Learning the 'wrong' things: a case study of police recruits trained at university

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Abstract

It can be argued that most of the theorising around work and learning is premised on the idea that the learning is a positive process whereby actors learn socially useful (the right) things. Whilst it is and they do, as researchers it might sometimes be more relevant to focus on processes and situations where people learn the 'wrong' things. In this paper I offer empirical evidence to support this from my research into new programme to train police recruits. Pierre Bourdieu's related concepts of field, capital, habitus and symbolic violence are deployed to suggest how aspects of the programme operate to reproduce facets of police culture.

Introduction

Discourses around work and learning often differentiate between formal, non-formal and informal means (Colley et al. 2003). Whilst research has shown that in some situations, insufficient, or no learning takes place, or that somebody learns something which is unintended (Illeris 2006). But how should we classify and theorise learning in a formal setting which is the *reverse* of that planned? In this paper I touch on the uncomfortable and under-researched idea of people learning the 'wrong' things. After an initial discussion of conceptual issues I provide empirical examples from my research in to a new programme to train British police recruits. The central aim of this research is to examine the influence of the training on their identities as police officers. Whist it is found that some aspects are positive, the data suggest unintended consequences. Concepts from the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu are employed to show how aspects of the programme operate to reproduce facets of police culture.

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Learning the 'wrong' things

Most research and theorising around work and learning, whether from an 'acquisition' or 'participation' (Sfard 1998) perspective, is premised on the ideal that the learning is a positive process whereby actors learn, or try to learn, socially useful (the 'right') things. For, example, individuals acquire the knowledge and skills to become competent teachers or nurses, or collectively they participate in a community of practice to become a midwife, meat cutter or tailor (Lave and Wenger 1991). However, as educators and researchers it might sometimes be relevant to focus on situations and processes where people learn the 'wrong' things. This is based on the premise that whether that learning occurs in a formal or informal environment, significant effort and resources are usually deployed to ensure that people learn the 'right' things. Thus, if some people learn some 'wrong' things, that learning must be powerful.

Police training and culture

My interest in people learning the 'wrong' things stems from my doctoral research into police recruit training. It can be argued that in Britain, training is often viewed as a panacea to right the perceived wrongs of policing and particularly in relation to concerns around institutional racism and diversity (HMIC 2002a, Macpherson 1999). It can also be argued that in some ways this is misguided, as policing is an inherently practical activity whereby officers almost certainly learn their craft in situated operational environments. However, the idea that professional attitudes and behaviour can be taught within the four walls of a classroom still prevails.

The latest example of this thinking can be discerned in a new programme to train police recruits. In 2005, following a damming Inspection Report (HMIC 2002b) into the previous system of recruit training, a radically new (Peace 2006) Initial Police Learning and Development Programme (IPLDP) was launched. The primary goal of the IPLDP is to implement 'modernised' recruit training and more specifically the programme has been designed to address long standing concerns around *professionalising* the service and changing its *culture.*

In common with general sociological and anthropological definitions of culture, the police culture refers to what Reiner (2000: 87) calls the, 'values, norms, perspectives and craft rules that inform police conduct'. Although other occupational groups clearly have their own cultures, police officers are often viewed distinctively due to their extensive discretionary powers and their isolation from the public (Sato 2003). Indeed, it has been argued that the culture emerged as a type of coping mechanism (Brown 1988) to insulate its members from the often hostile and hazardous features of policing. Whilst aspects of the culture can therefore be seen as positive, the concept is more typically invoked to condemn a broad range of perceived practices including: racism, sexism, cynicism, authoritarian conservatism and a 'them and us' division of the social world (Reiner 2000).

Research has shown that the traditional police academy is a site where the new recruits become socialised into the police service and start to assimilate some of the undesirable aspects of its culture (Fielding 1988). However, one of the most radical features of the IPLDP is that for the first time many recruits now undergo a significant part of their training at local universities, where they gain recognised professional qualifications. It can be seen how, in theory, this is laudable attempt to professionalise the service and at the same time disrupt the police cultural socialisation process.

Study and methodology

The case study was conducted in a provincial police force in the North of England which sends its new recruits to a local university to undertake a degree in police studies, part time, over the two years of their training period. Although it may be difficult for us all to agree what are the 'wrong' things are for the student officers to learn, in this case it is a relatively easy task to identify the *right* things. The curriculum is broadly based, and contains subjects underpinned by the disciplines of sociology, criminology, education and law. This academic content was mapped against the 22 National Occupational Standards for the police service to ensure that the learning is relevant to the workplace. Although White (2006) has convincingly argued that these competence frameworks are based on impoverished and discredited technical rationality models, this will not be critique of this paper. The previous system of training recruits within the confines of a police academy

was justifiably criticised for its insularity and lack of community involvement (HMIC 2002b).Thus on a broader level it is expected that sending the officers to a university campus will afford ample opportunities for community engagement (Home Office 2005) and the breaking down of police and public barriers.

