Primary source research with the PSNI in Northern Ireland

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A researcher’s reflexive account.

Overview

This research has been 3 and a half years in planning and coming to fruition. It started in late 2013 with a desire to, at least in part, update and hopefully compliment works such as those of Brewer and Magee (1991) and Mapstone (1994) and contribute to a contemporary analysis of policing in Northern Ireland’s divided society. I was particularly curious to see how the threat of terrorism was articulated by PSNI officers in the post Good Friday/Belfast agreement era.

From my own anecdotal experience as a long-service police officer I fully expected the accounts I might receive from front-line officers of these ranks to be divergent and often diametrically opposed to the accounts from more institutional sources, who would have a different agenda, beyond that of work and every day survival.

Within this context, therefore, I particularly sought to investigate the perspectives of front-line officers (Constable, Sergeant and Inspector ranks) whose thoughts and feelings are rarely captured, not least for operational reasons, in contrast to the frequent pronouncements by senior officers.

The original working title of this research was to be aligned with perspectives on terrorism from police officers who might give a first-hand narrative that is primary source material, of the narrative of terrorism as they saw it. My aim was to explore the risk, or perceived risk of terrorism in contemporary Northern Ireland behind the picture provided through speeches and articles by high ranking police officers, Government, and Media in the content and context of public policies and media articles.

I expected that my research would be a valuable illustration of, in a phrase I borrowed from British Military sources (Books, Articles etc.) “Ground Truth”. More specifically an illustration of the roles and responsibilities the police officers had in representing and embodying security for the people of Northern Ireland and the narratives that shaped their everyday working experience. I also hoped that their perspectives might offer lessons in how to, and how not to, organisationally discuss the complex securitisation of Northern Ireland.

In this sense I am using this word “securitisation” in the definition given by Bright (2012:2) in that; “‘securitisation’, a by now familiar concept which describes both the discursive construction of exceptional threats, and how this construction creates a type of politics which permits actors to break rules or restraints which normally apply. In this case, the threat of terrorism which these individuals are deemed to embody overrides certain rights such as liberty, or the right to a fair trial” (Bright, J. 2012:2).

Securitisation theory, after the Copenhagen school of thought “postulates that threat images can be modelled as the result of discursive processes that take place between the so-called ‘securitizing actor’ and the relevant audience(s)” (Balzacq T., Léonard S. (2013: abstract))
This securitised world is at least in part a potential outcome of what Lister (2018) describes as the politics of N.I and terrorism in general in the U.K “being understood in terms of how exceptionalism influences this world. Ideas and debates around exceptionalism demarcate a distinction between “normal” politics and security politics”

My venture into the “security politics “world through examining the PSNI functionality at the front line (arguably the most sensitive area) where policy and tactics meet the “Ground Truth” of street interactions, may have led me into this ideology of “exceptionalism” and the barriers which arise from it both within Individuals and Organisations

This is important and relevant to my study as this “construction of threats” and the associated policies and politics are, in the public dialogue at least, constructed through the pronouncements, policies, and speeches of leaders of both the Counter-Terrorist forces, in this case the PSNI, and the terrorists in Northern Ireland themselves.

What constitutes “Terrorism” seems from this perspective, the outside perspective of the General Public, Media Politicians and senior officers, is also arguably constructed in the same way. Therefore, the discursive process is itself limited to and controlled by senior actors within these institutions and not the many people operating below this level.

To date, I have been achieved access over 4 years to some of the people who are operating in the N.I. securitisation space below this senior level. I am perhaps unlikely to replicate the longitude of Brewers (1991) and Mapstones (1994) studies, but I have been able to at least part the ethnographic waters of Northern Irelands policing service through pilot qualitative research on the Belfast Harbour Police in 2015 and a more thorough examination of the PSNI itself in 2017.

**Progress**

I had expected my credentials as a long service police officer in the U.K. mainland Metropolitan, Cleveland and Derbyshire forces would facilitate my access into the “PSNI Culture” and help me locate the personal and individual narratives of these not so senior figures within their broader institutional culture. I believed therefore I would be more credible (to the Organisation and individual officers) as someone who understood and had lived policing narratives over a “solely” academic researcher.

