Article

Data and Obstacle: Police (Non)Visibility in Research on Protest Policing

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Abstract

The police, in particular the riot police, can be a rather inaccessible object of investigation, whose reservations towards research are analysed with reference to five barriers: 1) police control of access to the field, 2) the doubly asymmetric research relationship, 3) attempts by the police to steer the process, 4) the sceptical attitude of (potential) interviewees, and 5) the restrained discussion behaviour. However, what appears as a hurdle from a researcher's perspective allows structures of the object itself to be reconstructed. These include a prevalence of narratives of police "innocence" and "powerlessness" with which resistance against external aspirations for control is buttressed. The police view themselves as constantly being under public scrutiny and being unjustly publicly criticised. In this manner the predominant attitude towards research is reserved if not hostile. The police definitional power in its fields of action is thus partially transferred to research on the police. However, police interference has its limits, and counterstrategies will be set forth. Most data used are from a grounded theory methodology (GTM) project on video surveillance and countersurveillance of demonstrations, based primarily on group discussions and expert interviews with riot police.

Introduction

The police have always been a vanguard of the surveillance society—factually in a lot of regards as well as symbolically. This is especially so because of their role in the proliferation of CCTV: a (social) technology that expanded the realm of visibility in an extraordinary manner and gave rise to much of the surveillance studies debates (cf. Norris and Armstrong 1999). On the other hand, the police have always been resistant to being too visible themselves, especially since the omnipresence of visibility production from below ("sousveillance") gave the countersurveillance repertoires and police reactions to them a new boost (Marx 2009). "Policing's new visibility" (Goldsmith 2010) did not only support police accountability (Eijkman 2011) but also produced unintended backfire effects, many of which are strategies aimed at impeding sousveillance capacities (Wilson 2012; Ullrich and Knopp 2018). Their striving for secrecy is well known among those who study the police. A large proportion of the methodological literature in police research deals with the problem of how to lift the "blue curtain" (Niederhoffer 1967: 4) or how to make what is going on within the organisation visible.

Given the strong public interest in controlling the holder of the state's monopoly of the legitimate use of force, it seems futile to add another voice to the lament about invisibility of the backstage of policing. Therefore, I suggest two ways to go beyond moaning. The first is to collect experiences of how to successfully research police, in other words, how to lift the curtain. The second and perhaps more important way to make the best of it is to analyse the research object's resistance to its own visibility *as data about it*, or to answer the following

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question: What do the encounters between researchers and police as well as the police reaction to these scientific pretensions disclose about the character and structure of this organisation?

All three aspects (lament, solution strategies, and object-related interpretation of field experiences) receive due attention in the following reflections on research experiences in political and protest policing in Germany. This will add knowledge, firstly, to the general international literature of police research about *common problems*, and, secondly, to the literature about relevant specificities of the *case* (Germany) and *field* (protest policing). In the following, I provide an overview in the second section about the methodological literature on researching the police. I then briefly introduce in the third section the research projects used for the reflections in this article. The fourth section analyses five basic obstacles police researchers have to struggle with and their respective methodological implications: police control of access to the field; the doubly asymmetric research relationship; attempts by the police to steer the process; the sceptical attitude of potential interviewees; and the restrained discussion behaviour. The fifth section explores explanations for the police's resistance to research, specifically their hesitant reaction to being under public scrutiny and criticism. The final section, besides summing up, offers practical advice on how to methodologically tackle the challenges presented.

The Police—Still a “Hermetic Institution”?

Various authors identify phases of dominant currents in police research (Brown 1996; Garry, Rogers, and Gravelle 2014; Reichertz 2003; Reiner 2010: 1114): After the beginnings of empirical police research in the 1960s, in particular in Anglo-Saxon countries, controversies arose. These were fuelled, particularly in the '70s and '80s, by the conflict between Marxist-inspired critical police research and the affirmative assumptions of the police as an organisation about itself. This phase was followed by thriving police research in the social sciences that is still developing today and that views itself much more as value-neutral. The last decades also saw the development of increasingly dominant security research with an interest in police issues, which is predominantly originating from within the police itself and its research institutions and is accordingly police-oriented in its questions (J. Brown 1996: 179; van Dijk, Hoogewoning, and Punch 2016: 29). The instrumental interest of this kind of research is, in contrast to fundamental sociological research, simply “to accumulate a knowledge base . . . to reduce crime” (Wortley 2015). Recent discussions also identify several forms of police–academic partnerships—which also come with organisational and cultural barriers against successful encounters (Goode and Lumsden 2016).

Early on, it was discussed that the police as a field of research is characterised by strong organisational closure and thus erects high access barriers (Fox and Lundman 1974). The “‘blue curtain’ of secrecy that screened most police organizations” (Niederhoffer 1967: 4) is at the centre of methodological discussions on police research even today (Reiner 2010; Rogers 2014). Further discussed aspects are usually closely associated with this closure, such as the large amount of time spent on networking (Cockbain 2015: 24), communicative barriers (Goode and Lumsden 2016; Engel and Henderson 2014), mistrust on the part of the field (Brewer 1990; Brown 1996: 178), interventions of the police leadership, and even accusations of censorship (Fassin 2013; cf. also Brewer 1990). The methodological literature also treats the restrictive effect that moral and ethical conflicts have on research,¹ which result for example from close proximity to the sensitive field (Marks 2004; Punch 1989; Rogers 2014; Skinns, Wooff, and Sprawson 2016), and potential security problems for the researchers (Brewer 1990; Martin and Graham 2016: 158). Effects of the personality of the researchers on the research relationships are also investigated (Brown 1996; Laycock 2015), for example with respect to their gender in the masculine police culture (Brewer 1990; Marks 2004). The researcher's stance in and towards the field is generally taken to be crucial for the specific space of possibilities that presents itself to different types of in- and outsiders (Brown 1996; Greene 2015). Researchers may be perceived as intruders or inspectors but