The methodological strategy comprised qualitative data collection and analysis and is grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly interpretivist. An interpretive approach not only sees people as the primary sources of data but seeks their experiences or what Blaikie (2000) calls the 'insider' view, rather than imposing an 'outsider' view. The research design was longitudinal and 26 police recruit participants were interviewed on three occasions.

Findings and theoretical framework

Mason (2004) reminds us that qualitative research should involve active reflexivity, based on the belief that the researcher cannot be entirely neutral, objective or detached from the research process. However, when I started this project I believe I had a genuine open mind about how the officers would interpret the university experience. Indeed, if pushed, my gut feeling was that the university would have a broadly positive impact on the officers' development. On reflection, this was almost certainly shaped by my own experiences, both as a police officer and mature student. Having joined the police with few educational qualifications, I went on to study for a degree in politics and sociology. For me, this experience was literally transformational and it opened my mind to new ways of looking at the world.

However as the research got underway it became immediately clear that far from being positive, the majority of participants were reporting very negative experiences. Moreover, as the below comments from the participants indicate, the strength of the criticisms was both consistent and alarming:

> It was a nightmare (P14, interview 2/3/06)

> I nearly threw in the towel. It was a horrible experience. I never want to go through again (P24, interview 4/4/06)

The way they delivered the lessons I thought was shocking to be honest (P18 interview 29/3/06)

I felt like I was bullied by one of the module leaders. I don't know whether you want me to go into that? (P24, interview 4/4/06)

I think the university is trying to bring in community involvement, but by the way they are doing it they're building up barriers (P11, interview 22/2/06).

Whilst all the quotes are worrying the last one seemed to me to be an early and powerful indication of how aspects of the programme appeared to be having the reverse effect of what was planned. It will be remembered one of the stated aims the new training was to encourage community engagement and the breaking down of police and public barriers. However, the data clearly show that this is not taking place and to some extent this is due to where the officers are physically located. The recently formed University Police Studies Department is housed in what can not too inaccurately be described as a large Portakabin (temporary) type building, located on the very periphery of the campus. Whilst there may be perfectly sound administrative reasons for this, the location and structure became symbolically significant.

We were in a Portakabin which was completely as far away from the main buildings as possible and it was like we'd been segregated. It was like your different; we're trying to interact you with the public as if you are students, but we're gonna keep you separate. That was sort of what it felt like, we were just shoved to one side (P24, interview 4/4/06).

Many commentators have stressed social *isolation* and defensive *solidarity* as amongst the defining features of police culture (Waddington 1999). To some extent the occupation itself operates to separate officers from society (e.g. shift work, erratic hours, possession of coercive authority). However, a key factor is also the hostility that officers often face that serves to separate police from 'nonpolice' (Reiner 2000). This separation has been variously referred to as a: 'them and us' (Reiner 2000), 'Us/Them' (Waddington 1999) or 'we verses they' (Westley 1970) outlook. Whilst some social isolation is inevitable and

solidarity is not necessarily a bad thing, it can be seen how such an outlook can lead to a number of negative consequences. First, the idea of them and us goes against the central tenet of policing in Britain: that officers are part of the communities they police. Second, once officers start to think in terms of 'them' it becomes a slippery slope to further subdivide the 'them' (as well as 'us') into other social and cultural groups.

> There is a them and us and definitely at the university it's pressed home (P7, Interview 5/4/07).

As my data became more rich and consistent I turned to key concepts from the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Bourdieu 1977) to help me frame and analyse it.

Pierre Bourdieu and cultural reproduction

Although his work has been used extensively within educational research it is often overlooked that Bourdieu is primarily a theorist of class and cultural *reproduction* (Jenkins 1992, Shilling 2004) and his model of social relations has its roots in Marxist theories of class and conflict. One of Bourdieu's central intellectual projects was to explain class reproduction; of how one generation ensures that it ensures that it reproduces itself and passes on its privileges to the next. However, Bourdieu argued against the traditional Marxist view that society can only be analysed in terms of classes and ideology and much of his work concerns the independent role of cultural and educational factors. In order to understand the applicability of Bourdieu's work to my research it is necessary to get to grips with his three foundational concepts of *field, capital* and *habitus*.

According to Bourdieu, society is comprised of an ensemble of relatively autonomous fields. A field is a social arena in which people manoeuvre and struggle over power and resources and in the course of that struggle modify the structure of the field itself. Moi (1991:1021) quotes Bourdieu as defining a field in this way: 'a space in which a game takes place, a field of objective relations between individuals or institutions who are competing for the same stake'. That stake is the accumulation of capital as a means of ensuring the reproduction of the individual or institutions class.