I also anticipated that my personal experience of the policing culture and mainland narratives would also aid my transition into the PSNI world and would itself prove and provide legitimacy for my research interests. However, I had not considered the perceived risk by both the Organisation and certain individuals within the Organisation, of allowing, effectively an “Outsider” into the securitised PSNI world (see E.g. Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman 1988)

I did however, through persistence, eventually build up several contacts amongst senior PSNI officers which allowed me to craft an approach to sell the benefits of my research to the PSNI, on a subject (procedural justice) the PSNI was actively exploring, which might more adequately reflect the thoughts of and therefore appeal to command level officers.

After several months in 2016 of email exchanges and telephone conversations, and the filling in of the new research application form which has recently been introduced to field and deal with researchers such as myself, I was eventually granted access, on paper, in October 2016.

**Access**

To gain access to serving officers, I have had to refine research questions initially aligned to issues of modern terrorism and the risk and threat faced by police officers to, at least on the surface, questions of procedural justice. At the same time however, I remained determined to use access to PSNI officers as a chance, should it arise, to discuss the tenets and meanings of my original question. The Procedural Justice approach or angle arose through information from an insider staff member of the PSNI who, through another University contact was able to align me to current “hot button” topics within the PSNI senior management levels. This
was done through an “off the record” chat with the member of staff within one of the PSNI’s canteens. The fact that it was en vogue within the PSNI would have been unknown to me as an “outsider” and indeed, it was one senior officer’s research project.

Following a chat with that senior officer about my interests and how I may be able to help via semi structured interviews I was put in touch with another yet another lower ranking PSNI officer who could take me through the formal paperwork (recently introduced) required to pursue permission for research with the PSNI.

The “ethics” procedure, which had only been introduced, and was brand new to the PSNI, during my access enquiries, required me to record on a newly designed form:

The aims and Intentions of my research

Who would be conducting the research?

And, amongst other personal details including who I was working for, who was supervising me and several other personal contact details, of what use would my research be to the PSNI?

No other author (e.g. Gethins (2011), Murphy (2013) or Topping (2007)) had made any mention of an ethical procedure and accordingly this came as a surprise to me. It also led me to believe that access to serving PSNI officers as I had requested would be a long overly formal and by no means certain way of gaining access.

Finally during this ethical submission (by email) and through a series of phone calls and emails about my aims and intentions, the reasons behind my research, my own background and status as a serving police officer, and from being passed through various officers over a period of several months I was assured, much to my surprise (and relief- as this was an energy sapping process) that the paperwork was “just a formality”

I then around Oct 2016 finally received full permission and the names of a central point of contact- a sergeant at Musgrave street police station in Belfast, who would help organise my visits within the district and get the required access.

At all times, including the initial (unrecorded) meeting with my “Gatekeeper” ( as I then viewed him following the experiences of Brewer (1991), Gethins (2011), Mapstone (1994) and Murphy (2013) each of whom encountered close monitoring of their activities by one or more individuals within the RUC and PSNI) I sought to obtain an authentic “police voice” of Constables and Sergeants from my interviewees, which as a serving officer, I have found to be absent from a great deal of policing research.

Judging or providing a metric of the “Authenticity” of that voice is however difficult and inevitably involves the compromise between my own set narratives or “World” and the ability to “hear” and pick out the actual voice of the individual or Organisation (Chenail, R. J. (2011))

Therefore, in an Ontological sense, these questions of risk, narrative and original voice required me to compromise my approach such that my positioning became less of a “threat” to the securitised PSNI “World” and its officers- hence my adoption of the researcher guise in looking, ostensibly at least, at the problems of “Procedural Justice”. My own policing reality essentially became a part of the study which in turn lead naturally into an interpretivist approach to the study. It was important therefore to recognise my subjective level of engagement with the “real” world of the officers with whom I spoke.

