

Four Characteristics of Policing as a Practice

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Abstract The purpose of this article is three-fold: (1) to provide an analysis of autoethnography as a method in policing research; (2) to distinguish between policing as a practice and policing as an institution; and (3) to outline the characteristics of policing as a practice. I deploy an autoethnographic method to identify the characteristics of the practice of city policing in democracies. These characteristics—*heroic struggle*, *edgework*, *absolute sacrifice*, and *worldmaking*—draw attention to a crucial mismatch between policing as a practice and policing as an institution. I conclude by suggesting ways in which the characteristics of the practice can provide a firm foundation for further research into the contemporary problems of policing as an institution.

Introduction

The primary purpose of this paper is to outline the characteristics of policing as a practice and I shall argue that the practice of policing is characterized by heroic struggle, edgework, absolute sacrifice, and worldmaking. In order to characterize policing in this way I must first achieve two secondary purposes: provide an analysis of autoethnography as a method in policing research and distinguish between policing as a practice and policing as an institution. I take [Alasdair MacIntyre's \(1981\)](#) conceptions of practice, institution, and the relationship between them as my starting point. He begins his discussion of practices and institutions by distinguishing between two types of purpose towards which human activity is directed, which he refers to as two types of 'good' (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 148). External goods are resources that are limited

such that when they are acquired by one person or group they are denied to another. Internal goods are resources that are not limited in this way, in consequence of which their acquisition benefits the community beyond the successful person or group. According to [MacIntyre \(1981, p. 194\)](#):

Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with what I have called external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are the bearers. For no practice can survive

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for any length of time unsustained by institutions.

Public policing is clearly an *institution*: whether local, regional, or national, police services are funded by government bodies, structured in terms of rank and grade, and reward their membership by means of promotion and pay rises. MacIntyre (1981, p. 187) defines a practice as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human concepts of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.

Public policing is also clearly a *practice*, alongside MacIntyre's examples of farming, architecture, and chess. Practices can flourish in societies with different values, but not in societies where the foundational values of cooperation, risk-taking, fairness, and self-awareness are not respected. Practices are constituted by a specific set of excellences and a specific set of technical skills the combination of which is required to achieve the internal goods towards which the practice is directed. I shall discuss policing as an institution and a practice, using the example of the Durban City Police (DCP) and my own practice of policing within this institution. In order to justify this subjective approach to policing as a practice, however, I must first analyse autoethnography as a method in policing research.

Autoethnography

Heider (1975, p. 3) coined 'auto-ethnography' to describe an ethnographic study in which he asked

members of the Grand Valley Dani in Indonesia to give accounts of their own culture. Another early use of the term is by Hayano (1979, p. 99), presenting a taxonomy and evaluation of a new development in which 'anthropologists conduct and write ethnographies of their "own people"'. Hayano (1979, p. 103 fn.2) distinguishes between auto-ethnographic research thus defined and 'self-ethnographic' research, in which the researcher analyses her own life by means of the ethnographic method. Hayano claims that auto-ethnographies require neither a new method nor a new theoretical underpinning, but merely aggravate the problems of subjectivity, involvement, and confidentiality that ethnographers already face. 'Autoethnography' as it has been used since the publication of Bochner and Ellis' (2001) landmark edited collection, *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*, combines both Hayano's 'auto-ethnography' and 'self-ethnography'. In the new century, the emphasis switched from Hayano's initial definition to what Bochner and Ellis (2016, p. 10) refer to as 'evocative autoethnography', self-ethnographic studies intended to recreate the experiences of the researcher. Adams *et al.* (2015) nonetheless define autoethnography broadly, as a research method that combines the following six characteristics: (1) the use of personal experience as a descriptive tool, (2) recognition of the value of the researcher's relationship with others, (3) sustained reflexivity, (4) exploration of the process of meaning-making, (5) balance between rigour and creativity, and (6) promotion of social justice.

