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# Interaction rituals and 'police' encounters: new challenges for interactionist police sociology

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Interactionist police sociology is in need of revision and extension in the face of profound change in policing, society, and in the very nature of 'interaction'. The argument draws upon interaction ritual theory, a micro-sociological perspective that explores social life, and feelings of belonging and solidarity, as outcomes of encounters between people. Two tenets of the theory – that successful encounters produce emotional energy that creates bonds of solidarity, and that they require physical co-presence of human participants to work in this way – are being revised in the light of new empirical work exploring interaction with 'others' in a variety of new forms. The effect of this work is to provoke reassessment of what 'counts' as an encounter, and to question the nature and sources of solidarity in an age when face-to-face physical co-presence is in decline. These features of interaction ritual theory are developed through three purposively-selected, illustrative applications of it to policing: police as reproducers of order; policing as information brokering; and, the changing landscape of security encounters. The article opens up new questions and objects of study for interactionist police research that are fit for the empirical realities of contemporary policing.

Keywords: ritual, encounter, solidarity, order

## Introduction

The symbolic significance of interactions between police officers and members of the public has been at the heart of academic accounts of police work at least since the flurry of scholarly activity from the 1960s onwards that came to, if not define, then at least constitute a core preoccupation within the Anglo-American field (Reiner 2010). From those classic accounts of the police as state agents negotiating the fabric of local norms in everyday situated street encounters (Banton 1964, Bittner, 1970, Ericson 1982), to later analyses of how such encounters implicitly signified giving or withholding recognition of a person's status as a citizen (Loader 2006, Loader and Mulcahy 2003), often influenced by the perceived manner and quality of the personal interaction itself (Smith and Gray 1985, Sunshine and Tyler 2003, Bradford *et al.* 2009), it has been understood that the micro-level, face to face, 'on the street', interactions between police and people matter. They provide something of a barometer of the social order, signalling inclusion, reassurance, and solidarity for some (Innes 2004) just as they mark out lines of exclusion and oppression for others (Bowling *et al.* 2019, pp266-268, Young 1999, Shearing 1992).

This paper is sympathetic to this strain of interactionist police sociology, but seeks to demonstrate how it is in need of revision and extension in the face of profound and ongoing changes in policing, society, and, most crucially, the very nature of 'interaction' itself. The argument draws upon interaction ritual theory (IRT), an interactionist, micro-sociological perspective that explores social life, and feelings of belonging and solidarity as outcomes of encounters between people. Especially within the foundational work of Goffman (1956) and Collins (2004), IRT has a natural affinity with traditional interactionist scholarship on police public interaction. Both place face-to-face human encounters as the starting point for analysis, and both explore these encounters in terms of their symbolic and communicative significance to questions of solidarity, inclusion, exclusion and the social order. However, emerging critical perspectives on IRT present significant challenges to, and opportunities for, police sociology. In particular, this work problematizes two key assumptions about interaction encounters: that they require physical co-presence of participants to the encounter; and, that those participants must necessarily be human (DiMaggio *et al.* 2019, Campos-Castillo and Hitlin 2013, Cerulo 2011). Interaction with systems, electronic communications, and digital environments are providing perhaps the most tangible contemporary examples of where these assumptions are falling down. The aim of this paper is to provoke reassessment of what might 'count' as a police public encounter, and to initiate reflection on what new questions are raised by such reassessment.

We begin with an introductory exposition of the main components of IRT. The preoccupations of the perspective will resonate with those interested in interactionism, and some of its implicit affinity with, and explicit use within, criminology will be used to illustrate this. Particular attention will be given to two of its distinguishing features that are important to the discussion that follows: the analytical focus on emotional energy as an outcome of encounters; and the question of what today constitutes co-presence. These features of IRT will be articulated and developed further through three purposively-selected, illustrative applications of it to policing:

1. The first application is to police-public encounters as traditionally understood within the sociology of policing: *police as reproducers of social order* (Ericson 1982). This refers to the face to face performances between police officers and members of the public in the context of everyday 'street' policing (Banton 1964, Bittner 1970). The application of IRT is most obvious here, resonating closely with traditional police sociology and much of the influential procedural justice work that has effectively taken up its baton (Bradford *et al.* 2009, Sunshine and Tyler 2003). However, even in this most conservative application IRT draws attention to underlying features of encounters and their cumulative, distributive and wider symbolic effects that might re-vitalise and augment procedural justice perspectives.

The remaining applications have been selected precisely because they are not 'obvious' at all, and in fact challenge what might be assumed to be an encounter and an encounter with policing. They have been selected to provoke reconsideration of these questions:

2. The second application relates to a well-documented change in the empirical reality of everyday policing that has been in evidence since at least the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the tendency for more police work to be done behind the scenes, off the streets, involving intelligence and information systems (Ericson and Haggerty 1997, Smith 2007, Terpstra et al. 2019). Apart from the fact that this shift takes officers away from having face to face encounters with the public it has also been heralded as underpinning a defining function of contemporary policing: *information brokering* (Ericson 1994). Crime intelligence analysis will be used as an example to identify the internal encounters that animate information brokering interactions and processes. A key problem to be addressed here is whether the systems and interfaces themselves can be understood as participants within such encounters. It will be argued, drawing on emerging new evidence on co-presence, that they can, and should be. Recognising information system interactions as encounters carrying emotional energy potentially opens up a host of new lines of inquiry in relation to internal police solidarity, including how some technical systems, tools, and interfaces generate positive emotional energy from users, becoming accepted, and even legitimate, components of authoritative police practice, whereas others do not.
3. The third application reflects wider evolution and change within policing and society, and what I call here a *changing landscape of security encounters*. This is apparent across two well-documented axes. Firstly, is the fragmentation of 'policing', the growing importance and role of non-state sectors in providing security services (Johnston and Shearing 2003, Jones and Newburn 2002). For most people encounters with commercial security personnel likely form a much larger part of everyday experience than public-police encounters, but such encounters have rarely been examined as building blocks in the reproduction of order. Although the nature of inclusion, exclusion and belonging experienced through security encounters beyond the police will be of a distinctive texture and emotional charge to those of state agents, this does not mean that they are unimportant to analyses of negotiated local orders and wider social solidarity. Indeed, IRT suggests they have potential to be just as decisive. The second axis across which the landscape of security encounters has changed involves even more profound social change that reaches far beyond questions of policing: encounters mediated through technologies. Digital communications, online interactive environments, AI-assisted systems etc. were already becoming ubiquitous before the 2020 global pandemic, which has likely further normalised them<sup>1</sup>. They have long promised connection and immersion beyond earlier analogue counterparts (postal services, telegraph systems, the telephone), although their capacity to actually deliver equivalent levels of emotional energy remains contested (see, Turkle 2017). In any case, the cumulative effect of

these technologies, digital and analogue, is to reconfigure what 'being there' means, or in the vocabulary of interaction ritual, what being 'co-present' means. Again I turn to the emerging body of critical empirical work informed by IRT to explore how this necessitates substantial re-assessment of our thinking about police-public interactions, the wider state of social solidarity, and the capacity of the former to positively affect the latter.

IRT, particularly in the emergent, more open forms utilised here, connects these disparate kinds of policing and security encounter, prompting wide-reaching questions about the sources of and impediments to internal (to the police) and external (in society) experiences of solidarity and belonging in a world characterised both by familiarity, and by very profound change, in how we interact with it. This article is a call to police interactionism to catch-up.

### **Interaction ritual, the encounter and co-presence**

For criminologists 'rituals' are most commonly associated with the macro, functionalist forms explored within early anthropology (Durkheim 1912/2001, Collins 2004, pp. 26-28). Here rituals take the form of ceremonies, performances, and rites of passage imbued with symbolic significance, articulating the social (and/or religious) order writ large, confirming it, and training individuals to internalise its rhythms and meanings. Functionalist ritual practices express the structures and values of social orders, whether whole societies or particular institutions, lending them authority and legitimacy, and reaffirming the membership of participants to social groups. We see them in Durkheim's analysis of the communicative functions of punishment in maintaining social order (Garland 1990); in Carlen's (1976) surrealist-inspired account of a magistrates' court, where symbolic, ceremonial and dramatic rituals underpinned court authority and claims to 'due process'; in Garfinkel's (1956) demonstration of how court 'degradation ceremonies' stripped the status of 'accused' citizens, reconfiguring them as 'offenders'; and in Maruna's (2011) riposte that 'redemption rituals', symbolically reaffirming the return to community, are noticeable by their absence at the other end of criminal justice process. However, it is Rossner's (2011) work on rituals within restorative justice processes - exploring the dynamics, rhythms, and emotion of face to face encounters within them - that introduced criminology to *interaction* rituals.

IRT shares many common preoccupations with the functionalist accounts. It is interested in sources of solidarity, belonging, and identity; and in symbolic performances that articulate, confirm and reaffirm group membership and the legitimacy of that membership. However, in IRT, these things are negotiated, transacted and made real not (or not only) through functional social ceremonies but through visceral, embodied, everyday human experience at the micro-level, more in keeping with a bottom-up symbolic interactionist perspective (see: Blumer 1969). The starting point for IRT is the encounter, the situated moments in time,

where people interact with one another and at which structure and agency coalesce intersect and are negotiated:

(The interaction ritual) is the empirical/experiential location of our social psychology, our symbolic or strategic interaction, our existential phenomenology ... our arena of bargaining, games, exchange or rational choice. (Collins 2004, p.3)

Encounters are the rudimentary building blocks of all social interaction (including when we participate in formal functionalist ceremonies, which are comprised of micro encounters). They are the moments where we connect with the world, recognise others, and in the process recognise ourselves. Much of this is sub-cognitive, in that even where we don't explicitly know it we are performing rituals all the time as part of everyday life. This is illustrated in Goffman's work on how social conventions, cues and codes are at work in even basic forms of address to one another (rituals of asking 'how are you?' etc.), in conversational dynamics, rules and expectations (including facial feedback, appropriate body language, not speaking at once etc.), and in the performance of appropriate levels of deference and/or authority to others as the situation demands (Goffman 1956). It is in performing even these most mundane interaction rituals in our encounters with others that we affirm ourselves as more or less competent members of social groups (Collins 2004, pp.16-25).

In *Interaction Ritual Chains* Collins further elaborates a model of interaction ritual, specifying and unpacking both its constitutive components, and the outcomes derived where they are 'successful' (2004, pp.47-49). Two distinguishing, and interrelated, features of Collin's formulation merit emphasis here:

1. Successful encounters produce 'emotional energy'. To recognise and be recognised in an encounter is to affirm and reaffirm what is held 'sacred' by a group and our membership of it, and this visceral sense of solidarity intuitively 'feels' good. This emotional energy acts as a kind of social glue (2004, pp. 102-104), because we seek it out in future encounters, orientating ourselves towards those that we perceive as more likely to produce positive results. Of course, not all encounters are 'successful'. Where people fail to perform ritual norms of behaviour and etiquette in interaction they lose emotional energy and may shun future encounters of that kind, or indeed be shunned by others (Goffman 1956, Collins 2004, pp. 351-362). Good or bad, encounters mark us, as we carry experience and emotional energy from one to the next, our social lives being constituted by interaction ritual *chains of encounters* that are the micro-sociological basis for personal trajectories, social stratification, inclusion and exclusion (Collins 2004, pp.268-278).
2. Encounters require the 'physical co-presence' of at least two people. Collins emphasises the physiological, embodied experience of interaction rituals (2004, p.