In turn the study became increasingly ethnographic in nature. It became a study of the culture and attitudes of individuals in the PSNI society and sub-culture. Within that ethnographic approach I had also to recognise my own biases and subjectivity as far as possible by approaching the study through a more reflexive lens.

The difficulties of obtaining and defining this policing “voice” outside of my own experiences are well documented in academic research (See e.g. Brewer (1994)) and similarly the problems of obtaining primary source material relating to terrorism outside of the intelligence community for any academic research (Sage-man (2014)).
Policing is often seen and described by “outsider” academics as a closed community (Topping (2008), Waddington (1999)) whose narratives and customs are generally shared only amongst police officers themselves, although newer voices such as those of I believed, at least initially, as an “Insider” shaped by 30 years of exposure to this culture, that I may be able to not only access the views and experiences of officers, but also illuminate and understand my own experiences in the light of theirs.

Identity

In giving the PSNI officers a “voice” was I also giving myself a voice, albeit through the medium of academia? From the Insider perspective should my voice not have equal validity and worth alongside that of the interviewees? Logically I would suggest that it should. I therefore incorporate the value of my own “insider” voice “into the interviews. Though of course the metric for this voice, which in turn implies identity will vary depending on whether it is viewed from the individual, organisational cultural or community perspectives (See e.g. Garcia 2005)

However, within the interviews, during the process itself, I have constantly and consciously tried to focus on an outsiders’ perspective, for example through asking probing questions linked directly to the research aims, to which I knew the answer, or already at least had some part understanding of the answer, but the answer to which an outsider wouldn’t necessarily know.

I did this partly to clarify any issues raised to an educated lay reader, but I did this also to test and explore my own prejudices as an Insider too (See e.g. O’Reilly and Kiyimba (2015)). For example, if an interviewee provided an answer to a question I had a presumed answer to (from my own interpretation of the police “World”), and the interviewee’s answer was at odds with my own expected response, the surprise would often cause me to more closely explore the response than I might have otherwise.

This emic/etic dilemma was tested in the pilot interviews with the Belfast Harbour police. In specifics, would my own internal and external worldview have validity in what was potentially another police culture? As Triandis and Marin (1983) state in relation to the Psychology of the emic/etic crossover “A basic assumption of cross-cultural psychology, that instruments made in one culture and applied to another culture would not be as useful as instruments made in each of the cultures in which they are to be used” (Abstract to research paper 1983:1)

My “Instruments “in this regard were the format and language of my questions arising as they did from, at least in part, my own thoughts, feelings and experiences as a (then) serving police officer. Accordingly trying to find some kind of balance in my identity as both academic researcher and serving police officer and adopting neither a pseudoetic nor psuedoemic approach was very difficult. This is one of the reasons I have chosen the reflexive account of this “iterative process (which) in its basic form means that researchers make visible their impact on the research process and the impact of the research process on them” (O’Reilly and Kiyimba 2015; 174)

Trying to find this “outsider” or etic voice was difficult because of the ongoing internal conflict between my roles as both a serving police officer and a researcher into police affairs. There are points within the interviews where my perspective is almost entirely that of the insider and this is reflected in both my commentary and questions (see for example Sgt.” Donna” interview 2017)

There are other parts of the recording within which I feel the need to explain that I am playing “Devils” Advocate” and I know this is by way of apology to the interviewee, because I distinctly remember feeling uncomfortable at asking the question. In this respect, given that I was wearing a police badge (My own) and occasionally a flak jacket during the PSNI interview process, I consciously felt the role of researcher being subsumed by the stronger tribal identity of “police”. At such points my impartiality is at least questionable, and I believe that I display an implicit if not explicit bias towards the officer’s “world” and worldview (See e.g. “Clare” (2017) PSNI interview transcript).

However, on other occasions I remain outside the world of the interviewee, despite our sharing of a mutual police officer identity. This naturally was easier when I felt lesser kinship with the views and attitudes of the
individual. This, I suggest, simply by way of it being what we are as human beings, would be implicit bias on the part of any researcher honestly admitted in any circumstances or situation.