¹ Just to give one instructive example: A colleague privately reported having witnessed clearly illegal police violence in the field. On one hand, the researcher should have filed charges; on the other hand, this would have resulted in immediate loss of the precarious field contact. Moreover, the complaint would have had no chance of success due to the strong cohesion in the police unit. Due to the assured anonymity, the incident was not even mentioned in publications.

also as “accomplices” in different relationships of proximity and distance, depending on their position (Behr 2008: 5059). Detailed methodological reflection, as in the work of Punch (1989), Brewer (1990), Marks (2004), and Behr (2008) mentioned above and particularly in van Maanen (1981), is so far mainly occurring in ethnographic fieldwork and is for the most part strongly oriented towards the specific case under consideration. Books with a methodological orientation (or at least aspiration) have only recently appeared (Brunger, Tong, and Martin 2016; Gravelle and Rogers 2014). They, too, mostly deal with substantial studies or focus primarily on the *applied* police research “that can inform and improve police” and that is accordingly easier to carry out (Cockbain and Knutsson 2015a: 1). Given also the lack of reviews, the methodological literature remains “fragmented and dispersed” (Cockbain 2015: 22).

The situation is fundamentally similar in Germany. Here, too, what little police research there is has often been viewed sceptically from within its field of research. Experts emphasise that the research was mostly limited to statistical data and restricted field access when the research aspiration came from outside and did not offer a concrete added value for the police (Behr 2006: 17–18; Christe-Zeyse 2012: 21–22; Reichertz 2003: 414–15). Here, too, this is most likely connected with a fundamental mistrust of the organisation towards a research tradition critical of the police. For this reason, the police time and again tried to minimise their visibility to research and successfully “kept the supposedly hostile social scientists at bay” (Reichertz 2003: 414, own translation). The widespread mistrust towards research and the field-specific interest in closure and secrecy are complemented not least also by the factual power to enforce this interest vis-à-vis the researchers. From this position of powerlessness, police researchers turned to the public a few years ago with an appeal for more police research (Arbeitskreis Empirische Polizeiforschung 2012).

But are the police still a “hermetic institution that plays its cards close to the chest” (Busch et al. 1988: 35, own translation)? In particular the massive field access problems for researchers prompted much reasoning about the (im)possibility of doing police research. However, these problems are not just rooted in the secrecy interests of the security sector. Rather, they touch upon a basic problem of organisational sociology: organisations cannot be expected to have an interest per se in being research objects as long as the questions asked do not serve their own purposes. Accepting or supporting research would take time and entail other organisational efforts and even more potential costs in the future, because the output of research and its implications for the organisation are unpredictable. In view of some existing work on the police and my own experience, the dictum of the police as a hermetic institution seems somewhat exaggerated. Rather, the possibility of research appears to relate to general challenges of researching organisations and to depend on the specific topic. Particularly, the political character of the field of protest policing can be expected to have a strong restrictive effect. But precisely for the specific characteristics of this subfield, no methodological reflections have been published, neither for Germany nor in English-language literature, and most substantially relevant publications lack methodological reflections (e.g., Wood 2014). The following exposition therefore proceeds, with a consciously anti-deductive stance, mainly from very concrete field experiences, in order to interpret them in the knowledge of the specificity of the field while also considering them with a view to general tendencies in the literature.

Data and Methodology

The underlying empirical material is manifold. It derives mostly from a research project on current protest policing with a grounded theory design and a focus on video surveillance of demonstrations (“ViDemo”). It was carried out between 2011 and 2017 with group discussions, interviews, and field observations. It analysed the police use of cameras as a process that contributes to the police definitional power as well as the patterns of interaction with surveilled and countersurveillance protesters.² This project is supplemented by a study whose subject area includes police perception and handling of antisemitic hate crimes, for which expert interviews with higher police officers and document analyses were conducted in 2013 at the political department of the police in a German federal state (*Bundesland*) and analysed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring

² For more details cf. Ullrich (2018); Ullrich and Knopp (2018); Arzt and Ullrich (2016).

2000).³ Several irritations, long delays, and other difficulties in the course of the projects placed the possibility of police research *as such* into the focus of the reflection.

One important source is formed by the experiences with field contact initiation and preparatory conversations documented in field memos. Further sources are the collected verbatim data themselves, among them group discussions from the ViDemo-Project⁴ and semi-structured expert interviews from both projects with police officers about their work in particular at demonstrations carried out in three German federal states, and from field notes, which were produced on various occasions most of them protest events.⁵

The problem complexes I am dealing with here are not *exclusively* characteristic for the field of protest policing. Some problems, however, and in particular three contextual conditions of the data used, relate to the specific field and thus have concrete limiting consequences for generalisability of my considerations.

- Most of the interviewees were members of riot police units, including many officers responsible for video surveillance. Others are in senior staff positions, not always in the riot police, but generally in the context of demonstrations or political offences. Thus, the statements made refer explicitly to this subject area. To be sure, there are parallels to other countries, other fields of police activity, and other kinds of police formations. However, the extent to which this paper's considerations can be applied to these fields is limited (cf. P. A. J. Waddington 1996 on the specific moral ambiguities of this field).
- Secondly, limits arise from the substantial research themes of the underlying studies, which are politically and morally charged. Antisemitism is one of the most salient negative symbols of German political culture and is highly controversial (Ullrich and Kohlstruck 2017). Also, how the police deal with protest and in particular with video surveillance is linked to debates on "repression" and the "surveillance society." Thus, it is safe to assume that this *sensitivity problem* (Brewer 1990) increases existing tendencies of the police towards closure.
- Thirdly, I entered the field as a *protest researcher* and a *researcher of anti-Semitism*. With respect to the field, I am an "outside outsider" in Brown's (1996) classification of researcher types. Moreover, I personally take a rather critical stance towards the police—as I was a "typical" former conscientious objector with little taste for uniforms, weapons, orders, obedience, strict hierarchies, male shows of force, and so on. At least some subjective and symbolic aspects of the following portrayals need to be read in the knowledge of this speaking position.