19). Although on a continuum, encounters have intensity where deep shared focus and mutual attention are not only felt emotionally, but also physically, where human bodies sync with and become orientated towards one another (see: Rossner 2011). This finds particular expression in Collins' application of interaction ritual to group dynamics of violence (see: Weininger *et al.* 2019) but it remains part of his understanding of interaction rituals in a wider sense. The loss of physical co-presence, through mediated communications technologies for example, is something that he explicitly identifies as problematic to the health of social orders and solidarity (Collins 2004, p.64)

It is perhaps surprising that IRT has not thus far been directly applied to policing, where interactions are explicitly and formally concerned with order and the recognition, or otherwise, of groups within that order (Loader 2006, Loader and Mulcahy 2003). This article begins this reassessment of interactionism in policing, but in also seeking to critique and extend IRT, it goes beyond it. In particular, by questioning what 'counts' as co-presence and what kinds of encounter might produce emotional energy, it is argued that a whole new landscape of police public encounters meriting study are revealed.

### **Police as reproducers of order**

To say that the police play a role in the establishment, maintenance, and reproduction of social order it is not necessary to fetishize them, claiming that they are the 'thin blue line', without which there would be no social order (Reiner 2010, pp. 3-4). Many other factors are equally or even more important, likely varying considerably depending on the social, political and economic peculiarities of different jurisdictions (see: Loader and Mulcahy 2003, Reiner 2010, Smith 2007). Social order is complex and not the simple outcome of the work of any single social institution. However, interactionist police sociology has consistently demonstrated that the police are not irrelevant to social orders. At a mundane level they impose order in individual situations where it has broken down (Bittner 1970, Reiner 2010, pp. 141-147), and at a symbolic level they maintain *particular* social orders (generally the existing balance of socio-economic relations) through the pattern of situations that they institutionally prioritise (Shearing 1992; Walker, 1996, p.61). IRT at once provides insight into both the direct, individual encounter and its wider symbolic significance.

Where it is accepted that the cultivation of high levels police legitimacy in Britain was, to a large degree, the outcome of wider processes of social, political and economic emancipation (Reiner 2010, p. 77, Loader and Mulcahy 2003), this was only the story writ at the macro-level. Order and police legitimacy were also negotiated every day in the countless micro encounters of police work.

(T)he new police had to work constantly at establishing their legitimacy ...as front line agents in the 'reproduction of social order', the police eventually gained

acceptance and established systematic patterns of co-operation on this micro-level of everyday transactions with the citizenry..... (Ericson 1982, p. 3)

Ericson's characterisation of beat officers as 'front line agents in the reproduction of social order' chimes with Banton's (1964, p. 166) account of social control as negotiated, reliant on social relations, police-public contacts, and officers' ability to resolve conflict through soft, communal sources of authority rather than direct law enforcement (1964, pp.6-7). Ignatieff similarly finds police-public cooperation as something that was emergent, negotiated and contracted at this micro level of social relations:

In each neighbourhood, and sometimes street by street, the police negotiated a complex, shifting, largely unspoken 'contract'... This was the microscopic basis of police legitimacy... (Ignatieff 1979, p. 445)

Taken together, these accounts characterise social order and police legitimacy as forged from the ground up, through everyday face-to-face encounters coded with symbolic meaning, communicating formal and informal authority, and articulating particular patterns of inclusion and exclusion. The best current expression of this sociology of police-public interaction is to be found in procedural justice (PJ) (Sunshine and Tyler 2003, Bradford *et al.* 2009) which will be used here to illustrate how IRT might both complement and lend further nuance to this well-trodden field.

PJ explores the exercise of legal authority and power. Tyler (2006) demonstrated how citizens did not evaluate experiences of law in purely instrumental terms of whether decisions were 'favourable'. Rather, they were concerned with the procedural fairness of the process, whether it afforded them dignity and respect, whether they were kept informed, and whether they were involved in the process (Tyler 2006; Sunshine and Tyler 2003, pp.518-521; MacQueen and Bradford 2015, pp.421-422). Where these signifiers of PJ were adhered to citizens were more likely to recognise the process (and those enacting it) as having authority, and a legitimacy that would further enhance their likely compliance with it in the future (Tyler 2006).

To a significant degree the whole PJ approach is already implicitly talking about interaction ritual and rules and codes of interpersonal exchange. Echoing the vocabulary of IRT, it gives emphasis to the *moment of encounter*, how it is *performed* by participants, and the potential for such encounters to generate *group solidarity-enhancing emotion* where they provide *ratification of participants' status*. The rights of the citizen, and so their *legitimate membership* of the community, are *affirmed* and given recognition, *charging them with positive sentiment* (emotional energy) and a willingness to comply with authority. IRT and PJ are more complementary than they are at odds. There are, however, at least two areas in which IRT has potential to develop the study of direct police-public encounters. The first



relates to the ingredients and dynamics of encounters, the second to their distributive, cumulative, and vicarious symbolic effects.

