

Them and us: emerging findings from a case study of police recruits trained in partnership with a local university

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Abstract

A new partnership initiative to train police recruits at a local university is shown to be producing unintended consequences. The concept of 'hidden curriculum' is employed to examine how aspects of the new programme operate to undermine professional identity and reproduce facets of 'police culture'.

Scenario

Imagine this scenario. You are told about a new partnership initiative to send police recruits to a local university to undertake a Foundation Degree as part of their initial training. The broad aims are to promote professionalism, address longstanding concerns around police culture and develop community oriented police officers.

However, through your academic contacts you hear troubling stories. It seems that some of the participants don't want to be there and they would rather be getting on with their 'proper jobs'. Some have entrenched points of view. There has been stereotyping, with people being put into 'boxes'. More seriously, there have been suggestions of bullying and even a whiff of racism.

You have read some of the sociological literature on police culture. You are aware of the Scarman (1981) and Macpherson (1999) reports and have watched the television documentary *The Secret Policeman*³. You might be forgiven for thinking that some of the officers have not behaved very well. No wonder police training needs changing!

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² Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults.

³ BBC Panorama (October 2003) *The Secret Policeman*.

People were coming away from some lectures saying, he or she, they are so anti police, anti us, whatever we say is wrong. Their point of view is the only one that matters (P25, interview 19/4/06).

The stuff the university was trying to teach us to me was trying to think of people in boxes (P11, interview 22/2/06).

The way they delivered the lessons I thought was shocking to be honest. One of the lecturers, quite a few of us mentioned, that she seemed to be a little bit racist in some of the stuff she said (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).

Introduction

This paper reports on emerging findings from a doctoral research project examining a new programme to train police recruits. The empirical data are drawn from interviews with 26 officers at key points of their two year training period. A central aim of the research is to examine the influence of the new training on their emerging identities as police officers. Whilst it is found that some aspects are positive, the emerging data suggests unintended consequences. The study employs the concept of 'hidden curriculum' to examine how aspects of the programme operate to undermine professional identity and reproduce facets of 'police culture'.

The hidden curriculum

The hidden curriculum refers to the way in which cultural values and attitudes are transmitted through the structure of teaching and the organisation of educational institutions. This is in contrast to the formal curriculum which is subject based. The concept originated among scholars examining the role of schools in reproducing social class across generations (Jackson 1968, Apple 1979). In the field of vocational education the most extensive body of research has focussed on the training of doctors, where it has been shown that a powerful hidden curriculum operates at medical school (Hafferty and Franks 1994, Hafferty 1998). Within the sociology of policing the concept of 'socialisation' (Fielding 1988) is more typically deployed to refer to the process by which the new recruits learn the occupational culture. However, limited research has uncovered an 'unintentional' (Harris 1973) or 'hidden' curriculum (Prokos and Padavic 2002) at the training school. Perhaps more surprisingly there have been few attempts to identify a

hidden curriculum in British higher education and the author is not aware of any research within the context of vocational based Foundation Degrees. This study offers tentative empirical support that a type of hidden curriculum operates on one such programme.

Background: training matters but so do secret policemen

In 2003 a television documentary, *The Secret Policeman*, made national headlines when it exposed racism at a police recruit academy. In the aftermath, nine officers resigned and there were familiar calls to eliminate racism in policing. The measures needed were argued to include ‘psychological screening’ and improved training. However, it was both fortunate and ironic that this public disgrace of police training came at a time when a radically new recruit training programme was already under development.

The previous year a damning inspection report, *Training Matters* (HMIC 2002a), had already concluded that police recruit training ‘was not fit for purpose’. A prevalent concern centred on a lack of ‘community involvement’ across the training programme. The assumptions behind this perceived deficiency will be explored later; suffice it here to note that this criticism was rooted in longer term concerns about diversity in British Policing (HMIC 1996, 1997, 2000, 2002b, Macpherson 1999). *Training Matters* recommended that the training delivered to police recruits was restructured to ‘provide an in-depth understanding of the community to be policed, whilst ensuring that officers are also able to cope with the diversity of the police service itself’ (p.107). In April 2005 the new Initial Police Learning and Development Programme (IPLDP) was launched by the Home Office.

And now for something completely different

Although police recruit training has been restructured on numerous occasions (Allard 1997, HMIC 2002a) the IPLDP offers a ‘radical change’ (Peace 2006) from previous training programmes. According to the Home Office, the primary goal of the IPLDP is to implement ‘modernised’ recruit training and more specifically the programme has been designed to address two longstanding concerns.

1) Modernising the culture of the police service

The concept of police culture originally emerged from ethnographic studies of police work which uncovered a layer of informal practices and norms operating under the bureaucratic structure of police organisations (Cain 1973, Manning 1977). In common with general sociological and anthropological definitions of culture, the police culture refers to what Reiner (2000:87) terms the, ‘values, norms, perspectives and craft rules that inform police conduct’. Whilst other occupational groups 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 is argued that the culture emerged as a type of ‘coping mechanism’ (Westley 1970, Brown 1988) to insulate its members from the hazards of the twin environments of policing. As Brown (1988:9) explains:

(Police Officers) lead something of a schizophrenic existence: they must cope not only with the terror of an often hostile and unpredictable citizenry, but also with a hostile-even tyrannical-and unpredictable bureaucracy.

Whilst aspects of the culture can therefore be seen as ‘positive’ the concept is more usually invoked to condemn a broad range of perceived practices including: racism, sexism, cynicism and authoritarian conservatism (Reiner 2000). As will be seen, other key facets of the culture are argued to be defensive solidarity and a ‘them and us’ division of the social world.