Anderson (2006a, p. 374) acknowledges the value of evocative autoethnography as the dominant paradigm of autoethnographic research in the 21st century, but proposes 'the analytic autoethnographic paradigm' as an alternative. As Anderson (2006b) notes in his response to commentators, evocative ethnographers were united in their opposition to his epistemological assumptions and sociological analysis. My view—which is shared by Charmaz (2006), Vryan (2006), Atkinson (2006),

Wakeman (2014), and Mayor (2016), among others—is that analytic autoethnography is a useful addition to autoethnography as a research method. Anderson (2006a) draws on both first- and second-generation Chicago School ethnographers, defining analytic autoethnography in terms of five key features. The first of these is the ‘complete member researcher’, a researcher who is a fully fledged participant in the group being observed (and thus has a dual role as participant-observer) (Anderson, 2006a, p. 378). Second, analytic autoethnographers employ ‘analytic reflexivity’, framing their accounts with personal reflection and recognizing the impact of the process of representation on personal identity (Anderson, 2006a, p. 378). The third feature follows from the second, ‘the researcher is a highly visible social actor within the written text’ (Anderson, 2006a, p. 384). Fourth, analytic autoethnography involves ‘dialogue with informants beyond the self’ (Anderson, 2006a, p. 378). The important point is that autoethnographies are essentially about others, i.e. the group under study, rather than about the researcher and this is what distinguishes autoethnography from autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries. Finally and perhaps most importantly analytic autoethnography is characterized by its ‘commitment to the analytic agenda’, by which Anderson (2006a, p. 386) means that it seeks to use the empirical data collected from the specific sample to draw conclusions about the broader population in the manner of traditional social science. For Anderson, an autoethnography is not scientific (and analytic) if it is not extrapolating from the empirical to the theoretical and this inductive logic distinguishes analytic autoethnography from evocative autoethnography.

For a variety of operational, legal, and ethical reasons, there have been very few police autoethnographies published in the Anglosphere. Tooth (2019) in the UK and Brooks (2021) in the USA conducted research while being employed as

part-time volunteer police officers. Holdaway (1983) and Young (1991) were both police scholars in the UK who conducted covert insider research once they resumed their police careers. Similarly, in the USA, Moskos (2008) joined the police and served as an officer for a short period as part of his sociological research. Also, in the USA, ‘philosopher-cop’ Wender (2008, p. 5) published a retrospective study of policing based on his 15 years of service. My study is neither a contemporaneous autoethnography (Tooth and Brooks) nor a covert ethnography (Holdaway, Young, and Moskos) and is, in consequence, closest to Wender’s retrospective autoethnography in method. I draw exclusively on my police service, which took place in South Africa from 1992 to 1998, during the dismantling of apartheid and the first 4 years of Nelson Mandela’s presidency. My source of autoethnographic data is the archive I compiled over a period of 27 years. During my service I kept a series of scrapbooks, six 192-page A4 notebooks and one 96-page A3 sketchbook, filled with cuttings from in-service magazines and local, regional, and national newspapers; with pasted pages from training manuals, memoranda, standing orders, and municipal regulations; and with personal documents and photographs. Two of the units in which I served were the subject of studies, one ethnographic and one journalistic, and both researchers shared their material with me. These fieldnotes were supplemented with the following secondary and primary research, all acquired or produced after my service: newspaper and journal articles provided by Rhino Research, a company based in Gauteng; notes from 15 h of interviewing Chris Cray, a former colleague; a detailed diary of 2 years of my service co-created with Carl Mitchell, another former colleague; and an audiovisual archive collected from YouTube and other sources.¹ Considered in its entirety, this archive is sufficient grounds for characterizing this study as an autoethnography.

¹ I have changed the names of all four of the police officers mentioned in this article.

Durban City Police

On the evening of Monday 14 September 1992, aged 19 years, I reported to the DCP headquarters in Old Fort Place to begin my induction as an Auxiliary Constable (a part-time, fully sworn role), doing my best to conceal my nerves from a soft-spoken but nonetheless intimidating training sergeant. Shortly after midday on Friday 30 January 1998, I drove back to headquarters to terminate my final tour of duty as a Senior Constable, mildly disappointed that I had not been able to interest either the force field unit or the local detective branch in raiding the mid-sized 'chop-shop' my partner and I had discovered that morning.² I joined the force a second time as a Police Constable (fully sworn, full-time) in June 1993 and was promoted to Senior Constable in June 1997. My service of 5.5 years can be divided into the following periods: 1 year of basic and specialist training (the former prolonged in consequence of local politics and operational requirements); 1.5 years of general uniform patrol (divided equally between foot and van patrol); 1 year in the Public Transport Unit (a plainclothes community liaison role); and 2 years in the Dog Section (divided equally between being a pursuit driver and a dog handler).