The first contribution becomes apparent in the moments when PJ interventions don't work as planned, such as in MacQueen and Bradford's (2015) randomized control trial of an experimental use of PJ in Scottish road-traffic policing. The project was an attempt to test the results of the Queensland Community Engagement Trial where it had been demonstrated that when road-traffic police worked to a PJ script this had a substantial effect on citizen satisfaction (MacQueen and Bradford 2015, p. 420). The Scottish results were unexpected in that citizen satisfaction was lower for the experimental group delivering the intervention. The authors' observations (2015, pp. 434-438) are compatible with IRT. It had been noted that the 'business as usual' norm of policing in Scotland was already more adherent to PJ principles than had been the case in Queensland. The intervention had thus been designed to *increase* the PJ 'dosage' in experimental encounters, requiring that *all* principles be administered, in both verbal exchanges and in written information provided to drivers. This undermined officers' normal rhythms of interaction with citizens in two ways. The script made the encounters longer and in doing so breached social expectations about what would be a reasonable time for the exchange. Secondly, they 'bureaucratised' interactions, formalising them, and affecting officers' natural rapport with citizens as they struggled to remember and include everything that was required for the intervention (MacQueen and Bradford, 2015, p. 436). What the authors' intuitively perceive here, and what IRT emphasises, is that in any delivery of formally coded interaction scripts informal expectations and symbols of deference and demeanour are always simultaneously being performed. Both the dynamics of the encounter, and its symbolic content are at play. In terms of dynamics, the required adherence to a formal script appears to have undermined the *mutual focus and attention* experienced between the citizen and the officer. In IRT terms this immediately lessens the potency of the interaction and the likelihood of it producing positive emotional energy (Collins 2004, pp.47-49). Of course, expectations of mutual focus and attention also have a symbolic content that may vary across different contexts. Here the bureaucratic, scripted encounters appear to have been locally perceived as signifying impersonal, and perhaps even unfriendly relations, in breach of informal expectations of respectful interaction (Goffman, 1956). In short, two caveats to the PJ project are flagged here: firstly, that PJ interventions themselves risk interrupting the dynamics of successful interaction rituals (by interceding in mutual focus and attention); and, secondly, that cognisance needs to be given to the local, informal signifiers of dignity and respect that are being simultaneously transacted alongside any script, affecting its transferability across different communities and/or jurisdictions.

However, in the wider context of frontline policing we also know that experience of a direct encounter with the police is unevenly distributed (Bowling et al. 2019, pp.125-126), and that this pattern of policing itself articulates strong symbolic messages about inclusion and

exclusion (Walker, 1996, pp. 58-59). Herein lies the second point. Where PJ in direct encounters has been shown to often improve individual experience, we also need to be attentive to the cumulative and vicarious effects of the IRCs which people bring to them, and through which they have felt their group identity and its relationship with the police over time. This relates to distributive fairness. Distributive justice demands that police services not only be applied fairly in face-to-face encounters but that such contacts, and police services more generally, should be allocated fairly across communities (Sunshine and Tyler 2003, p514). Distributive justice has recently received less attention than its procedural counterpart, but IRT might be drawn upon to revitalise it as a topic of study in a number of ways. Firstly, it would reconfigure work on police encounters to give greater emphasis to the exploration of the effects of IRCs – the cumulative effect of direct police encounters, particularly as they are experienced as distributively unfair. Secondly, it draws attention to the wider circulation of symbolic markers of exclusion and their indirect, vicarious effects. In IRT the symbols being ritually performed in direct encounters do not exist in isolated parcels of experience. Symbols and rituals are necessarily collective in nature, our shared connection to, and ratification of, them being the essence of their importance to social solidarity. At the individual level symbols are carried across the multiple, overlapping IRCs of encounters that constitute lived experience, and, as emphasised previously, for Collins these encounters *are* the “primary realm of living ritual” where symbols are performed and charged with significance (2004, pp.98-99). However, there is also a “secondary realm where those symbols become circulated in the IRs that make up the surrounding social networks, whether taken as positive or negative emblems, or just treated reflexively as items of news, gossip, reputation” (Collins, 2004, pp. 98-99). The secondary realm specifically talks to the fact that direct, individual encounters are always situated within social constellations. It talks to ideas of a shared social imagination (Collins, 2004, p.83, and on policing and the public imagination see: Loader and Mulcahy, 2003). This draws attention to how the wider symbolic significance and distribution of policing is at play both in direct police-public encounters and vicariously experienced beyond them. It is already moving us towards how IRT itself is being extended to encapsulate landscapes of intersecting encounters that reach well beyond direct face to face interactions; discussions that are developed in the following sections.

### **Police as knowledge brokers**

Frontline, face-to-face police work might be the most self-evident context in which to apply interaction ritual, but it is not necessarily the most important, or not any longer. The following two sections examine more challenging ways in which IRT can be extended in order to be rendered applicable to the new empirical realities of policing. Doing so provokes a necessary reassessment of interactionist police sociology and its objects of study. In this section we turn to the tendency for police work to move ‘back stage’, away from the frontline and the face-to-face, and towards the proactive use of information and

intelligence systems in pursuance of prevention, surveillance, investigation and governance (Ericson and Haggerty 1997, Smith 2007, Terpstra et al. 2019). These kinds of police work involve the collection, control, marshalling and selective sharing of large amounts of information. Ericson argues that they increasingly characterise police work, the primary function of which has become 'knowledge brokering' (Ericson 1994).

Given the more bureaucratic aspects of policing implied by knowledge brokering it might initially seem that any application of ritual to this work would be to apply it in its under-theorized, pejorative form; to argue that policing is becoming a ritualised 'going through the motions' of form-filling, 'without meaning' for participants (Collins 2004). Some aspects of the bureaucratisation and performance management of policing have indeed produced disillusionment, anomie and 'ritualised' disengagement within the organisation, and a resultant distancing of the police from communities (Terpstra *et al.* 2019). This is something we will return to. For the moment it will be argued that applying IRT to the knowledge brokering function offers insight into why some technologies and systems become more readily accepted into police work than others. Specifically it explains how some forms of knowledge brokering *can* generate emotional commitment, becoming authoritative and valued parts of police work. Crime intelligence analysis (CIA) will be used to illustrate the point.

