethnography has made a substantial contribution to enriching our understandings of policing activity, which takes place 'beyond' the police. In a similar manner, the policing of world borders has become increasingly salient, accruing steady interest from ethnographers wishing to deeply understand how this phenomenon plays out at the coalface (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010; Mutsaers 2014). Such works have proved essential for illuminating the stories, perspectives and behaviours of those responsible for preserving border priorities and regulating global mobility. A number of important ethnographies emerged in the early 2000s to shed light on the harsh realities of policing but went beyond the expected Anglo-American context. A new series of studies examined policing cultures and practices in circumstances of social and political turmoil, most notably in post-apartheid South Africa (Glaeser 2000; Marks 2005; Altbeker 2005; Faull 2015). More recent ethnographies in this vein have also presented rigorous analysis of police structures, mentalities and behaviours in transitional and post-conflict societies (Jauregui 2010; Beek and Gopfert 2013; Blaustein 2015). Together, they provide an international, comparative perspective of policing in a variety of contexts.

While there is a strong tradition of ethnography within policing scholarship, from the 1980s police research in its ethnographic form has been challenged by the developing trend towards government-funded agendas (Reiner 1997). The ensuing 'policy police research tradition' (Bradley and Nixon 2009) focuses on establishing practically relevant theories and evidence that can directly inform and improve police policies, strategies and tactics. Since the late-1990s, the emphasis placed on the need for police organisations to understand 'what works', including how, why and in what circumstances, has been given considerable momentum with the advent of 'evidence-based policing' – a term originally coined by Sherman (1998), but which is now defined and adopted in various ways and across many countries around the world. Though initially associated with randomised control trials and quasi-experimental research, the concept of evidence-based policing has since been treated in a more nuanced way, with researchers recognising the value of a range of research methods and research objectives, which reach beyond narrow considerations of whether a policing initiative works (Knutsson and Tompson 2017). Nevertheless, quantitative surveys, experimental studies and the search for 'good/best practice' still occupy a prominent position in the contemporary research landscape, rather than a critical preoccupation with issues of democracy and power – 'what matters in policing' (Sheptycki 2018). Furthermore, on the basis of a restrictive view of whether or not research designs are capable of producing evidence strong enough for the police to act on, ethnography and other methods reliant on gathering and analysing qualitative data are found wanting and largely side-lined. It is concerning that trends in funding, career prospects and government evaluation systems do not seem to favour ethnographic research (Manning 2014b). As we aim to demonstrate in these special issues, however, police ethnographies have endured challenges to the method and are arguably returning to prominence. In short, 'what works' research clearly serves a purpose, but unless we understand the nature and influence of the 'informal organisation' (Skolnick 1966) we cannot hope to understand the realities of police work or the impact of law, policy, and reform on operational policing.

Ethnography is valued, then, for its ability to expose and situate the inner-life of policing in its various guises and settings. One of the central themes within ethnographies is that policing is for the most part an exclusionary project directed towards suspect populations occupying the social, legal and economic margins. For this reason, Herbert (2017) has argued that the role of ethnographers should be (re)oriented towards enhancing policing governance – if only because the capacity to exercise violence sets the police apart from other institutions and lies at the heart of what they do. As he argues, the ethnographer 'can thus be seen primarily as an agent acting legitimately on behalf of the wider public, who must do all that is necessary to see police practice as it would commonly occur' (p.37). In this way, the articles presented in these two special issues

of *Policing and Society* could perhaps be regarded as more than simply underlining the salience of ethnography for comprehending the world of policing. Rather, by powerfully bringing the backstage of policing to the front of stage, they have the potential to enhance accountability and change policing practices.

The Meaning of Ethnography

In a similar way to other methodologies, the meaning of ethnography can vary and the label is not used in an entirely standard fashion. This variation is noted by Lofland (1995, p. 30) who suggests that 'there may be as many forms of ethnography as there are ethnographers'. Broadly speaking, however, ethnography is concerned with the discovery and description of the culture and structure of particular social groups. Its origin lies in the tradition of anthropology in which the researchers' technique was to immerse himself - rarely herself - in the culture of the society or group under study in order to describe life in vivid detail (O'Connell and Layder 1994). This entailed becoming an accepted member of the group and actively participating in its cultural life and everyday practices. However, early ethnographic expeditions were intimately connected to political endeavours in which socially privileged white males from elite universities arrived to study the foreign 'other'. In this form, the method served as a means through which broader colonialist projects oppressed marginalised and vulnerable populations (Robinson 2014).