Five Barriers to Police Research

The Police Control of Field Access

The degree of organisational closure of the police manifests in strict membership rules as well as in the communication with the environment of the police. The formal access points are limited to corresponding functional roles like press officers, who are tasked with presenting the "sunny side" (own translation) of the organisation (Kühl 2014: 333). That leaves only the most senior level in the various police administrations, as ordinary members are not allowed to provide statements without authorisation. Thus, the official channels largely monopolise field access. There are hardly any alternatives to this way through the "gate" if the police are not merely to be observed in the public space (cf. Fox and Lundman 1974; Busch et al. 1988: 478ff.). Even observations in the public space are not necessarily accepted.

³ For details see the study report (Kohlstruck and Ullrich 2015; cf. Ullrich and Kohlstruck 2017).

⁴ Cf. Lamnek (1998). Participants were given a video stimulus from a demonstration in which many police cameras were present, and they were asked to freely discuss matters. With further stimulating questions by the interviewer, they lasted around sixty to ninety minutes and ended with reflective and wrap-up questions. For a more detailed discussion of survey methodology, I should refer to the several publications on the subject matter from the ViDemo project (up-to-date information on the project website <http://bit.do/videmo2>).

⁵ All data were coded according to the grounded theory procedures, with successive open and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

To initiate research in the ViDemo project, requests to facilitate interviews and group discussions were submitted to nine state police departments. In only three of these cases was it possible to carry out research activities, to a varying extent. Only in two of them did group discussions and interviews with the actually intended target group come about through official channels. In the third federal state, a detour via the police college allowed two group discussions to be carried out with master's degree students, who had been deployed in riot police units, and partly dealt with interest before their studies. Further contacts internal to the organisation were then established from within this group. In four federal states, there was either no response at all or an explicit rejection. In the remaining two cases, contact terminated after the request was forwarded in various ways within the organisation.

The official channel to be navigated varied in duration and was usually not transparent. The preparatory communication usually took months. These temporal structures barely fit with those of project-oriented research (cf. Brewer 1990; Fassin 2013). And even when successful, a distant and sceptical attitude of the police remained, sometimes even being articulated explicitly:

We actually approach the subject very cautiously. So, as I said, you can consider yourself lucky that we actually received you today and pushed this through [at the police headquarters] (006_GD).⁶

Thus, it is no surprise that only in one federal state did the mere official request allow the research to take place. In the other cases, the official channel only ran its course because existing contacts advocated for the project within the organisation. In one of the latter cases, it was a person at the highest management level of the state police, with whom contact had been established in a thematically separate research context, who ordered that the project be supported by the police. In the second case, it was a dedicated police officer with an unusually critical perspective on her own organisation who did not rest until the group discussions at the college had been approved. The mutual trust established in the course of these discussions in turn allowed respondents to advocate for the further survey to their superiors and thus indirectly made it possible to interview the real target group (active riot police).

These reactions illustrate that the police are barely interested in supporting external research and that they can reject it without further ado. Strong motivation of individual members of the organisation in suitable functions (most importantly at senior levels) are required to breach this barrier. Thus, field access is the central challenge, placing extraordinary demands on time (cf. Brewer 1990: 582) and requiring improvisational skills against immense resistance from the organisation. Particularly tangible consequences lie in the composition of the sample that comes about in this manner, which is under limited control of the researcher and in the end is strongly influenced by factors exterior to the research (similarly in Tränkle 2015: 144). Federal states whose police departments would have held the promise of an informative contrast could not be included in the investigation; where interviews took place there were non-transparent processes of participant selection on the part of the police contact persons (see the third barrier, "Maintaining Control"), and interviews were also carried out with less central actors in order to obtain any data at all in certain areas. The generalisability of findings is severely limited by these restrictions.

The Doubly Asymmetric Research Relationship

Problems with the surveys can of course not be traced to the properties of the police alone, as there are at least two sides to the interaction. The demeanour and other features of the researchers as well as their institutional background also affect the mode in which the police process the intrusion (Brown 1996). And the contact leaves traces on both sides. The research relationship proves to be doubly asymmetric, depending on the different power resources of those involved. They subtly influence the research process and inhibit mutual openness.

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⁶ The source reference of the primary sources always provides first the document number and then an abbreviation. INT stands for expert interview, GD for group discussion, and FP for field protocol/memo. Emphasis is added in boldface, and inaudible or hardly audible parts are enclosed in double parentheses.

I tend to have research relationships as a protest researcher and personal relationships with politically active people rather than police officers. Moreover, my activities and publications critical of police are publicly documented. This fact should represent a disadvantage. In the case of the newly established police contacts, there was no indication that the respondents had informed themselves about their researching counterpart. Thus, my position at the university, decorated with two doctoral titles (this was sometimes mentioned), was often enough *legitimation* for my request. At the same time, considering the social status of academics, this background surely also contributed to distance or insecurity of the interlocutors, whose professional culture stands in sharp contrast to the university culture: practice-oriented and anti-theoretical (Waddington, Jones, and Critcher 1989: 182), not prone to reflection, at least at the base (Behr 2006: 13–14), and characterised by conditional programmes (Willems et al. 1988: 22–23) as well as standard routines (D. P. Waddington, Jones, and Critcher 1989: 182). Thus, already the invitation to a more or less public reflection in a group discussion was a disruption to the everyday organisational activity structure of the police.⁷

However, most of the explicit expressions of scepticism and distance related to unwillingness to be scrutinised or criticised, thus “good reasons” from the organisation’s perspective. Accordingly, the research process required much persuasion as well as further compromises and strongly set out a specific position for the researcher.

As someone submitting requests to police authorities, often unsuccessfully, I quickly took on the role of a “petitioner.” From this precarious starting point, every possible access to the field had to be sought (cf. Cockbain 2015: 24ff.). Gaining access to the field sometimes required a constant insistence that often made me feel uncomfortable. Those who had shown themselves receptive to my request had to expect my “ruthless” exploitation of their willingness to help. Research on the police thus runs the risk of straining basic rules of research ethics with respect to the researched *persons* in order to satisfy the need for information on the *organisation* in which they work.