Creswell and Miller (2000) have suggested that the validity of procedures chosen by researchers is “governed by two perspectives: the lens researchers use to validate their studies and researchers’ paradigm assumptions (Creswell and Miller 2000:1). The research validity, at least in part, according to Creswell and Miller, relies in part on “the participants realities of the social phenomena” (Creswell and Miller 2000:1)

Or, as Chenail (2011:255) puts it “Instrumentation rigor and bias management are major challenges for qualitative researchers employing interviewing as a data generation method in their studies”.

Gaps in my understanding and exploration of the police narrative in N.I also arise, at least in part, through the challenges of research in the province itself away from and outside of the PSNI as an organisation. (Brewer (1993), Topping (2015), Weitzer (1995)). It is arguable that the behaviour and attitude of previous researchers has played some part in this.

However, in apparent contrast to the accounts of other researchers such as Brewer and Magee (1991), Murphy (2013) Mulcahy (2006) and Topping (2007), I received little if any overt “gatekeeping” in terms of control with the PSNI.

Once I was accepted to do the research and from the moment, I was on the ground at Musgrave I was given complete freedom of movement around different stations within Belfast. I was provided with help, transport and advice. The only real constraints were operational ones as to the availability of interviewees who were all on duty at the times of the various interviews.

I believe, without substantive evidence, and I am relying on subjective experience and impressions, that my perceived identity with PSNI officers lay in my identity as a “fellow” police officer, therefore making me emic in methodological approach.

This perception by PSNI officers, rather than, or possibly in addition to, any purely personal qualities I may have, did I believe aid my research and access, both in the way officers spoke to me, and the places I could go. Indeed, on occasion I emphasised my police identity through actions, words and behaviour deliberately to use this kinship to access information.

At other times my unconscious and learnt behaviours from long service as a police officer became overt in any case. One officer who came to pick me up from my hotel stated explicitly that he recognised me as an off-duty police officer simply from my body language and behaviour whilst I was stood in the street (Author-field research 2016). Such unconscious leakage during recorded interviews and probably even more so during “off the record” chats (e.g. PC speaking of frustration of junior officers whose expectations were not being met during a lift journey 6/2/17), which were less formal and more relaxed, I would have struggled to prevent anyway.

Of course, I was not privy to any covert gatekeeping but within my own experience and evidence as a long service officer (who had worked in sensitive policing areas both geographically and in terms of subject) I could not detect any attempts to keep me away from areas or individuals.

Topping (2007) writes that

“As indicated by Mulcahy (2000:72), ‘throughout the conflict the RUC has sought to control the information available to researcher…’. Thus, regarding police suspicion towards ‘outsiders’ generally (Brewer, 1990; McLoughlin and Miller, 2006), the highly politicised nature of the police role in Northern Ireland has further amplified this problem – to the extent that police assume that hidden agendas must ‘lurk beneath facades of academic objectivity’ (Mulcahy, 2000:72). In this regard, while much has been written in relation to policing in the country, little empirical research undertaken with either the police organisation or the policing institutions (Bayley, 2007)” (Topping 2007:120)
From this statement by Topping, even given the time elapsed since the statement, I remain more convinced that my identity was mostly but not wholly, that of an Insider with an “emic” approach.

My research indicates or certainly suggests that some attitudes (such as “it’ll always be this way” when referring to policing problems in areas such as West Belfast) remain similar, if not the same as those other researchers have indicated, which to a large extent reflect my own personal feelings (if not necessarily thoughts) and which in previous research (e.g. Brewer and Magee (1991)) were held by previous RUC officers.

The policing problems at PC (or “Con” in local Belfast vernacular) and Sergeant Level as well as the accompanying narratives “Post 1998” also remain, albeit perhaps (as I have no specific data in this regard, only feelings) on a quantitively lesser scale. Indeed, some of the interviewees and a further number of serving officers within the PSNI were originally RUC officers (and explicitly identify with this RUC identity within the narratives in the interviews (see e.g. transcript “John” 30.01.17)). Since many even as “Senior Pc’s” are guides, mentors and supervisors to those whose service is only within the PSNI (at least in N.I.) it would be reasonable to suggest that they contribute to the existence of RUC-Type narratives which, my research suggests, still exists within the PSNI front-line community.