CIA has evolved substantially since the early days recalled by Innes et al. (2005, p.41) where coloured pins on maps provided a representation of the distribution of local crime. Change has been driven in part by information and communications technologies and the capacity to process information (Maguire and John 2006, Ericson and Haggerty 1997), but it has also been driven by police organisations themselves becoming more orientated around rationalities of strategic risk management and prevention (Johnston and Shearing 2003, Innes et al. 2005). A few common features of what is generally involved in CIA are sketched to illustrate where and how IRT is pertinent to its study.

There are four sub-stages in what Innes et al. call the 'information cycle' (2005, p. 43). Information is acquired (collected from numerous sources, including street level officers, phone lines, and a range of partner organisations), analysed (filtered, collated and categorised around offender profiles, network analysis, crime mapping etc.) assayed (where outputs from analysis are applied to particular problems to determine risk and lines of action); and, acted upon (where intelligence is used to direct police resources). Implicit in this sketch is the fact that a wide range of potential actors are part of this cycle, including the officers on the street collecting and acting on intelligence, the civilian crime analysts, and police managers with tasking and coordination functions. The cycle is also supported through information systems of various kinds, including the National Intelligence Model which coordinates and shares intelligence products (see: Maguire and John 2006, pp. 69-

74), as well as the mundane input and tasking systems used on the frontline (increasingly likely to be mobile phones).

Characterised in this way, the practice of CIA is comprised of a complex interlocking set of encounters between a variety of participants with distinctive roles and stakes in the process: between officer and citizen; officer and analyst; manager and frontline officer; and, frontline officer and citizen again etc. All of these interactions could, in theory, be explored through the lens of interaction ritual. However, a subset of potential encounters that pose a challenge for IRT, and an opportunity to extend it, are those between the officers, analysts and managers, and the non-human technological interfaces and intelligence products of the process. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) shows how interactions with systems might readily be included as 'encounters'. Within ANT the ability of 'actants' to participate and direct activity within a network is well-documented (Prior 2008, pp. 828-833, Cerulo 2011) and actants need not be human:

(A)n actant is any independent entity that, at any time, can acquire the ability to make things happen within the actor-network. The actant need not express intention; it need not experience consciousness or reflect on its action. Indeed, the things an actant makes happen may not involve any of the special capabilities typically tied to humanness. (Cerulo 2011, pp. 782)

Pets, deities, the dead, robots, avatars and computer systems are all potential actants in Cerulo's account. Closer to the network of encounters suggested here, Prior (2008, p. 827) demonstrates the 'agentic' qualities of documentary tools, showing how they frame, prompt and direct human actors who are in active engaged dialogue, or 'episodes of interaction' with them (2008, p. 827). The rounds of a doctor are used as an illustration, where documentary materials are seen to act as calculators, aide de memoirs, and as diagnostic prompts, suggestions and checklists that play an active role, in interaction with the doctor, in organising, sequencing, and lending authority to, medical diagnosis and treatment (Prior 2008, pp. 826-828). Opening up the analysis of interaction to include non-human participants is also beginning to be recognised within IRT. The challenge here is co-presence, and whether emotional and mutually-focused interaction ritual can be possible, or of the same intensity, when mediated by technologies or when technologies are the co-participants. The issue of co-presence, and the problems it raises, is developed in the following discussion of 'encounters mediated by technologies'. For the moment it can be noted that interaction ritual scholars *are* finding evidence of emotion-producing encounters with non-human actors, including information systems and technologies (Zhao 2003, Campos-Castillo and Hitlin 2013). In the context of knowledge brokering this extension of IRT opens up new possibilities for exploring, at a micro-level, just how some interfaces and systems become incorporated, legitimated, even accepted as 'sacred' within the practices of organisations, and how some do not.

IRT would predict that where systems generate emotional responses that connect them to the shared understanding of a practice (what is sacred to it, its mission, recognition of which marks identification with it) they will more likely become part of it. Existing work on the functions of science, law, and systems within policing illustrates how this is likely the case, and suggestive of the particular character of the shared emotional responses that successful system encounters will produce: legitimacy, empowerment and affirmation of police mission.

Innes et al. (2005) note the *legitimizing* qualities of appeals to 'science' that characterise use of knowledge in the police (see also: Ericson and Shearing 1986). They show how the stages of the intelligence cycle, and the interactions around the production and use of intelligence, legitimate one another, imbuing intelligence products with symbolic power and scientific validity (for participants) (Innes *et al.* 2005, pp. 50-51). This whole process of authentication of crime intelligence legitimates and justifies action taken in light of it. It empowers the police to assert their view of the world as authoritative, to claim 'things look this way' as opposed to that one might 'look at things this way' in a similar manner to how Ericson and Shearing (1986, p.129) have shown how the law enables police practice. Bullock and Johnston (2012) illustrated this same point more recently in the context of Human Rights legislation in England, showing how legal rules and procedures framing police practice in the powerful rhetoric of Human Rights were made to work, through everyday encounters and practice, largely in pursuance of the existing police law enforcement mission. Where systems fail to be incorporated into police practice or have created active sites of resistance or dissonance (Terpstra *et al.* 2019) the inverse is likely to be true. Although other cultural, organisational or political factors may also be at play, IRT predicts that the building blocks of success or failure of system reforms will be found right at the level of system encounters, where officer meets system, and whether that encounter produces emotional affinity to the collective police mission and the identification that goes with that, or whether it does not. At the very least this reveals a distinctive interactionist focus that can inform future evaluations of police system reforms.