Methodologically speaking, the role of a petitioner is a variant of the “*Gefühl des Ausbeuters*,” the interviewer’s feeling of being exploitative (Hermanns 2004: 212) and leads to problematic compromises in the further process. After all, the aim was not to irritate the ever so precious and sometimes severely strained contacts with avoidable demands. With the statement already quoted above, that I was lucky to get anything at all from the police, this was rather clearly articulated as a warning. Thus, if the interview had come about with a narrow time slot, I sometimes did not see myself in a position to make further demands, such as moving the tables into a better discussion arrangement. In particular, the concretely desired composition of the focus group could not always be insisted upon.

Finally, the factors shaping the relationship also include various context features of the interview settings. As a rule, the interviews and group discussions took place on the police premises, often in barracks. These are sealed off by walls, CCTV, barbed wire, and other security systems. The entrance is through guarded gates. The interviewees usually wore uniforms and weapons; many of them were tall, very muscular men with corresponding body language. Symbols of dominance were omnipresent. The consequence is that “it is often intimidating for sociologists to enter the ‘world of the police’” (Marks 2004: 873). Even though quite friendly, approachable, and communicative people often showed themselves behind the symbolic walls, the police proved to be a palpably powerful and power-exerting organisation, also in shaping the research relationship, which may require “tougher and more cynical investigators” (Punch 1989: 197).⁸

⁷ This was also mentioned several times by interviewed officers, who, with hindsight, very much appreciated the experience of an exchange of ideas and of reflecting on their own work and deplored that there is otherwise no time for this.

⁸ Fox and Lundman (1974: 58) therefore principally assume that demands of the two sides can only be partly mitigated and that compromises that come about in this manner are purchased with a loss of external validity.

Maintaining Control: Police Steering Attempts

Securing authority, control, and dominance is the rationale of police action.⁹ In the research process, this manifests in nondisclosure of relevant information and overt attempts at intervening in the course of research and influencing its possible results.

Nondisclosure applies to various documents that are quite relevant also to the public, for example the Federal Criminal Police's definitions, which stipulate which offences are to be registered as political crime based on which criteria (see Kohlstruck and Ullrich 2015: 3234.). Recording expert interviews in the German federal police office was not allowed; only brief notes could be taken. In one federal state contacted in order to initiate research, the entire subject of video surveillance was declared classified. In another state, a visit to an "evidence preservation and documentation vehicle" that had originally been agreed upon (which the liaison officer had considered less problematic than a group discussion) did not take place because the vehicle had been recently classified.

Such classification can be regarded as a legal barrier, which is in a certain sense objective and regularly causes even parliamentary requests for information to fail. In any case, the decisions in which there was apparently some scope for discretion reveal more about the functioning of the police as an organisation, allowing the motives for steering interventions to be reconstructed.

In a preparatory conversation, a senior police officer articulated several revealing concerns. He wanted to ensure that I meet enough "experienced officers," as there was a risk of younger or less experienced ones saying "something wrong" (013_FP). He supported the wish to conduct expert interviews with senior police officers, as they possess the relevant knowledge. However, he had reservations about the idea of group discussions, as they could take on "a dynamic of their own" and accordingly be "harder to control." This worry betrays a clear sense of the purpose of group discussions, which do indeed rely on the quasi-natural dynamics of the conversation in order to stimulate utterances typical of the group that might be withheld in the more controlled individual interview. While group discussions with officers did come about, it was apparent that particularly "presentable" officers and "minders" were usually selected for this purpose.

In preparing the survey, I always asked for discussions with a group of rank-and-file officers, so that the dynamics of the discussion would not be curbed by formal hierarchies. This came about only in a few cases. Except for the discussions with some of the students, superiors were always among the participants, and they usually set the tone. Their presence served a supervisory function to maintain secrecy and error latency. Several senior informants worried that internal matters might be brought up, and the success of future police measures might be jeopardised if too many details became public. Whenever an explicit argument for the presence of "minders" was offered, it was this one. Several times, the contact persons and the interviewees themselves emphasised that the police attach great importance to the participation of very "experienced officers" and that these were accordingly particularly encouraged (compelled?) to participate. How the group composition came about was not transparent in most cases.

Principally it is to be assumed that particularly the leadership strives to shape the research process according to the organisational rationality, resulting in steering interventions into the research process and thus less valid results. In the conversations organised by the police, I did not encounter anyone who too overtly dissented from the formal norms of the police culture. Their absence may have had other reasons, including self-selection or low prevalence, but is also recognisable as a goal of planned organisational avoidance. However, overall it is doubtful whether the steering attempts comprehensively achieved their goal of maintaining complete control; the interviews and group discussions contained much that was not at all in line with the police's ideals of self-representation.

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⁹ There is a rich literature on authority and its safeguarding as central organisational imperatives of the police (cf., e.g., Wilson 1968; Feest and Blankenburg 1972; Behr 2008; Loftus 2010; Fekjær, Petersson, and Thomassen 2014; Bettermann 2015). Attacks on these imperatives, for example through disrespect, can trigger role insecurities or even abuse and overpolicing (Bettermann 2015; cf. Behr 2008: 96; Feest and Blankenburg 1972: 7074.)

Scepticism of the Interviewed Officers

The hurdles discussed so far reside predominantly at the level of the organisation and its interests. However, subjective and subcultural aspects of the respondents also contribute to the difficulties; after the official channels they are the second “gate” to be traversed (Fox and Lundman 1974: 53). A text sequence already quoted in the first barrier above expresses the organisation’s distance from the research project. A look at a larger segment of this text shows that this also includes their members:

[...] You can consider yourself lucky that we actually received you today and pushed this through, because [...] it was quite difficult to [bring along] the colleagues. And everyone has his department, other things to do more or less (006_GD)

Thus, the interview partners also displayed scepticism, which worsens the organisational distance from the research. Several contacts reported that it was sometimes not easy to motivate officers to participate. Various aspects contributed to this, for example the terminology used. Some struggled with the term “video surveillance” that occurs in the name of the project—while it is a standard term in the sciences, cops showed reservations because of its political connotations. In the context of demonstrations, the word “surveillance” is associated with the attitude critical of the police that is often a subject of public discussion. Within the police, terms like videography, image recording, and image transmission are often preferred. In a similar vein, other symbols (clothing, speech) likely also caused irritations, though no systematic occurrences were observed in this regard.