There is modern research to suggest that the insider perspective from “Embedding” even if the researcher does not originally share the values of the police culture they are operating within, is of great value in aiding research into policing (See for example Hartman R.K et al (2018) where examining Nordic policing culture.). It could be considered, and I certainly felt, that this “Insider” identity gave me this embedding.

Whatever my identity and access during the research it seemed to me that access to the data inherent in these narratives would give much needed insight and aids to understanding the ways in which U.K society is policed, not from the perspective of senior police officers, but from the perspective of the individual officers whom the public encounter and deal with on a day to day basis.

Gethins (2011) describes it during a study of Catholic officers in the modern PSNI as “a wealth of data that they [police officers] accumulate in daily interaction with the public which might profitably be sought more widely by other groups serving society” (Gethins 2011:215). Similarly, in a recent assessment, Murphy (2013:185) observes that much work on policing in N.I “omits the crucial internal dimension.”

It was a shock therefore when my first tentative approaches via email to the PSNI from my police PNN email account were not too politely rejected in 2013 in the guise of the PSNI being “too busy” (Personal email correspondence with SGT staff officer to PSNI ACC Oct 2013).

Over the months, it transpired that I had not only underestimated the number of enquiries PSNI receive along such lines but also that I had neglected to give any account of what might be “in” the research for the PSNI as an institution in terms of compromise (security, integrity, reputation) and the potential rewards in terms of the risk of research.

Risk

All police officers are used to managing risk at the personal and Organisational levels (see for example (Ratcliffe 2016)) and there is an expectation that at the individual and Organisational level that this is done proportionately to the level of that honestly held perception and the evidence upon which the perception (again either personal to the individual officer or further on up the chain in terms of Organisational policy and tactics e.g. in the application of appropriate levels of force to manage the risk).

However, in a securitised society at the level of N.I. since the Troubles and thereafter, the threat to both Organisation and Individual in existential terms, seems to be perceived at a higher level within the PSNI than in mainland policing bodies and in the perceptions of communities there (See e.g. Ellison, Pino and Shirlowl (2012)) This can be associated with increased paranoia of “Outsiders” and may magnify the real threat they embody to both parties, to unrealistic levels. (Knox (2001))

There is therefore a “Risk Irony” in that we strive to control what we don’t know or understand (Beck, 2006:335). Ignorance about me as a person and the narratives I may or may not carry are presumably
conflated by “Gatekeeping” officers into a variety of agendas which may present a “danger” to individuals or the Organisation as a whole. The irony lies in that neither party, neither me, the police officer/researcher, or the PSNI knows or understands exactly what the risk may or may not be, or whether the danger is existential or simply one of credibility or publicity.

In terms of my research aims therefore this irony not only makes access to the PSNI as an Organisation more complex, in the sense of explaining the research impact if released into a potentially “outsider” audience but may also provoke mixed feelings about me as a Researcher. Essentially- can I be trusted to keep and reliably record the narratives I might uncover?

**Summary**

In this paper I have tried to introduce the reader to some of the issue’s researchers in the field of Terrorism and Security may face. Not only in terms of their own identity as a “researcher”, the concepts of which in the police environment has been discussed by many of the authors mentioned already, but of researcher identity in securitised spaces. More specifically, in the securitised spaces of Northern Ireland and the risk factors at play historically there and, as my research suggests, still at play today.

Information from primary sources, as opposed to theory and conjecture, in the terrorist field, which of course includes Northern Ireland, is still sparse (Schuurman (2019)) and the risks to the researcher, both perceived and actual, still affect the access to primary sources, the methodology employed, and the complex ethical issues involved.

The identity of the researcher in terms of self-identification and perceived identity by others is, I suggest, even more complex in this field than more “straightforward” policing research today.

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