### **Policing and a changing landscape of 'security encounter'**

In this final application two ways in which the landscape of encounters is changing are used to revisit and develop some of the themes developed thus far. The first change relates to the idea that from the latter half of the twentieth century onwards, policing became more fragmented, with the commercial and voluntary sectors playing greater roles alongside state police (Jones and Newburn 2002). In terms of IRT this raises questions about the extent and character of encounters with this wider 'family' of security providers, if and how such encounters foster feelings of solidarity and belonging and, if so, in what terms. This discussion returns us to the preoccupations of the earlier discussion of the micro

reproduction of order. The second change relates to the growing role of technologies in mediating social interaction. The question here is whether and how encounters can take place through technologies and, if they can, what quality of interaction ritual is possible. This extends the discussion of knowledge brokering where the possibility of drawing non-human participants into the analysis of encounters was introduced. In exploring encounters mediated by technologies, current theory and empirical evidence on 'co-presence' demonstrates how the whole experience of interaction and 'being there' has been, and is being, changed. This has wide ramifications for the whole fabric of social interaction and order, which itself is of profound importance to policing, constituting the context in which it operates. There is much here that lies beyond the reach of a single article. Therefore, these provisional reflections contain themselves by revisiting themes previously explored in analogue – the reproduction of order through micro-level transactions, and the affirmation of the police mission through encounters. Even these limited applications necessitate substantial re-assessment of our thinking about the changing nature of police-public interactions, the wider state of social solidarity, and the capacity of policing to positively contribute to it.

#### *Encounters beyond the police*

The landscape of 'policing' - in terms of the balance and relationship between its state, commercial, and voluntary forms - changes over time, and has distinctive patterns across the world (Johnston and Shearing 2003). Where there is evidence that the public police carry symbolic power, characterising the political order (Loader and Mulcahy 2003, Walker 1996), and giving recognition to rights-bearing citizens (Loader 2006), this does not mean that encounters beyond the police do not also have significance to questions of order, citizenship, and inclusion.

To use Innes' (2004) terminology, people encounter different 'signifiers' of security, and of different kinds of security, throughout their everyday lives. Only a fraction of these are likely to involve the public police, more of us likely having some kinds of encounter with private security personnel. In some instances private security staff are clearly carrying out primary security functions (such as airport security, security staff at schools, security teams in shopping centres) whereas, in many others their 'security' function is secondary to and embedded within other primary functions (travel ticket collectors, concierges, shop assistants, park attendants) that might make their security function less pronounced or immediately obvious, but it also makes them more ubiquitous throughout the social fabric (Jones and Newburn 2002). Most of us have routine, face-to-face encounters with secondary security signifiers of this kind. Despite this, academic work has continued to focus on encounters between public police officials and the public, such as in the PJ work noted earlier (Bradford *et al.* 2009) and in relation to the exercise of stop and search powers, for example (Smith and Gray 1985, Murray 2014). The growing work that has tried to capture something of the experience of private security, its distinctive functions, and the

orientations personnel evolve to deal with their work, see: Loftstrand *et al.* 2016) is important but has not yet provided an account of what encounters mean for members of the public. IRT predicts that regular, cumulative IRCs with diverse forms of security, even if they don't have the *same* significance as encounters with the police, are nonetheless encounters through which order, solidarity, and belonging are performed. Here, the feelings produced might be less explicitly framed in terms of citizenship and national identity, but instead reflect more one's status as consumer or flawed non-consumer (Bauman 2005). We noted in the context of exploring the police role in the reproduction of order that it is almost a given that the public participants in most police-public encounters are (relatively speaking) outsiders; socially, economically, ethnically (Reiner 2010, pp. 123-124 and 159-173, Shearing 1992). More pressing in the forging of outsider identities and experiences of exclusion, might be the cumulative effects of everyday encounters with non-state security functionaries, which reaffirm exclusion and outsider identities. Plausible, however, might be scenarios where commercial and voluntary security personnel, free from the oppressive effects of the public police's law and order orientations (see: Johnstone and Shearing 2003) instead offer inclusion and recognition to people otherwise socially excluded, through basic requirements of respect and courtesy that are afforded to all customers. The evidence currently suggests that police categories of 'property' and commercial categories of 'failed consumer' are relatively congruent (Young 1999), in which case the exclusion faced by those so defined will be confirmed by both, but further empirical evidence is required to properly disentangle the relative and sometimes overlapping roles of different security signifiers in contemporary transactions of social order.

### *Encounters mediated by technologies*

Social interaction is increasingly mediated by technologies of many kinds. Some are not so new, such as the telephone and the television, whereas others have become ingrained and everyday very quickly, such as email, social media, online gaming platforms, virtual environments, and AI home-hub systems. Their cumulative effects on social order, identity, solidarity and security were only just being grasped (Turkle 2017, Castells 2010) at the time of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. Reliance on digitally-mediated interaction (coupled with requirements to actively limit face to face encounters) throughout this period make such questions all the more pressing, but they are not new, finding specific expression within policing research (see: Wall and Williams 2013, Williams *et al.* 2013, Goldsmith 2015) and within associated fields of cybercrime (Yar and Steinmetz 2019) and surveillance studies (Lyon 2007). Here the focus is intentionally narrow and restricted to how these emerging modes of interaction have provoked reassessment of core tenets of IRT, and in turn how such a reconfigured IRT reveals new challenges for policing and security. The illustrations are orientated around the dimensions of policing explored previously: the police role in the micro-transaction of social order; and processes of affirmation of the police mission. They are but an initial sketch of just some distinctive new opportunities for interactionist

research. Collins' warnings about the dangers of mediated-interaction rituals is our starting point.