The DCP is South Africa's oldest police service, though it has been known by three different names: Durban Borough Police (1854–1936), DCP (1936–2000), and Durban Metropolitan Police Service (2000–present). Policing in South Africa was consolidated into two national and two local forces in 1912. The national forces, the South African Police (SAP) and the South African Mounted Riflemen, were typical of colonial police forces in having both police and military functions, with the latter a military unit raised to fight in wartime and police the Black population in peacetime (King and Portman, 2000). By 1936 further consolidation left only the SAP and the DCP, with the former the main police presence in

Durban (constituting about 90% of the establishment) and lead agency responsible for crime prevention and the latter relegated to lead agency for by-law enforcement and traffic control. Unlike the SAP, the DCP was modelled on London's Metropolitan Police Service and employed neither military ranks nor military training (Rauch *et al.*, 2001). As a local force responsible for policing the only South African city where the majority of the White population was English- rather than Afrikaans-speaking, the DCP had a very limited role in the maintenance of apartheid, being deployed on internal security duties only once during the National Party's rule. The worst human rights abuses by the force are probably the suppression of the communist Beer Hall Riots in June 1929, during which seven protesters and counter-protesters were killed (Jewell, 1989). The DCP is not mentioned at all in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (1998) final report. The force expanded steadily during my service. By the time I left, there were over 500 police officers, including part-time Auxiliary Constables. The DCP did not recruit women as police officers until 1993 and the proportion of female officers had reached about 5% by 1998. The ethnic mix of the force reflected the ethnic mix of the area policed, roughly one-third Black, White, and South Asian. Most of the 15 commissioned officers (Inspector, Chief Inspector, Deputy Chief Constable, and Chief Constable) were White, however, including all four of the chief officers (three of whom were born in the UK).

Durban was then and is still the third largest city in South Africa, behind Johannesburg and Cape Town. Although the municipality was considerably smaller, the DCP serviced the metropolitan area, which had a population of three million. There were nearly 2,000 murders in 1997, a murder rate of about 67 per 100,000. Combining several sources which are themselves approximates (Special Task Force South Africa, 1999; Seguridad, 2020;

² 'Chop shop' was police slang for a premises where stolen motor vehicles were processed before being sold.

Suneson and Comen, 2020), this puts Durban on a par with the currently most dangerous city in the USA (St Louis, 66), but below Johannesburg and Cape Town at the time (both in the 70s) and well below the two currently most dangerous cities in the world, Tijuana (134) and Juárez (105). I do not recall how many police officers were shot in Durban during my service because only the small proportion that died received any significant media coverage. I do recall that the highest number of police officers killed in South Africa in a single year was 349 (in 1996). One major difference between Durban in the 1990s and most contemporary cities is that the illegal drug trade was not lucrative. In consequence, organized crime was focused on the minibus taxi industry (Durban was plagued by 'Taxi Wars' from 1995 to 1997), armed robberies (of business premises, banks, and cash-in-transit), and motor vehicle theft (almost exclusively motor cars). The likelihood of being killed on duty in Durban was low compared with rural areas, although police officers incurred a higher than average risk of injury or death in motor vehicle collisions. I do not know what the official statistics were, but there was a high rate of suicide among police officers (six whom I knew personally, four men and two women).

Policing as a practice

The purpose of the practice of policing in democracies and the practice into which I was inducted in 1992 was and is to protect the public (Skolnick and Bayley, 1988; Manning, 2010). Returning to MacIntyre's (1981) distinction between institutions and practices, public protection is the internal good at which the practice of policing is aimed. I employ 'public protection' in its broadest construal in recognition of Van Maanen's (1978) and Bowling *et al.*'s (2019) respective characterizations of the almost unlimited range of services provided by the police. To be a 'good cop' was to be good at