The fact that even those who ended up taking part in the study continued to harbour reservations certainly had an influence on the often very restrained discussion behaviour (the fifth barrier) but also manifested explicitly in the summary question concluding every interview and every group discussion. Several times in the responses to the concluding discussion, the respondent’s own scepticism towards the subject and the research project was mentioned or the summary included an assessment that the scepticism that was at least initially present turned out to be unwarranted. Frequently it was only over the course of the interview that the interviewer’s feeling of being exploitative (“*Gefühl des Ausbeuters*”) turned into the mutually shared “feeling of happy coincidence” (Hermanns 2004: 212).

I don’t have anything to add, either. And it was a pleasant conversation, too, like, I didn’t feel uncomfortable or pushed into a corner or whatever. My take on it. (031_GD)¹⁰

This quote may also indicate that scepticism is linked to the view of police work as something visible, observed, and criticised, a position that many of the interviewees feel to be inappropriate (see section following, “About the Unnecessity of Police Visibility”). Over the course of the conversation, but at least at the outset, this often had an inhibiting effect. It was not immediately possible to generate longer narrations in many group discussions with cops (cf. fifth barrier, following).

At the same time, it should be emphasised that, in contrast to this dominating experience with scepticism and reservations, there were also individual officers who supported the project with great interest and vigour because they see deficits within the police, want to remedy them, and appreciate a critical view from outside. This has often been discussed within the police in recent years under the trope “organisational culture” and “error culture” (Liebl 2004). As will be further elaborated, such proactive supporters tend to be atypical.

¹⁰ This quote additionally confirms one of the asymmetries referred to under the second barrier, “The Doubly Asymmetric Research Relationship.” It indicates that interviewees did not put it past the interviewer to “push them into a corner.” There were also worries that unfavourable interpretations would be created through “cherry-picking” and “cutting” (024_GD).

Restrained Discussion Behaviour

In the group discussions with officers, presenting a discussion stimulus (usually a video from a demonstration) often did not suffice to trigger a self-sustaining discussion. The formulaic language common within the police is geared towards abstracting from the concrete case and thus likely serves a protective function for those who employ it. One extreme example, which unmask the general tendency in the field:

My tasks in the BFE take the form of a detaining officer. My task is, for example at a demonstration, if an offender is observed, to approach him and then to process him expediently while conserving evidence. (56_GD, rank and file)

Unfortunately, it was difficult to stimulate narrations of experiences in this way. In most of the discussions with rank and file riot police, only additional questions and requests for elaboration allowed more narrative content to be obtained. With respect to the degree to which the discussion was self-sustaining, there are two rather clearly distinguishable types of conversation dynamics: there were restrained and talkative discussion groups.

In the restrained type of discussions, the presentation of the stimulus was followed by a short reaction to the content of the film. After a few minutes, the discussion came to a halt and required follow-up questions by the interviewer. The attitude averse to discussions even manifested in the explicit request that the interviewer should simply ask concrete questions. Also, there was hardly any open dissent in the corresponding discussion rounds, and statements were rarely explicitly contradicted. The participants were mainly officers currently working in riot police units. As if to confirm this finding, in a group discussion in which (due to illness) only two officers were participating, the assessment was made that this was not problematic because no other opinions would have been offered anyway (049_GD). Though this is surely a fictitious consensus, inferred from the assumption that police behaviour is determined by law, rather than an actual homogeneity of opinions, it is to be assumed that this fiction is immensely effective (cf. Kühl 2014: 97ff.).

The talkative type was markedly different. After the stimulus, the discussion was self-sustaining. These group discussions also had more of the character of a discussion, there were objections and more complex debates. The group discussions belonging to the talkative type were in particular most of those carried out at police colleges of two federal states with master's degree students.

Two related aspects seem to be the cause of this difference: on one hand, (a) the characteristics of the brain workers and their current environment that tends to be conducive to reflection and on the other hand, (b) inversely, constraints and everyday practices in the organisational setting as well as of the police subculture of the units. Thus, different functions in the respective organisational contexts shape the readiness for and the acceptable extent of reflexive discourses.

- (a) The ascent (or lateral entry for legal professionals) into the elevated and higher service is only open to some of the officers, who need to qualify under highly competitive conditions and are then educated at a considerably higher level, in particular in complex legal issues. Moreover, studying itself seems to be partly able to crack the "pragmatic and anti-theoretical orientation of the police culture" (D. P. Waddington et al, Jones, and Critcher 1989: 182), as indicated by various references to curricular material and controversies surrounding it. However, this should not be taken to imply homogeneity of the group members. The decisive factor for the talkative discourse was the *greater heterogeneity* in the opinions and experiences of those interviewed at the colleges, while the homogeneity with respect to formal status and rank was greater. Only in these discussion groups were complex, explicitly theoretical arguments referring to specific research occasionally offered. Otherwise, in the discussions with the "practitioners," more complex, contradictory circumstances tended to be treated as binary considerations and were resolved with a pragmatic solution. Only among the master's students were there some who had experienced demonstrations from the perspective of participants and sometimes also articulated criticism of the police. Both aspects also posed challenges to the other participants in the discussion and thus led to overall more complex discourses and multi-perspectival problem analyses. Those who rose through the ranks are thus

a specific group in the police, which is moreover situated in a context relatively conducive to discussion and reflection at the time of the survey. This agrees with research findings that emphasise that the professional practice and the norms of cop culture that operate in it have such a decisive influence that they can supplant affirmation of ideals of police culture achieved during training and studies (Fekjær, Petersson, and Thomassen 2014; Wortley and Homel 1995).