In the decades since, social scientists have adopted a version of ethnography to explore and gain rich information on the way of life of groups within particular enclaves of society. Ethnographers study people by becoming immersed in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' for a prolonged period of time. They enter certain aspects of the lives of 'others', learn to speak their language, appreciate their customs, and attempt to view reality through their eyes. 'Being there' (Geertz 1988) allows ethnographers to observe the daily activities and social interactions of those under study, as well as allowing them to experience the mundane and spectacular moments which touch and shape their lives. In so doing, ethnographers form close relationships with their research participants, and engage in many unrehearsed, on-the-spot conversations to elicit their views and understandings of various topics. With its emphasis on participant observation, and a requirement to see the world from the point of view of their participants, the features of ethnography contrast strikingly with more 'scientific' methods of positivist social sciences. Ethnography differs significantly from the latter type of methods precisely because it examines what people *do* as well as what they say, thereby enabling an insightful examination of any discrepancies between talk and behaviour – an important distinction for those researching the police (Waddington 1999b).

The ultimate goal of undertaking a police ethnography is to comprehend 'the conduct of the police within the logics of the insider as well as with the perspective of the outsider' (Fassin 2013: xii). As a methodological approach, ethnography has proven unparalleled for penetrating the inner world of police organizations and examining the working rules, tacit understandings, and underlying assumptions that operate beneath the 'presentational canopy' (Holdaway 1983). Speaking as both a social scientist and serving police officer, Young (1991, p. 15) explains that it requires a great deal of fieldwork 'to reveal much about the unspoken agenda which determines many aspects of police practice'. All other approaches are, to varying degrees, unsuitable for achieving this end because the methods employed 'rely on some sort of account offered by the police themselves (whether in interviews or official documents and statistics), the veracity of which is often precisely the question being studied' (Reiner and Newburn 2008, p. 354). Such accounts are selective presentations that do not necessarily depict the state of phenomena as they actually exist and may be an attempt to convince the target audience of a particular image or truth that should not be taken at face value. The police, as Manning (1997, p. 43) notes, 'take special care to manage or control access to and

knowledge of back regions. This protects that which they conceal, such as organizational secrets, plans, and the less than laudatory features of organizational life'.

Ethnography, however, is not what it was. The traditional fieldwork rite of passage, learning a language and spending months or years among an unfamiliar culture (Rabinow 1977; Barley 1983), has long been superseded. Now, anthropologists – and social scientists - study their own communities (Evans 2007) and organizations (Pachirat 2011; Krause-Jensen 2013). Similarly, what counts as 'ethnographic' has expanded to embrace an array of different approaches. Narrative ethnographers, for example, appreciate talk as a form of social action and focus on the construction, performance and effect of stories (Gubrium and Holstein 2008). Visual and other sensory approaches seek to augment fieldnotes with images and sounds that evoke something of a time and place (Warren 2012; Arnfred 2015). Researchers working in the framework of autoethnography have sought to develop the reflexive aspects of ethnographic work to explore their own experiences against broader social, economic and political phenomena (Doloriert and Sambrook 2012). More recently, on-line communities have been explored via ethnographic principles as a resource for netnographies (Kozinets 2015; Tunçalp and Lê 2014). While many have welcomed these innovations and developments, others argue that ethnography has lost a part of its special quality, and has been diluted. What is ethnography if it does not entail the close and careful observation of people over time in their own setting (Atkinson 2015)?

At its heart, ethnography is an eclectic research methodology. From the outset, it has brought together researchers with different interests, perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds. They have attended to the social, the linguistic, the physical and the economic aspects of the cultures they have studied. Perhaps what unites ethnographers is the written output. Etymologically, ethnography refers to writing about culture. In that sense, 'an ethnography' is produced as much by *how* we write as by the processes of data collection and analysis (van Maanen 2011). In their writings, ethnographers bring the symbolic worlds they study to life in a manner that can be rendered intelligible to the reader, ascribing a voice to those who are researched, and thereby communicating the story of the research experience. They attempt to provide an authoritative account of the people in question and render their culture visible through interpretative representation.

Wherever we stand on such definitional disputes is, for the purposes of this collection, unimportant. We do not intend to define or police the boundaries of what is and what is not to be embraced by the label 'ethnographic'. Rather, we would suggest that the works collected here occupy different positions on what might be thought of as the 'ethnography spectrum' and demonstrate the potential of an ethnographic approach to understanding the world of policing. In the current academic context, ethnographic work is so often constrained by time and financial resources that to undertake extended fieldwork is, perhaps, unrealistic. Gaining access to police organizations for academic study can also present its challenges (van Maanen 1978; Fleming 2011; Cockbain 2015). Access is not simply a matter of formal permission to undertake the research. It is as much about the development of a more informal relationship of trust with those you are observing, often those policing actors at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy. It is perhaps, then, even more difficult to undertake some of the shorter-form (rapid, extemporaneous) ethnographies. In that relatively brief time, how do we assure ourselves, as researchers, that what we have observed has some relationship to the world as the police see it? Have we understood their perspective such that we can analyse it and communicate it to a wider audience? Or, are we strangers looking in at a world that is, in part, a performance for our benefit? Traditionally, ethnographic research involves an emic perspective of people and groups. The point at which an ethnographer has 'fitted in' and become an imaginary citizen of the social world they are studying is a subjective one.