protecting the public and being good at protecting the public required mastery of a specific set of excellences and a specific set of skills. My concern in this article is with the former rather than the latter. Skolnick and Fyfe (1993) draw attention to both the significance of defining good police work and the relatively little academic attention the subject has received. The most comprehensive account to date is by Muir (1977, p. 46), who defines the good police officer as the 'professional police officer', who is in turn characterized in terms of a professional political model. I discuss Muir's model and its relation to my research below. At no time during either my year of basic and specialist training or my 2 years of being mentored by first Police Constable Siza Menye and then Senior Constable (later Sergeant) Cray were the excellences explained, discussed, or even mentioned by name. Excellences were, instead, identified indirectly, by their absence, using an informal vocabulary. As such, they are a product of informal occupational norms, which Holdaway (1983, p. 134) summarizes as the social construction of policing by the lower ranks: 'which means not that it is concocted out of thin air but that the various legal and policy instruments available to the staff are modified as the rules in the book are translated into rules in use of [*sic*] the ground.'

Cops who lacked the excellence of physical courage were labelled as 'scared', which did not mean feeling fear—we were all scared a lot of the time—but failing to overcome fear. Courage, physical courage especially but also moral courage, was the most valued of all the excellences of the practice and once a reputation for being scared was acquired it was almost impossible to escape. The absence of the excellence of self-restraint was called 'getting involved' and there were several officers with reputations for escalating confrontations unnecessarily.³ Cops who were untrustworthy were known as 'thrillers', a lack of the excellence of integrity that involved a combination

³ Muir (1977, p. 86) notes the use of similar terminology in police officers' descriptions of 'family beefs'.

of exaggeration and apathy. Thrillers were typically lazy, 'only here for the 27th' (the monthly payday), and would try to conceal their neglect of duty by embellishment, falsification, or both. The absence of the excellence of judgement was referred to as being 'stupid', regardless of the individual's education or other intellectual abilities. Typically, stupid cops were those who were unable to balance the two priorities of keeping the peace and enforcing the law within their police practice.

In addition to these four excellences, there were three other features of the practice of policing that were recognized and accepted without ever being the subject of discussion. Perhaps most important was the understanding that being a good cop required a combination of excellence and luck. My 13 month partnership with Chris is an instructive example: though our level of commitment remained consistent, we were afflicted with bad luck for the first 6 months (to the extent that our colleagues spoke of 'the curse of Cray') and gifted with good luck for the rest (during which Chris was lauded as 'one-shot Cray' for his self-restraint). If one was not dogged by misfortune, then there were two ways to fail to be a good cop, through choice or weakness. Those who chose not to aspire to the excellences of the practice had usually joined the police for either the power or for job security. Those who aspired to the excellences of the practice but failed to achieve them were well-intentioned, but lacking in one or more of courage, self-restraint, integrity, or judgement. This type of failure need not be permanent. [Wambaugh \(1971\)](#) provides a gripping account of excellences being achieved relatively late in careers in his novel *The New Centurions*, which is based on his own service. Finally, being a good cop was accompanied by pleasure in dedication to duty, by reciprocal respect for other good cops, and by genuine friendship.

Characteristics of the practice

My experience of the practice of policing is that it had four primary characteristics, which I shall

explain by means of the following concepts: heroic struggle, edgework, absolute sacrifice, and world-making. Excellences are, as explained above, the personal qualities required to perform the practice and they are excellences rather than deficiencies because their object, the internal good of public protection, is one that is valued in and by society. As constitutive of the practice, they are essential to it. Characteristics as I conceive of them here are features of the practice that arise from the pursuit of excellence within an institutional context, i.e. in a particular service at a particular time (the DCP from 1992 to 1998 in my case). Unlike excellences, characteristics are contingent. In other words, while public protection requires the qualities of courage, self-restraint, integrity, and judgement, the characteristics I describe below are features of my experience of the practice of policing that have no necessary relation to that practice and could thus have been different.