However, Bourdieu did not intend capital to be understood in purely Marxist terms and one of his key conceptual innovations was the classification of three different types of capital: economic, cultural and social. The concept of economic capital is readily understood and comprises forms of material wealth. Cultural capital, however, is a concept unique to Bourdieu's theoretical framework and includes forms of knowledge, taste and education. Whereas cultural capital is based around an individuals stock of cultural resources, social capital is based more on their relationships and networks of support. For Bourdieu then, positions in a field are dependent on the kinds and strengths of capital possessed. As Field (2003:20) outlines, 'Bourdieu compared the social field to a casino: [where] we gamble not only with the black chips that represent our economic capital, but also with the blue chips of our cultural capital and the red chips of our social capital.

The final concept to consider is habitus which represents Bourdieu's ambitious attempt to transcend the traditional division in social theory between agency and structure. It is used to explain some features of social life that he suggests cannot be explained simply by understanding the combined actions of individuals but rather are influenced by history, tradition, customs and principles that people do no make explicit. Habitus is developed by imitation as people unconsciously incorporate behaviours into their lives, imitating other actors within a field through a process of interative learning (Lane 2000). However, the habitus leads to a wide repertoire of possible actions, simultaneously enabling individuals to draw on both transformative and constraining courses of action (Reay 2004). As Bourdieu (1990:87) explains, 'habitus is a kind a transforming machine that leads us to 'reproduce' the social conditions of our own production, but in a relatively unpredictable way, in such a way that one cannot move simply and mechanically from the knowledge of conditions of production to knowledge of the products'.

For Bourdieu, it is the interaction of habitus, capital and the field that generate the 'logic of practice' and he has explained this interaction in terms of an equation: (Habitus X Capital) + Field=Practice (Bourdieu 1984:101). This can be understood in terms of structure and agency, with the capital and field forming the structure within the relationship and the individual practice, or agency, being 'regulated' by the habitus.

In an important discussion of the uses of habitus in educational research Reay (2004) critiques the contemporary fashion of overlaying research analyses with Bourdieu's concepts, rather than making the concepts work in the context of the data and the research settings. Whilst there are always myriad theoretical perspectives which can be utilised in any research, in this case the emergent data and setting demanded a Bourdiesaian framing and the deployment of his 'thinking tools'.

Although it may tempting to start with his arguably better known concept of habitus, for Bourdieu, the *field* should be the primary area of study (Grenfell and James 2004) as it is the relationships within the field that are important, rather than the individual actors. Although for analytical purposes the field is considered to be 'bounded' it is not a static, geographical or spatial entity but can better be thought of as a series of structures, institutions and activities all of which relate to the people acting within the field. For present purposes the institution of and activities surrounding the university training are of central structural interest in this field. As noted above, the field is often theorised as a site of *conflict* as actors within the field struggle and manoeuvre over power and resources. An overriding theme in the data is a sense conflict between the police officers and academics to the extent that the latter are often characterised as being 'anti-police'. As one participant explained

> To be honest the majority of lecturers didn't seem to like police officers. Most of them were ex probation staff and they seemed to have issues with police and look down at us. They are really not pro-police which I think is a bit awkward when it's a policing course (P15, interview 4/12/2006).

If some of the academics are indeed 'anti-police' then this could simply be put down to their previous professional experiences and prejudices, which form part of their own habitus, as the above participant suggests. However, it will be remembered that in Bourdieu's framework, the medium of all relations within the field is *capital*. All capital-whether economic, social or cultural-is *symbolic* and the prevailing conditions of it shape social practice (Grenfell and James 2004). Whist economic and social capital may not be of central relevance in this study, cultural capital, or the lack of it, has huge significance. Although many graduates join the police service, it remains the case that unlike most

professions there is no minimum educational requirement. Prior to the new training this hardly mattered because the traditional curriculum was focussed predominantly on police legislation and procedures. Whilst such a curriculum has its obvious limitations, it was nevertheless a great 'leveller' as an officer's previous background provided little advantage. However, the fact that recruits now find themselves on a university campus, where they are required to perform and compete on a wider academic level means that background is important:

> I can't understand why you can join the police with no qualifications and yet you're expected to do a policing Degree; it's just beyond me that nobody's made that connection. I felt out of my depth (P24, interview 4/4/06).

The above quote highlights how this is also an unusual situation for the university. On the majority of degree courses the typical student will have undergone a prior process of academic progression. Of course, teaching students without the usual entry requirements would prove challenging for even the most able tutors. However, many of the participants believed that they were not treated like 'proper students'.

> I didn't think that they treated us like students either; more like, not second class citizens, that's a bit strong; as if they didn't want to be there and they were under duress to be there and actually teach us. You just constantly got the impression that they thought: oh we are doing this cos we have to, they're all thick and they don't understand us (P8, interview 3/10/06).