For all its contribution to the social sciences, ethnography is not an entirely flawless methodology. Critiques, emanating from both opponents and proponents of the method, tend to revolve around its interpretivist character. 'Social action', Manning (1997, p. 3) writes, 'like poetry, is ambiguous. It can be read or interpreted in a variety of ways and at several layers of meaning'. Far from being 'a neutral channel of communication' (Pearson 1993, p. vii), the 'self' of the ethnographer is the research instrument, the lens through which the social world is seen and the person with whom research participants interact. Making sense of what is observed, and how findings are presented, is a largely idiosyncratic exercise and often too reliant on the positioning of the ethnographer (Hammersley 2018). At worst, findings may be viewed as biased and unreliable, and there are associated concerns about generalisation from single or small numbers of cases within ethnographic fieldwork. In a recent critique, Lubet (2018) interrogates the use of evidence in ethnography – in terms of sources, collection, presentation, and dependability – by comparing it to the standards that have been developed to determine the reliability of evidence in legal practice. He explains how ethnography would benefit from greater attention to the quality of evidence. Part of the solution has been to encourage ethnographers to be reflexive about how their own cultural, political and intellectual positioning shapes the collection and discussion of the data (Davies 2012). Another is to engage our subjects as collaborators (Marcus 1998). Research participants may be educated in the same disciplines as the researcher and may even be aware of what ethnography is. We can share our field notes and our published papers with them as auditors of our authenticity. The subjects of our research may disagree with the conclusions, but do they recognise the world described? If our work is to have 'impact', as is now increasingly required by research funding bodies (Chubb and Watermeyer 2016; Pearce and Evans 2018), then it must correspond in some way with the world under study - in this case, with the world as seen and experienced by the policing actors that we are trying to affect.

The Articles

This collection of papers is Part 1 of a two-part special issue. Together, the volumes illustrate the range of the ethnography spectrum. In this first issue, we focus on the police and Anglo-American policing. The second issue is more international in scope and seeks to enrich our understandings of policing 'beyond' the police. Anyone who has spent time observing policing worlds - and indeed those working within that world - will most likely recognise the descriptions presented in these papers. They illustrate the varieties of activities and practices that constitute late modern policing in a range of policing landscapes.

Policing scholars have tended to conceptualise developments in and practices of policing against socio-cultural, economic and political transformations. Ethnography, as noted, is especially helpful in this regard since it allows a more fundamental social analysis of the determinants, nature and consequences of policing. Today, the appeal that policing ought to be studied in its broadest contextual manner has never been so relevant. Societies are experiencing a series of economic, cultural, political and technological disturbances that are reshaping patterns of citizenship, social disadvantage, the dynamics of crime, inclusion and exclusion in communities. The articles which follow each reflect upon the character and style of policing within this changing landscape.

In the first paper, **Paul Quinton** concentrates on the face-to-face encounters between the police and sections of the public. He reappraises the stop and search activities of officers working in the post-Macpherson landscape of policing. This is classic ethnographic terrain, and the study consists of more than 565 hours observing officers on patrol. However, the study was undertaken by a team and not the lone researcher we associate with ethnography practice. Team research presents problems for the analysis of ethnographic data, overcome here by coding and by the pro-forma

recording of aspects of the encounters. While this is not the first-hand familiarity we might ideally want as ethnographers, it does allow for more data and for more time in the field that is otherwise so hard to find. Theoretically inspired by Goffman's (1983) notion of the 'interaction order', Quinton draws on fieldnotes from 281 observed interactions (followed up with many interviews with officers) to examine the various strategies employed by police officers to subtlety exert power over, and manage encounters with, suspects. In so doing, he is particularly concerned to make apparent those tactics employed by the police to minimise the uncertainty and potential for conflict in order to control the situation. The findings suggest that while some police-initiated encounters with suspects were antagonistic, many were notably calm and benign – something which tends to escape academic attention in this area. This, Quinton suggests, offers an alternative view in which officers are adept at (co)producing 'orderliness' within their interactions with suspects. Overall, the article provides a detailed portrayal of police-suspect encounters in which officers maintain almost complete control through subtle – rather than coercive – uses of state power. Quinton ends with a reflection on how developments in the contemporary climate of policing may (re)shape these kinds of encounters.