'Heroic' has several related meanings, one of which refers to the type of society that preceded the classical age in Western Europe. The definitive feature of this society is the recognition that all human endeavour ends in failure rather than success ([MacIntyre, 1981](#)). Policing in democracies is a *heroic struggle* in this sense because the aim of that practice, protecting the public, is necessarily impossible to achieve. What I mean is that there is no realistic set of circumstances in which a police officer can ever please everyone—peers, superiors, victims, witnesses, suspects, and all the diverse elements that constitute a heterogeneous public. [Muir \(1977, p. 164\)](#) refers to the 'cognitive strain' of policing caused by the combination of the need to make judgements quickly (before adequate information can be acquired) and the costs of being mistaken (severe in consequence of the police officer's authority). The practice of policing is characterized by a struggle that will always be accompanied by failure, even when it appears to be successful. The most important prosecution in which Chris and I were involved was the premeditated murder of a middle-aged woman by a group

of six youths. The crime scene was a freeway after midnight and we found the victim dead, but all suspects in attendance. As soon as they saw me, they fled into the thick bush on either side of the road and Chris used his dog to track and apprehend one of them. Within 24 h the local detectives arrested the leader, but he would not give up any accomplices. In the first few seconds of my arrival I was in a position to apprehend the remaining four and could have done so had I not been concerned about using excessive force. Whenever I think about the case, it is always about the four suspects that escaped not the two that went to trial. Presser (2008) argues that heroism is criminogenic when the struggle against impossible odds is conflated with another meaning of heroism, being acclaimed or admired for greatness. Toxic masculinity frames the difficulty of the struggle as the moral justification of the struggle, i.e. the hero is acclaimed or admired solely for embarking on an impossible endeavour without considering whether that endeavour is worthwhile.

Edgework is the term Lyng (1990) uses to describe the phenomenon of voluntary risk taking in contemporary society, which includes sports such as skydiving and motor racing and occupations such as a policing and combat roles in the military. Edgework has two key features: first, that it involves a high risk of injury or death; and second, that this risk can be reduced by the edgeworker achieving competence in a specific skill set. Muir (1977, p. 263) cites Skolnick (1966) on the dangers of police work and describes patrolling as 'lonely, dangerous, and preoccupied with human suffering.' Police officers in the most peaceful countries in the world or on the most uneventful beats can be confronted with life or death situations in which they are required to intervene, often at great personal risk, at any time during a tour of duty. This risk can of course be minimized—by failing to respond to calls for service, by employing excessive force, or by treating every member of the public as a threat—but this is not what it means to participate in the practice of policing. Lyng (1990)

notes that edgework is accompanied by a euphoric sensation and a particular set of emotions. The sensation is of self-determination and the emotional sequence proceeds from fear to exhilaration. Skolnick's (1966) theory of working personality depicts a similar situation, in which police officers experience both intimidation and enjoyment in the face of danger. The euphoria and exhilaration can, I suggest, easily become addictive, particularly when the work itself is demanding in terms of time, commitment, and lifestyle. My colleagues and I worked a 48-h week, which was only 4 more than the norm in South Africa at the time, but we were on duty for 12 days and off for 2 (i.e. off duty every second weekend). Police officers without family responsibilities tended to spend their 2 days off in one of two ways, either exhausted collapse or extravagant recreation. I indulged in both, but what I remember most clearly is those 2 days as *waiting*—killing time until the next tour of duty.

Derrida (1992) used the Biblical narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac to articulate two conceptions of self-sacrifice, authentic and absolute. Authentic sacrifice involves a recognition of the ethical bond among all human beings and a willingness to act on this bond by sacrificing one's own interests for that of another. Muir (1977, p. 178) acknowledges this bond in the 'tragic perspective', the appreciation of human suffering, one of his two criteria for the professional police officer (the other is moral calm, the appreciation of the relationship between coercion and justice). *Absolute sacrifice* involves the recognition that one can never achieve authentic sacrifice because of the extent of the demands made by the ethical bond. When we recognize this, we move beyond the concern with the sacrifice of our own interests to a concern with why we make some sacrifices but not others. In Derrida's (1992, p. 71) terms, absolute sacrifice is not about the self, but about the others we sacrifice: 'I can respond to the one (or to the one), that is to say to the other, only by sacrificing to that one the other.' Muir (1977, p. 218) refers to the second-guessing that ensues as the acquisition of

‘moral baggage’, which suggests the deteriorative effects of long-term participation in such activity. I mentioned the frequency of police suicides above, but Police Constable Themba Radebe’s stands out for me. We were of a similar age, had joined the Dog Section together, and approached our police practice with the same seriousness. Themba was liked by his colleagues and respected by his superiors. There was some talk of a broken engagement, but nobody really knew why he killed himself. Whatever the immediate cause, I think the absolute sacrifice—and the accompanying degree of responsibility—wore him down. Becoming a police officer is essentially a sacrifice of one’s own interests to those of the public good and the practice of policing requires that police officers sacrifice their interests on a continuous rather than daily basis. While the ultimate sacrifice, of one’s own life in exchange for another’s, is relatively rare in most countries, police officers necessarily exchange their safety for those of others while on and off duty and often sacrifice their physical or mental health.