- (b) However, there is another (possible) explanation for the restrained type in addition to the mere converse that the practitioners are more firmly anchored in the system of street cop norms. It is offered by a police interlocutor who was present in a group discussion as a press officer but essentially stayed out of the conversation. After the discussion ended, he remarked that I, the interviewer, had probably expected longer and more detailed descriptions and that the officers had been rather taciturn. He assumes that this may be related to fear of admitting violations of the law—or of making an inopportune disclosure in the presence of someone of higher rank. The practitioners need to withhold informal practices that characterise their work. Thus, in this case the silence would at the same time be highly reflexive. Interestingly, the press officer added that such worries were, however, entirely unfounded, as these were outstanding officers—this, too, being a further indication of the non-random composition of the group.

The press officer thus (involuntarily) invoked two structural obstacles that counteract the societal need for control and also the much-vaunted “error culture.” One of them follows from the restrictive principle of compulsory prosecution (legality principle), which all officers are subject to, but which is hardly ever honoured in practice and which creates reciprocal susceptibility to blackmail (Behr 2009; Tränkle 2015). Any misconduct is potentially criminally relevant, which also applies to acquiescence in the misconduct of colleagues, as a failure to report this amounts to obstruction of justice in office. For example, this prevents belated filing of charges. At the same time, there are various organisational interests to conceal knowledge of strategies as well as informal and deviant practices.

About the Unnecessity of Police Visibility: The “Innocent” Police

Many of the challenges described in this paper are well-known to organisational researchers from other subject areas, although the laments recur particularly regularly in this case. But which specifics characterise the *police* reaction to research aspirations? What does research stand for from the perspective of the police? The data offers many avenues to understanding police scepticism towards the intrusion of the social sciences. One aspect is an explicit interest in maintaining the secrecy of *operational* information, where camouflage is essential for their functionality. This is addressed as a boundary for the survey in the preliminary talk, and compliance is monitored by superiors. Added to this is the interest in disguising informality and deviance within the police in communication latency. Two strategies are applied towards research to make this plausible: the rhetorical diminution of police power and the delegitimisation and rejection of criticism of the police.

Diminution Strategies—The “Powerless” Police

I think the whole thing is politically blown out of proportion, considering how timidly the police employs these instruments. (025_INT, police union)

There is a basic orientation that voiced scepticism of the police is not justified, characterised by unnecessary mistrust and usually gross exaggeration, as are the efforts derived from this criticism to control the police and limit its enforcement powers. This is apparent in many places in the data and is underpinned with manifold arguments, all of which understate the actions of the holder of the monopoly of the legitimate use of force (see Table 1).

Table 1: Examples of Rhetorical Diminutions

Police video surveillance is compared to that of private companies: in North Rhine-Westphalia there are allegedly only nineteen police cameras. “That corresponds to the camera density of a single Lidl¹¹ branch” (025_INT).

A drone for image transmission was called an “ultimately useless toy” (006_GD, P2).

It was claimed that the police do not actually want more video recordings, or to carry out more analyses of the existing ones, as no one could sensibly evaluate all this due to the sheer quantity (006_GD, 026_INT, 035_INT).

Criticism and worries are referred to as overblown science fiction scenarios taken from US crime series (006_GD, P2).

The high-tech mobile recording and analysis station BeDoKW is trivialised as “ultimately just a van with a camera and a computer” in one account (022_GD).

An interviewee dismisses the demand for identifiability of police officers as excessive and unnecessary, (wrongly) alleging that seventy per cent of officers wear identification (025_INT).

The presence of police cameras is relativised by mentioning the—even more numerous—cameras of journalists and participants (022_GD, P2, P3).

These other cameras are described as technically more advanced (022_GD, P2, P3).

All these arguments have in common that they depict police resources and strategies as “not worth mentioning.” In connection with justificatory narrations in the face of perceived demands for control, diminishing strategies are chosen as a matter of course. Apparently, this does not, in the respondents’ views, contradict the fact that the same resources are assessed as successful and effective in other narrative contexts.

Taking the Focus Off Rule Deviations—Police Perspectives on Control of the Police

Efforts to limit or externally control police powers are often met with a knee-jerk rejection from within the organisation itself. “The police are once again placed under a general suspicion, combined with the suggestion that they will break the law” (own translation)—this, for example, from Michael Knape, who served as a director with the police chief in Berlin at the time, in a speech on the legislative process of the new Berlin law on assemblies. These two motives also frequently show up in the protocols: suspicions of abuse of power that are not justified in the view of the police and general contempt for control of the police.

The idea of the police being unjustly criticised is expressed in various ways. A lack of respect towards the wearers of uniforms, mistrust, and too little support from the political sphere are mentioned. The control of police by elected representatives in state parliaments in the form of minor interpellations (“*Kleine Anfragen*”) with respect to protest events, camera use, technical equipment, and so on, is also described as a nuisance because the questions themselves are understood by the police as signs of a fundamental mistrust towards the organisation.

For some, the “new visibility” of the police (Goldsmith 2010; Thompson 2005), in particular through countersurveillance, gives rise to hopes for a “new accountability” (Eijkman 2011), while others (the police) are motivated to strengthen internal cohesion and fend off aspirations for control. This is also suggested (at the level of the cop culture) by recent results of a survey in Berlin riot police units (Thinnes 2015). For instance, more than a third of the respondents did not believe that “the citizen [has] a right to learn who takes a measure against him” (own translation). Whistleblowers in the police are subject to very harsh exclusionary reactions; extremely strictly construed expectations of loyalty and error latency are a fundamental characteristic and problem of police culture (Herrnkind 2004). In the context of video recordings, this rejection of restrictions and control is characterised in particular by indignation at countersurveillance strategies, such as filming police activity with mobile phone cameras (Ullrich and Knopp 2018). In almost all group discussions, narratives are

¹¹ Lidl is a German discount supermarket chain.

present that report on the “arbitrariness” of this kind of surveillance of the police, which allegedly takes individual acts of police violence out of context, acts that given the context would often be interpreted as an entirely justified use of force.