In Collins' formulation the physical co-presence of human participants is an important ingredient of successful encounters (2004, p.19). He is not arguing that interaction rituals cannot occur without co-presence, rather that mediated rituals will be *less effective* in generating emotional energy and solidarity because physical proximity in interaction provides the most visceral, mutually attuned, and immersive form of experience (2004, p.64). He cautions that a decline in face-to-face encounters risks diminishing both individual and collective feelings of solidarity:

(T)he more that human social activities are carried out by distance media, at low levels of IR (interaction ritual) intensity, the less solidarity people will feel; the less respect they will have for shared symbolic objects; and the less enthusiastic personal motivations they will have in the form of EE (emotional energy). (Collins 2004, p. 64)

Collins' intuitions about the risks to collective solidarity of the information age have garnered support. Turkle's (2017) work on the psychological effects of technologically-mediated interaction concludes that a world of mediated connectivity socially disconnects people. However, a growing body of studies actively using IRT to critically examine new forms of digital encounter draw us towards some more qualified conclusions. On the specific issue of co-presence there is now a substantial amount of evidence that interaction rituals do occur in a wide continuum of mediated forms; through oral mobile telephone communications (Ling 2008), in textual forms such as email, interactive forums, and text based environments (DiMaggio *et al.* 2019, Maloney 2013, Zhao 2003); in the form of visually represented social worlds and avatars (Schroeder 2002); and, including where the other participant or interlocutor is not human, such as in prayer, or with computer and AI systems (as in the previous discussion of knowledge brokering, see also: Cerulo 2011). Together this work reconfigures what it means to 'be there', demonstrating that presence can not only be mediated but that it can be fluid and multifaceted.

Accepting that co-presence and interaction ritual are possible in mediated forms brings us to the issue of their quality, whether they arouse the *same level* of emotional feeling, connection and solidarity. Zhao (2003) examined a wide range of modes of co-presence including technologically-mediated and text-based forms, prayer and 'para-social' encounters (watching TV). He appears to confirm that the mode of co-presence, whether proximate and physical or more distant and mediated, does affect the strength of the perception of the 'other', agreeing with Collins that physical co-presence is the most rich sensory mode generating the most powerful interaction ritual effects. However, he also acknowledges growing evidence to the contrary, such as the high levels of mutual focus in text-only exchanges despite their 'low level media richness' (2003, p. 452). Particularly



where text and other media are used together more recent research confirms this caveat, reporting very high levels of immersion and feelings of group identity in online forums (DiMaggio *et al.* 2019, Maloney 2013). These findings are further confirmed closer to home as criminological research into religious and racial hate crime (Williams *et al.* 2020) and the online expression of community tensions prior to and during public disorder (Proctor *et al.* 2013, Williams *et al.* 2013) attest to the capacity of social media interaction to generate strong collective emotion. In reality the emotional outcome of encounters may be less about the mode of co-presence and as much about the other ingredients, such as the shared interest at stake, and what it means for participants. Indeed, there is evidence that some encounters might work better when mediated. Maloney's (2013) study of 'pro ana'<sup>ii</sup> websites is a good illustration of the potential for technologically-mediated interaction rituals to be designed to elicit emotional connections; in this case providing users with a sense of shared interest, mutual focus and identification as 'pro ana' through encounters (on real-time chat rooms and in forum threads) they would just not have, or would actively avoid, with those physically (and emotionally) close to them. In summary, there is not only evidence that strong emotional energy and affinity *can* be generated through diverse mediated encounters, there is also evidence that mediated encounters might open up different kinds of affinities and solidarities that people can explore, meaning that it might not be that there is less collective solidarity, rather it is just more fragmented and differentiated.

In terms of the police role in reproducing and maintaining order I make three preliminary observations about how these extensions of co-presence and IRT open up questions for police interactionist sociology. Firstly, the new landscape of technologically-mediated security encounters that they reveal opens up the field of *what* interactionists study. This is both in the sense of what forms the new locations of encounter take (AI-assisted call-handling, security apps, ID verification systems, social media channels, and community consultation forums are but a few examples) and what the new situated moment of encounter has become, that being, an interface that mediates between the public and the police. The design of these interfaces prompt the second set of questions opened up by IRT: *how* do these technologies work to affect people and generate affinity and solidarity? The research on mediated interaction rituals indicates that they do so by recreating the ingredients of interaction rituals in their designs. Systems that orient people around shared interests upon which their mutual attention can be directed produce sustained interest, affinity, and bonds with the system and the others (or perceived 'others') being engaged through it. This is how the pro-ana websites studied by Maloney (2013) worked, and it is also how social media as a whole works to be emotionally affective in ways designed keep us connected (Turkle 2017). There is already awareness of these insights in the context of policing, such as in Brainard and Derrick-Mills (2011) study of Washington, DC's Metropolitan Police Department's use of interactive online forums in their community policing and communications strategy. In reviewing the threads of communications they

showed how particular issues – such as firework use manifesting as both everyday nuisance and prompt for anxieties around guns – galvanised people into mutual attention and focus, supported by the capacity of the system to let people volunteer input that mattered to them, and officers adopting a stance of ‘mutuality’ towards this engagement. How system designs do (or do not) contribute towards necessary conditions for interaction ritual encounters is just as important a question as what forms the new security encounters take. This leaves us with the third question: *why* adoption of mediated-encounters with the public should be treated with caution.