Ashley Kilgallon's paper also draws on Goffman (1959, 1963) to explore the professionally stigmatised identities of officers involved in the policing of the Notting Hill Carnival. As she notes, this annual event operates within a framework of a contentious racial history between predominantly white police officers and the black and minority ethnic communities leading the carnival. Kilgallon observed three consecutive Carnivals from two vantage points. Firstly, she accompanied Police Liaison Teams (PLTs) assigned to Carnival floats on-the-ground. Secondly, Kilgallon also observed the 'back-stage' work of the senior officer who had strategic oversight of the policing operation. These two positions were supplemented with observations of the planning meetings, briefings and informal conversations preceding the events. In so doing, Kilgallon became witness to the co-existence of both strained and peaceful relationships between the police and Carnival revellers. For Kilgallon, the PLTs she accompanied demonstrated an acute understanding of the troubled history between the police and minority ethnic groups and, as a result, consciously sought to engage in respectful, meaningful exchanges in order to challenge the tainted identity of the police. As a relatively new guise of police, Kilgallon argues that PLTs harness the potential to reconstruct more reciprocal communicative foundations with Carnival revellers and the black community more broadly.

Ross Deuchar, Vaughn Crichlow and Seth Fallik provide a comparative, ethnographic account of how police officers working in the US and Scotland have received and interpreted a new policing environment characterised by activism, public scepticism and transformations in traditional forms of police accountability and media. In the American policing study, high-profile clashes between (predominantly young, black) protestors and police have been exacerbated by the ubiquitous ownership of smart phones capturing police misbehaviour on film, and then shared with mass audiences via social media platforms. While 'sousveillance' and digital activism have prompted demands for greater oversight of policing, for the police, these developments have culminated in feelings of disempowerment and a defensive resentment. In the Scottish ethnography, the informal recording of police conduct is largely uncommon, but police are nevertheless beleaguered by longstanding controversies about police deployment of stop and search powers - against the white working class in particular. Together, Deuchar, Crichlow and Fallik provide an illuminating insight into how social and political challenges to contemporary policing are being received and understood by officers working at the sharp end. They conclude with some reflections on ways to potentially ameliorate the crisis facing the police - and their reputation - within the fractured communities they are charged to serve.

The implications for the police of expanding technologies – principally those oriented towards risk management - are also the focus of the article by **Alex Black and Karen Lumsden.** They draw on 66 hours of observation (supported with a number of focus groups), which formed part of an ethnography of call handlers, dispatchers and response officers working in a police force control room to develop the concept of 'precautionary policing'. The control room is often a fast-paced - even frantic - environment in which judgements are made rapidly, with the added pressure of call handlers knowing that their actions and decisions are recorded, potentially for later inspection. Black and Lumsden apply Foucault's notion on *le dispositive* to understand the way 'riskwork' is perceived and undertaken within contemporary police organisations. Thematically, their article shines light on police engagement with new technologies of risk, how novel forms of risk management can shape the response of call handlers and the use of cautionary tales to avert organisational service failures. Above all, what Black and Lumsden find is a highly risk-averse culture, despite the enactment of policies and organisational narratives supporting a more balanced approach to risk-taking behaviours.

As the article by **Sarah Charman** suggests, the renowned 'us' and 'them' mindset within police culture can influence how the police classify victims of crimes. She draws on research with new police recruits, following them through their first years in service. This approach, identifying the changing attitudes of a cohort over time, is revealing of a culture and of the process of socialisation as they express it. Charman reveals that officers are important definers of victim status and, in their work, make sharp distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims of crime. This tendency to categorise victims has its roots in the occupational socialisation of police officers, but is further solidified in their real-world encounters. In particular, Charman found that officers often rejected or downplayed victim status based upon preconceived ideas about the latters' lifestyle choices. Victims who did not conform with societal norms of respectability (drug users, teenage parents or those previously known to the police) were at special risk of misrecognition and, by extension, the withholding of legitimate protection by the police.

Finally, in this issue, **Merlijn van Hulst** reflects on the centrality of stories in ethnographies and in policing itself, reviewing the literature on police storytelling from an ethnographic perspective. In order to capture the state of the art, he traces the origins of scholarly interest in police storytelling within the study of police culture before examining the burgeoning literature and new ground that has been covered over recent years, such as story 'tellability' - police story telling among recruits, and differences across settings. At the heart of discussions about stories, van Hulst suggests, are questions as to their purpose and their veracity. He concludes by identifying a series of challenges/opportunities – the longstanding *challenge* of understanding the relationship between talk and action, for example, which presents an *opportunity* to study speculative, emergent stories as a basis for practice – for the police ethnographer that underline the extent to which the questions raised remain unresolved. Another promising area for future research, he argues, is to track stories as they travel through time in order to better understand whether or not, why and how, they become part of the police repertoire.

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