Srinivasan (2019, p. 145) defines *worldmaking* as ‘the transformation of the world through a transformation of representational practices.’ Representational practices are important because the way in which the social world is represented determines both our experience of that world and our personal identity. Worldmaking is a transformation that consists of two stages, diagnosis, and redescription. The first involves realizing that the social world is not a consequence of randomness, but of a created representational order. The second involves realizing that we can exercise our agency to create our own representations individually or collectively and, in so doing, remake the social world. Srinivasan (2019) advocates collective feminine worldmaking over individualistic masculine worldmaking, but it is the latter that characterizes policing. Policing in democracies is almost entirely reliant on discretion and this alone provides the individual police officer with substantial power over the public, including the power of life

and death in rare circumstances. Bittner (1970, p. 39) describes the police as ‘nothing else than a mechanism for the distribution of situationally justified force’ while Manning (2010, p. xii) goes further, stating that the police ‘operates an agency for the redistribution of life chances in a population’. In contrast, the police officer in a democracy is an insignificant part of the criminal justice system as a whole, often as powerless as the public she is sworn to protect (Muir, 1977; Skolnick, 1999). Police officers worldmake when they exercise their agency by deciding whether or not to employ their discretion and there is a strong temptation to worldmake beyond the bounds of one’s authority, which may be motivated by either self-interest or self-sacrifice. My most blatant exceeding of authority was while working in the Public Transport Unit. I was called to a protest of about a dozen minibus taxi drivers near the docks and had just persuaded them to dismantle their blockade when the local SAP station commander, a major, arrived and ordered me to arrest their leader. I made a show of looking for him, then reported that he had already left and that I had no way of ascertaining his identity. The major was convinced by my performance and I emerged from the incident neither charged with insubordination nor praised for de-escalation.

What is striking about these four characteristics of the practice of policing is that they can either contribute to or detract from the internal good of public protection. Police officers who appreciate the practice as a heroic struggle may well be more realistic in their goals and, in consequence, more effective in actual public protection. On the other hand, that same appreciation could lead to either cynicism or mental health problems. Similarly, appreciation of the absolute sacrifice the practice demands could prepare officers for the limitations it will impose on their lifestyles or produce indifference or despair. The balance between power and powerlessness epitomized in the authority of the police officer could—again—produce a worldmaker who is well-acquainted with her role within

the justice system or one who strives to impose her own brand of justice outside that system. Understanding the practice of policing as edgework will prepare officers for the rigours that the excellences demand, but the addictive quality of those rigours can encourage officers to take unnecessary or illegal risks. Heroic struggle, edgework, absolute sacrifice, and worldmaking are thus not only contingent features of the practice of policing, but features that are neither intrinsically helpful nor intrinsically harmful with respect to public protection.

Discussion

My analytic autoethnographic method commits me to extrapolate from the empirical to the theoretical, from the sample of my personal experience to the experience of a larger population. Given the details provided about the DCP, I think it is reasonable to suggest that my experience of policing in Durban at the end of the 20th century is comparable to the experience of contemporary city policing in the USA. Similarities include culture (a common language and system of government), an equivalent level of gun crime, and a shared urban environment, with the only major difference being the activities in which organized crime is involved. As such, I shall take heroic struggle, edgework, absolute sacrifice, and worldmaking as characteristic of city policing in the USA. The characteristics may also have some relevance to city policing in the UK, where the culture and environment are similar. In this section, I want to explore the value of my conception of characteristics of the practice by comparing it to two related concepts, Muir's (1977) streetcorner politicians and Reiner's (1982) cop culture.