Related to this, participants often reported that in seminars and lectures their own views were often dismissed by the tutors as not being relevant or just wrong. As just one participant commented:

> They'd ask an opinion and people have obviously all got different opinions, but when people said things that they didn't agree with it was just, well no that's not right. But I thought that's the whole point of debating isn't it? You just felt that, a lot

of the time, you just ended up thinking I'll be quiet because it's not getting me anywhere and it's not been listed to (P, 21interview 3/4/2006).

Often it was not just the recruits' opinions that were said to be dismissed, but their own *practical* experiences of policing situations which did not seem to fit with the tutors' academic and theoretical take on police work. Bourdieu has argued that educational institutions often practice a form of *symbolic violence* on students and this concept is also central to understanding how inequalities or culture can be reproduced (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). By symbolic violence, Bourdieu meant a soft sort of violence which is exercised upon an individual with his or her complicity. It is an act of violence because it leads to the constraint and subordination of individuals, but it is symbolic in the sense that it is its achieved indirectly and without physical force or coercion. Symbolic violence is practiced in numerous ways. Bourdieu argued, for example, that it is performed by educators who impose meanings as 'legitimate by concealing power relations which are the basis of its force' and at the same time communicating a logic of disinterest (Ibid, p4). However, it is also a form of symbolic violence to devalue or minimise professional experience and subordinate it to theoretical perspectives. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is also related to his concept of habitus as it is through the habitus that the effects of the violence become internalized as take- for-granted ways of thinking and behaving. 'The more that they employ such thoughts and actions and find them to 'work' in particular circumstances social contexts the more they become a durable and 'habitualised' part of their consciousness' (Connolly and Healy 2004:16).

 The below quote is an extremely worrying example of just one of the officers experiences of writing an assignment, where she was faced with a difficult professional dilemma.

In the assignments I am not necessarily putting down my views. Rather it's what they want to hear. Unfortunately it does not come from the heart because you are putting what they want you to put not how you actually feel yourself. Which is a shame really. In a way it feels like lying really. You are being mistrustful because you are literally putting what they want to hear and it might not necessarily be what you are

feeling or I am not saying I have blatantly lied but you kind of *bend things* to fit in an assignment.

For those not familiar with police jargon, the reference above to 'bend things' means to make things fit. It has often been argued that the police culture sometimes requires officers to make evidence against suspects stronger than it is. This has been said to occur in statements, evidence files or police officers notebooks. Within the police culture this is not necessarily seen as lying (although it clearly is) but is referred to as 'bending' the evidence. Whilst this is a version of what is sometimes called noble cause corruption the practice is both highly unprofessional as well as illegal and cannot be condoned in any circumstances. Whilst it must be made perfectly clear that this student officer is not doing anything illegal it is at least possible to see how when she realises that this 'works' in an academic essay the practice could become habitualised to 'bend' things in other circumstances.

Conclusion and discussion

Space precludes discussion of many other examples in the data which point to officers learning the 'wrong' things and which suggest that negative aspects of police culture are being reproduced. Put bluntly, this is the exact opposite of what was envisaged and hoped for in the new training programme. However, this study had focused on aspects of learning taking place in one university and at this stage no wider generalisations are claimed. Also, the data does point to some intended and more positive outcomes. For example, it is clear that the officers are gaining a far broader educational experience than they would at a traditional police academy.

The study has practical, conceptual and methodological implications. The practical implications for the police service are fairly obvious but the study also shows how, from an educational perspective, a laudable and well intentioned initiative can have unforeseen and unintended consequences.

The conceptual issues require further development. For example is the concept of the 'wrong things' useful for categorising and analysing what seems to be taking place here? When raising the concept of the wrong things two wider issues are likely to surface; the

first is broadly political and the second is fundamentally methodological. First, who decides what the wrong things are the and how are the decided? Whilst these questions are perhaps not intractable they certainly take us in to the realms of politics, and ethics and clearly depend on ones theoretical and ideological standpoint.

As well as trying to decide normative questions about what are the wrong things there is also the methodological problem of trying to research them. After all, it is often difficult enough trying to research how people learn the right things and arguably most research designs are inclined towards this aim. In this case, the original aim of my research was not to examine if the officers were learning the 'wrong' things or for that matter the rights but more broadly to examine the influence of the new training on their identities as police officers. However, as is often the case with qualitative research, the findings were unexpected and for some will be unwelcome. In trying to uncover the learning of the 'wrong' things the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu offers a useful methodological and analytical approach. His concepts of field, capital and habitus draw our attention to both the individual and structural aspects of learning. In particular, his concept of habitus should make us focus not just on explicit teaching, but also on other wider pedagogical practices in educational institutions and how these often 'wrong' things may become internalised by the learners.

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