2) Professionalising the police service

It is a moot point as to whether the police service is a profession. Using a straightforward descriptive definition of professionalism, Watkins (1999) notes how both the Department for Education and Employment and the current Standard Occupational Classification define a professional as a person who holds a minimum of a degree level qualification. Historically, police officers receive no external qualification at the conclusion of their training period. This has long been regarded as unsatisfactory (HMIC 2002a) and recently it was decided that police forces must train their new officers to a minimum of NVQ Level Three standard (Home Office 2006). It should be noted however, that this is

a *minimum* qualification and individual police forces have been encouraged to form partnerships with further and higher education providers to offer their officers higher awards such as Foundation Degrees.

Study and methodology

The case study was conducted in a provincial police force in the north of England. A case study approach can explore, describe and explain complex relationships and ‘bring to life’ meanings and issues through contextualisation and what Flyvbjerg (2001) calls ‘the power of example’. This force currently recruits approximately 300 officers each year and working in partnership with a local university requires them to complete a Foundation Degree in Police Studies over the two years of their training period.⁴ The degree is modular and the formal curriculum contains subjects underpinned by the disciplines of sociology, criminology, education and law. The officers spend 6 full weeks on the campus where they are taught almost exclusively by academics.

The methodological strategy employed in this study comprises 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 is longitudinal and 26 volunteer participants, across four cohort intakes, were interviewed on three occasions. All the interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. The computer aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) NVivo7 was utilised to assist with data management and the identification of emerging themes.

Emerging themes

Mason (2004:7) 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

⁴ A new cohort of approximately 40 officers is recruited every 6 weeks. At the time of writing seven of the original 26 participants have resigned from the police service and ‘dropped out’ of the study prior to completing all three interviews.

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 recruit and mature student. When I joined the police in 1988 police academy training comprised what Rowe & Garland (2003:399) rightly term 'instruction in legislation and military style drill'. In comparison, the idea of getting paid to debate social issues and theory without being SHOUTED at seems appealing. My own experience of combining university study with a police career has, I believe, had a positive influence on my identity, both as a person and professionally. 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 my research progressed a number of consistent and sometimes troublesome themes started to emerge. Some of which were unexpected yet some which, in hindsight, could have been anticipated.

Cultural Capital

In certain ways the British police academy has provided an unusually *equal* form of vocational training. Although many graduates join the 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 just felt at a disadvantage and I would always be playing catch up and you think gosh there's more pressure on me cos I think half the class have got degrees (P24, interview 4/4/06).

I've been to uni and I understand the academic side of work. But the majority of the class that I'm in now have never had to write essays at that level; so it's been really hard for some of them; really daunting, and I can see their fears (P23, interview 4/5/06).

At first blush the finding that cultural capital counts on a university programme seems singularly unremarkable, if not bleeding obvious; and why should the police have it any different, particularly if there is a need to professionalise? However, it must be remembered that many of the officers have been recruited with few, if *any*, academic qualifications:

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

Neither students nor professionals

The above quote highlights how this is also an unusual situation for the university. On the majority of Foundation Degree programmes 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).

Professionalisation is not just about officers having letters after their names, but critically it is about how *individuals* think, feel and act. However, although some of the participants felt that they were not treated like 'proper students' the majority believed that they were not treated like professional police officers. Worse, some explained that they were: 'talked down to'; 'patronised'; 'treated like kids'; and that some of the tutors were 'condescending' even 'anti-police':

We were treated as students, as students who shouldn't have been there is my best explanation. They didn't treat us like professionals (P7, interview 4/10/06).

Them and us

Many commentators have stressed social *isolation* and (often defensive) *solidarity* as amongst the defining features of police culture (Reiner 2000, 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, Paoline 2003). 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 perhaps 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 this country: that officers are part of the communities that 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).

The previous regime of training new officers within the institutional confines of a police academy was justifiably criticised for its insularity and lack of community involvement (HMIC 2002a). As Peace (2006:337) explains, ‘insufficient community engagement to expose the officers to the society that they will eventually police, flies in the face of the community-oriented policing axiom and leaves the officers inadequately prepared to commence their roles as neighbourhood police officers’. It can be seen how, in theory, moving part of the training to a university campus is a laudable attempt to break down police public barriers. However, the emerging findings suggest that this is also 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’ type building, located right 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).

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).

Discussion

The idea of ‘building up barriers’ between police and any section of the community could not be further removed or more unintended than the original aim of the IPLDP. However, this case study has focused on a partnership between one police force and one university and at this stage no wider generalisations are claimed. Also, the emerging 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. Many of the participants also welcome the fact that they will conclude their training with a nationally recognised professional qualification.

The study has practical and conceptual implications. Although the practical implications are clearer, some of the theoretical issues require further development. For example, is the concept of ‘hidden curriculum’ useful for trying to make sense of the officers experiences? No doubt if we look long enough and hard enough we can find a hidden curriculum in *any* classroom. Should therefore the concept be reserved for those ‘formal’ learning environments which unintentionally *reproduce* important social phenomena such as class or culture? It seems clear that the recruits are experiencing a powerful dose of unintended learning and worse that they are learning the ‘wrong things’; for example that they not are professionals; that they are different; that there is ‘them and us’ and they need to stick together to counteract that.

The study may also make a modest contribution to the ongoing debate around ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ learning. Although both the intended and unintended learning clearly takes place within a formal (university) environment, would we categorise the unintended learning as an ‘informal’ process? In their review of the extensive literature (Colley et al. 2002) conclude that ‘formal and informal dimensions are always, or almost always present in any learning situation, no matter how small’. This study supports that conclusion. However, the research may question whether the term ‘informal’ fully encapsulates a process of learning which is so unintended and opposite to that which is supposed to take place.

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