Suspicious against the police activate standardised immunisation strategies. Reminiscent of a spectacular case of alleged racist violence by a federal police officer in Hanover, whose colleagues were well informed about what happened, two master’s students unambiguously condemned such acts. However, despite the existing detailed evidence, they simply considered the unanimous accounts in the media to be implausible. They doubted the plausibility of the silence of the officer’s colleagues. Such esprit de corps or peer pressure may have existed in the past, but nowadays such things are no longer possible, they said. They also made disparaging remarks about concepts in the social sciences employed to interpret such incidents, such as the “code of silence” (Punch 1983; Behr 2009).

This example, like further comparable arguments, is not proof of the absence of liberal, democratic principles and respect for the rule of law within the police. Most of the interviews and discussions do document such constitutional and democratic positions, for example in the form of an acknowledgement that the police are bound by the law. Occasionally, activists’ fears of police surveillance and violations of the law are recognised as plausible and legitimate by officers. It is just that these aspects do not play a prominent role in the considerations of the practitioners and are not detailed (except if it serves to prove the innocence of the police); rather, they explicitly acknowledge that they are bound by duty to acknowledge rights even though they do not personally endorse them with much conviction. Illegal police violence never appears as a structural problem, always as an exception that is attributed to the almost proverbial “bad apples” (own translation) (Behr 2009; Frevel and Behr 2015) or trivialised as an exceptional “kicking over the traces” (e.g., 006_GD, 032_INT, 040_GD, 053_INT). For its originators, the concept of the “resistance officer” provides a topos of “condensed self-criticism within the police” (Tränkle 2015, own translation) that personalises the problem.

In the interviews and group discussions, the cops are in an ambivalent, conflictual situation. In the terminology of recent police research, the fear of officers who might say something “wrong” could be interpreted as an expression of the constitutive conflict between the guideline-based police culture oriented towards the legality principle (Behr 2006) on one hand and the everyday norms of the “street cops” (Behr 2008) in the cop culture still strongly oriented towards masculinity and authority (ibid.) on the other hand. There is a tension between the police culture that, according to Behr, not only characterises the organisation but is also an *interpretive proposal of the police to the public*, an image of how police should be or at least outwardly appear, and the cop culture that ensures the internal cohesion of the police against their surroundings. Leading actors in the organisation are aware that the ideals of the organisational self-presentation are not necessarily identical with the everyday practices of common officers and indeed that describing the latter may threaten the desired public image of the police. From the perspective of organisational sociology, one might state that in order to secure legitimacy the leadership strives to stabilise the outward appearance of the police according to its normative order. This quite evidently occurs in the explicit knowledge that deviations from the formal rules of the organisation are by no means rare exceptions in the factual order. As Luhmann noted, such deviations need not be dysfunctional or unwanted. Rather, they are often “convenient illegality” (Luhmann 1976: 304–14, own translation), which necessarily comes about when a self-consistent normative order collides with environments (i.e., systems with corresponding rationalities of their own) and cannot be seamlessly implemented in practice. In the case of the police, the fact is that the comprehensive principle of compulsory prosecution cannot be honoured in practice due to a lack of resources but also fundamentally.

Luhmann also mentions the disadvantages or costs of this situation: Illegality must remain latent; its systemic functionality must be concealed and at best personalised as an individual deviation. This is achieved by tropes such as the “resistance officer.” These cops are not just legally and morally problematic “Ramboes”—in certain dangerous situations they are, from the perspective of their colleagues, a useful “small detaining unit” (Tränkle 2015, own translation). In the end, useful illegality requires “auxiliary acts of protection and concealment” (Luhmann 1976: 313, own translation). This contributes to the formation of the *code of silence*.

A very selective reference to established discursive patterns of criticism is striking and characteristic in this regard. While criticism of surveillance measures of the police against protesters (which is often set forth with the argument of unjustified general suspicion) is almost unanimously rejected as excessive by cops, officers perceive themselves as under general suspicion, in particular with respect to the discussion about mandatory identifiability of officers. The following statement of a police union representative stands for various similar remarks throughout the interviews and discussions:

So, we're against that as a police union, because, um, we don't believe that it's right that all cops can be placed under the general suspicion that they're potential offenders that you need to be able to expose. (025_INT, police union)

The organisation and probably most of its members agree that such a general suspicion against the police is unfounded.

A Lesson to Learn?

Systematising Experiences

The police force is a very resistant object of research; its attempts and its real capabilities to influence research on the police are extensive. As a powerful gatekeeper, it controls and sometimes blocks access to the field. Moreover, ongoing research is subject to further direct steering attempts by the organisation and subtle influences that also result from the role of the researcher as an often unwanted petitioner confronted with the trappings of power. If these hurdles are overcome, the organisational error latency and a cop culture barely oriented towards reflection prove to be further stumbling blocks.

The obstacles that arise, that have to be interpreted and overcome in the course of research, are erected by an organisation whose fundamental rationality of action consists in establishing authority. As the organisational embodiment of state order is loath to be visible and thus to be “the criticised police” (Frevel and Behr 2015, own translation), it also aims at also setting up their definitional power towards research. The constant attempt to secure “definitional power” (Feest and Blankenburg 1972, own translation), including in processes of interpreting the organisation, manifests as a pattern in the relationship of the police to the sciences. The organisation sees itself under unjustified attack by critics, interprets this as being on the defensive, and uses this interpretation as an argumentative resource for fending off transparency. These circumstances lead to analyses of the research object that are not satisfactory and may in part be sanitised. Researchers walk a fine line and run the risk of being taken in by a staged image out of gratitude for access and reduced distance from the research object. The result is that critical police research is subject to narrow external limits as long as alternative data sources are lacking. The immense steering influence of the police on possible perspectives in the field also affects the researchers and thus places high demands on them to strike a balance between proximity and distance from the object of research.