IRT predicts some risks facing police organisations seeking to engage with the public through technologies. These new spaces (online spaces, social media) have reconfigured expectations of interaction that police will have to adapt to. Where the uniform signals authority and expectations of deference in face-to-face encounters this is not necessarily the case online, where expectations are generally that interaction is more democratic and ‘peer to peer’ (Goldsmith 2015, p. 259). This opens up positive opportunities for those previously marginalised, or otherwise reticent in face-to-face encounters, to find a voice (as was the case in Maloney’s example), although it has also been found to disinhibit police interlocutors themselves, resulting in indiscretions and inappropriate behaviours that fail to meet expectations of police professionalism (Goldsmith 2015). In short, the police need to be attentive to the balance to be struck between signalling ‘mutuality’ (Brainard and Derrick-Mills 2011, pp. 402-405) and maintaining a level of symbolic authority even in the face of inevitable hostility from some members of the public (Brainard and Derrick-Mills 2011, p. 406). This is akin to repurposing Skolnick’s ‘working personality’ of the police officer, forged by officers seeking to manage problems and conflicts without ever compromising their authority, for the digital age (Skolnick 1998).

Using social media and technology is therefore no silver bullet in terms of enhancing police legitimacy, it comes with its own risks of failure. There are also lessons to be learned from analogue police work, for example, that digital encounters also need to be procedurally just (Bradford et al. 2009, see also Brainard and Derrick-Mills 2011, p.391), and that any police encounters, particularly in contexts where the police are held in relatively high esteem, have real potential to lower public trust (Smith 2007, pp.295-298) and so proactively seeking them out is inherently risky. Finally, a crucial question is whether mediated-encounters are complementing or replacing face-to-face encounters.

In the context of knowledge brokering it was argued that systems have been shown to create encounters that affirm police practices, lending internal authority and legitimacy to the police mission (Innes et al. 2005, Ericson and Shearing 1986). However, where these internal encounters occur *instead* of face-to-face interactions with the public, and some studies have characterised policing as moving in precisely this direction (see: Terpstra et al. 2019), this may have profound consequences for what kinds of policing become valued (for

better or worse) and the relationship between the police and the public. We know more about how encounters matter in terms of how the public feel about the police (Bradford et al. 2009), but less is said directly about how they make the police feel about the public. Studies of police culture indicate that there isn't a singular feeling towards the public, rather there are different publics, some the source of frustration and derision, others (sometimes simultaneously) the focus of their strong sense of mission: the public to be protected (Reiner 2010, pp.123-125). Such sentiments do not only come from contacts with the public (working culture and internal IRCs are also important), but denied regular face-to-face interaction with them, there is a question for interactionist police sociology about if/how this will have long term effects on officers' sense of mission and the depth of their feelings of affinity and solidarity with the public. In Terpstra et al.'s terms (2019) there is a risk of 'disconnect' between police and communities, and a certain anomie as officers find their 'shared symbolic objects' with, and 'enthusiastic personal motivations' for (Collins 2004, p. 64), communities eroded or disengaged. Their thesis of 'abstract policing' might well find its explanation in the shifts in forms and frequencies of encounters between police and people.

## **Conclusion**

The nature of interaction and what 'counts' as an encounter was being reconfigured, both through theoretical developments in IRT, and through empirical evidence challenging the primacy of human co-presence, even before the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020 brought the issue into stark relief. Applying these developments to different aspects of policing – long acknowledged as rich in symbolism and marking inclusion and exclusion from group membership – reveals distinct new avenues for police research that reach beyond the study of face-to-face encounters. That said, PJ has demonstrated that face to face encounters still matter in terms of how people feel towards authority, and the collective it represents, in ways generally compatible with IRT - even as it demonstrates how PJ scripts may inadvertently 'fail' by disrupting informal dynamics and expectations of interaction. Greater attention to the cumulative effects of IRCs would balance considerations of procedural probity with questions of distributive justice and the wider, vicarious circulation of symbols of inclusion and exclusion. However, moving beyond the traditional focus of police sociology there are many more ways in which the study of police encounters can be broadened. Encounters with systems and technologies are increasingly the empirical reality of the working lives of police officers. The quality of these encounters can be decisive in determining whether systems become incorporated into how the police think about their mission, underpinning the success or failure of systems and/or the reforms that have introduced them. The lesson here is to look at reforms at the micro-level, at the moment where officer and system interact, and at what feelings are evoked from that performance. Then there is the whole question of the wider landscape of encounters. On the one hand, most police-public encounters are likely to be with private or other non-state forms of policing working to commercial orientations. Their symbolic capital is different to that of

the public police but not unimportant to people's experience of inclusion and exclusion. On the other hand, the whole rise of the digital age deepens and extends the ways in which encounters are technologically mediated. This has potentially profound consequences for social order, facilitating the fragmentation and diversification of solidarities and identities at the same time as they lead to concerns about social disconnection and anomie. All of this has consequences for policing, shaping the context and the problems with which they must grapple, but it also provides new possibilities in which to encounter the public, possibilities with their own risks. As police increasingly experience their own work through interfaces there are questions about how this shift away from the primacy of face to face interaction with the public might have longer term consequences for how they feel about their communities, and for how their communities feel about them. Even taken together, these issues reflect far from an exhaustive agenda to move forward, but they do provide a starting point through which to take seriously that police encounters, and interaction more generally, have changed, are changing, and are providing important new avenues for research.

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<sup>i</sup> This article was under review during, but largely written prior to, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> The pro-ana movement rejects medical definitions of anorexia as a disease to be treated, instead seeing it as a lifestyle choice that can be maintained (Maloney, 2013: 111-112).