I referred to Muir in my introduction to policing as a practice as well as in my explanation of each of the four characteristics of that practice and there is a significant overlap in our respective

research. Muir's (1977, p. xi) ethnography of the pseudonymous 'Laconia Police Department' in the USA in the early 1970s is concerned with finding a solution to what he describes as the problem of coercive power. The problem arises because the practice of policing is essentially an 'extortionate transaction', i.e. an interaction in which there is always a hostage and a ransom, which is accompanied by a set of paradoxes in democratic societies (1977, p. 37). The combination of continuous extortion and paradoxical complexity poses the question of moral corruption: are 'wickedness, banality, or cowardice' inevitable consequences of policing and, if not, how can they be reduced or prevented (1977, p. 51)? Muir's conclusion is twofold. First, the police officer who meets the criteria for good policing (tragic perspective and moral calm) in the professional political model is more resistant to corruption. The model is *political* because it is concerned with power, which is also why police officers are *streetcorner politicians*. Second, while corruption is inevitable, it can be reduced by three institutional influences: language (developing rhetorical proficiency), learning (operant and observational), and leadership (maintenance of morale). I describe these influences as institutional rather than practice-based because Muir identifies their sources as peers, sergeants, and the chief, respectively. Muir and I are both interested in the excellences of the practice of policing and how pursuit of these excellences can undermine that practice. We differ on two key points, however, the scope and the cause of the problem. For Muir, the scope is limited to a single crucial characteristic of the practice of policing, the extortionate transaction. This is closest to what I have described as worldmaking and while related to heroic struggle and absolute responsibility, Muir's conception of the problem is narrower than mine. For Muir, the scope of the problem is also its cause, the inevitable corruption that is the consequence of continuous extortion and paradoxical complexity. In my conception, the cause is the mismatch between policing as a practice and

policing as an institution. My research is thus indebted to rather than derivative of Muir's.

There is also an overlap between my characteristics of the practice and Reiner's (1982) research on the informal occupational norms of policing. Reiner set his inquiry in the context of Skolnick's (1966) claim that the norms are an inevitable consequence of the practice of policing in democracies. He has researched the subject for four decades, alone and in collaboration with colleagues, but his conception of *cop culture* remains largely unchanged, 'a common set of themes which constantly reoccur' on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly in the UK and USA (1982, p. 167). These themes are: commitment, suspicion, loyalty, conservatism, machismo, racism, and pragmatism. Cop culture, like my characteristics, is produced by a combination of agency and structure, which is why Reiner (Bowling *et al.*, 2019, p. 184) identifies the need for 'reshaping the basic character of the police role, through wider transformation of the macro-structures of economic inequality and power.' There are, however, two reasons to avoid reducing the characteristics of the practice to cop culture. First, although there are indeed similarities, the concepts are not identical. Second, and more importantly, the themes of cop culture are—like Holdaway's (1983) symbolic interactionist analysis—overwhelmingly negative, the totality of the culture representing and reproducing the complicity of the institution of policing in social inequality. The features of cop culture are failures emergent from the stresses of policing in democracies, whereas the features of the characteristics are emergent from *successful* police practice. If good cops run the risk of criminogenic heroism, addiction to risk-taking, indifference to suffering, and exceeding their authority just by being good cops, then there is a mismatch between the practice of policing and the institution of policing within which the practice takes place. This finding is consistent with much recent research into US policing (Moskos, 2008; Zack, 2015; Davis, 2016; Vitale, 2017).

Conclusion

My primary aim in this article has been to outline the characteristics of policing as a practice. I began by describing policing as a practice aimed at the internal good of public protection and then identified the excellences constitutive of that practice by autoethnographic means. My finding was that there were four characteristics of the practice—heroic struggle, edgework, absolute sacrifice, and worldmaking—that emerged from the pursuit of excellence. These characteristics have both positive and negative poles and what is significant about them is that they reveal a crucial mismatch between policing as a practice and policing as an institution. Recognition of this mismatch has implications for the question of police reform or transformation. It suggests, for example, that the growing dissatisfaction with policing in the USA and UK in the 21st century cannot be ameliorated by training or education, i.e. measures targeting policing as a practice, but must be approached at the level of policing as an institution. This may, in turn, have implications for other institutions within the criminal justice system.

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