However, it needs to be emphasised that all that has been described here concerning challenges and problems is not the whole truth, though these are broadly shared experiences of police researchers (Arbeitskreis Empirische Polizeiforschung 2012). Time and again over the course of the research process, I encountered representatives of the organisation who showed an interest in reflecting on their work, sometimes explicitly, not merely rhetorically, wishing for criticism of the organisation and going to considerable efforts to this end, so as to make research possible against the sluggish wheels of bureaucracy. These persons are mostly not “manual police workers” (own translation) or “street cops” (Behr 2009; Reuss-Ianni 1993); rather they are employed in particular management or brain-work positions that ascribe greater weight to “norms of individuality, self-expression, and personal development” (Behr 2009, own translation). This can be understood as evidence for Behr’s hypothesis that the closure of the police against criticism is not exclusively due to a generalised esprit de corps, that is, a “working bond between cop culture and police culture” (own translation) resulting in forgetfulness and silence when investigations against officers go hand in hand with official acquiescence or even assistance (Behr 2009). This is certainly necessary for safeguarding the error latency, but Behr considers the mechanisms of internal cohesion, the personal interdependencies in

“communities of danger” (Kühl 2014: chap. 4, own translation), such as the riot police, to be more decisive in this personnel segment. These communities are governed by relatively strong collegial “norms of camaraderie” (ibid., own translation) that arise in organisations in which the necessary use of the body makes the difference between the professional role and the person disappear (Kühl 2014: 153). According to Behr, when the public criticizes the police or when police officers testify against fellow officers in court, these mechanisms prevent an attitude of integrity and conformity with the law and instead favour a bunker mentality that also affects the sciences. The problems described stand in contradiction to the error culture that is formulaically invoked time and again.

Strategies for Successful Police Research

It seems inappropriate to not even start police research because of the difficulties that arise. There are means of dealing with some of the problems, as well as counter-tendencies to be located outside the conscious control of the participants. These include (a) a self-sustaining character of the survey and solution strategies at the level of the research design, in particular (b) data triangulation as a prerequisite for immanent criticism, (c) contact initiation via certain access points, (d) strategies of empowerment, as well as (e) general techniques for conducting and preparing interviews, and (f) self-reflection (see Table 2).

Table 2: Approaches to Dealing with Difficulties in Police Research

(a) Self-Sustaining Character of the Survey
Fortunately (from a research perspective), the described attempts at exerting influence are not successful <i>to the desired degree</i>. This is ensured for example by narrative constraints and self-sustaining discussion dynamics that also allow authentic, unsanitised insights into the field. At the same time, officers exhibit a desire to communicate, though sometimes with an expectation towards the researcher as their mouthpiece who should show “how it really is” (cf. Behr 2008: 53) and also an interest by the organisation in using the results generated.
(b) Data Triangulation
This makes it all the more important not to rely solely on data that are subject to intense steering. Rather, triangulation with observational data and with multiple perspectives into the field of research is urgently required (e.g., many of the studies in Gravelle and Rogers 2014). This allows contradictions between practice and the self-presentation of the police to come into view (see examples in Arzt and Ullrich 2016).
(c) Access Points
Informal contacts, in particular to senior management levels, again proved to be the decisive condition for successful access to the field and the possibility of carrying out research (cf. Fox and Lundman 1974). Bypassing the hierarchy rarely yields results; the higher the access obtained, the better. The concrete behavioural advice from Fox and Lundman to increase one’s own standing through “community activities” has also lost none of its validity, and “networking” requires an extensive investment of time (Cockbain 2015: 24). In this context, it is also important to seek out those who due to their position are able to take a more distanced, critical view of their own organisation (college teachers in the police training, researchers in and from the police, actors in psychosocial fields of activity, organised interest groups within the police). At the same time, the selectivity of the access needs to be reflected.
(d) Empowerment and Resilience
The solution approach for the symbolic challenges of the police power structure practised in the project consisted in carrying out interviews in pairs whenever possible, which is in any case advisable but not always easy to implement for practical reasons. This not only allows responsibilities to be divided (Person 1: interviewer, main counterpart; Person 2: responsible for the setting and equipment, but also informed and supportive with follow-up questions, notes, etc.) but also allows

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mutual reinforcement in order to master a situation that is strongly determined by extra-scientific motives and trappings of power.

(e) General Techniques for Conducting Interviews

Restraint in the discussion can only be dealt with using the standard techniques for conducting qualitative interviews. An open, interested attitude should be clearly on display, and clarity on strict and extensive strategies for anonymisation must be established. It is particularly important to exercise patience and to control one's own prompts to intervene, but it can be hard to avoid: a more directive role may be needed in such settings, thus resulting in a more prestructured, deductively generated data. Demeanour and vocabulary should take into account sensitivities, as far as possible making use of knowledge of the field, for example, to avoid using signal words with negative connotations. All this must serve to establish trust—which should be justified, not merely maintained through a false appearance.

(f) Self-Reflection

In order to master this, sufficient time and space for reflection (of the current state) of the research relationships should be scheduled. For this purpose, it is as important to scrutinise one's own symbolic signals (including through feedback from the researched counterpart), as a confident demeanour is imperative. At the same time, all findings need to be interpreted against the background of the conflicting goals of the surveyed organisation, acting in tension between competing principles: on one hand the legality principle, democratic principles of transparency and control, as well as new demands of the “error” and “learning culture”; on the other hand the de facto fiction of the police being governed by law and variously motivated secrecy interests.

Generally, for reasons of integrity and ethics, the “moral career of the project should be an essential part of the methodological analysis” (Punch 1989: 197; cf. Marks 2004: 886; Skinns, Wooff, and Sprawson 2016).¹² This dictum holds true for all currents, be they explicitly “critical” research about or “value-neutral” research on the police. The obstacles described here may well be suited to unify the different currents in police research as they all have similar experiences in the field, namely if assessing the research results is preceded by the big question of whether substantial empirical research is possible at all. This represents more than a methodological problem for research, as transparency of police work is also vital for any democracy.

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¹² For further practical advice, ranging from clothing to manner, see the chapters in Cockbain and Knutsson (2015a; e.g., Cockbain 2015; Brown 2015; Greene 2015).

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