

# Dancing with the devil?

## Participatory action research with police in South Africa

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*At the present moment, major changes are being proposed to the way that policing should be done in South Africa. These changes do not seem to be informed by any research agenda or by a long term strategic approach aimed at 'smarter policing'. This paper reflects on the possible partnerships that (academic) researchers and police could form with the shared objective of bring about change in police organisations. These collaborative research arrangements are undoubtedly difficult. Police and academic researchers continue to operate in silos and the two groups have distinctive institutional cultures, which are sometimes at odds with one another. However, as this paper tries to demonstrate, collaborative research is possible. This article is in many ways a personal reflection on my own research collaborations with the police using a participatory action research approach.*

We have recently been informed through the mass media that policing in South Africa is likely to change dramatically in the near future. We are told that the police are likely to be remilitarised; that police should 'shoot to kill' with far less caution than current legislation allows for; and that our police service should now be called a police force. We have also been informed that municipal and city police will be incorporated into the SAPS to facilitate shared resources and to centralise accountability. Those critical of what lies ahead have provided a few reasons as to why these new proposals have been made. Suggestions include that key government actors are populist and that government is trying to put forward a strong hand in appeasing those who will be travelling to South Africa for the World Cup.

Another suggestion is that the proposed changes are what the police actually want, and that these changes will increase police morale and effectiveness. Given that there is so much uncertainty in

South Africa as to 'what kind' of police we want, this debate is likely to rage on. However, what we can conclude with some certainty is that these new proposals for 'beefing up policing' are not informed by evidence-based research. Nor are they the result of joint research partnerships between police (particularly at leadership levels) and researchers. This is lamentable because, as is the case with any practitioner enhancement programmes, 'good' policing results from collaborations between researchers and the police.

The status quo in South Africa (i.e. police planning in the absence of research collaboration) flies in the face of current international trends. In recent decades, across the world, collaborative working and research relationships between police and academics have become fairly common. Police and academic researchers have come together with the shared aim of making police more effective, developing crime combating strategies, and creating new and better educational avenues for the

police. In places like Australia and the United Kingdom these relations have been formalised through institutionalised links or through the creation of research institutes 'owned' by both police and researchers.

While there can be no doubt that there have been significant shifts in the nature of police/academic relations in the past decade, it would be wrong to assume that the real organisational and cultural differences that interfere with the collaborative enterprises between these two groupings no longer exist. The challenges that were noted by policing scholars from the 1960s remain real today. What has changed, though, is that police and academic researchers have become less alien to one another. Even so, they are not yet bedfellows.

This article argues that police and academic researchers can become real collaborators and friends with a shared commitment and mission. What I hope this paper demonstrates, through a very personalised account, is that deciding how one works with police (what approach or method to use) is informed as much by the outcomes one hopes to achieve as it is by the personalities of the researchers themselves. The personality of the researcher impacts on the nature and extent of change that s/he is able to effect in collaborative projects with the police. Secondly, while research work with the police should be oriented toward making the police more effective, more reflective, more oriented toward rights based policing, and better able to use their limited resources, change outcomes do not have to be dramatic. Change often occurs in small shifts rather than through dramatic rifts. Change comes from individuals doing and seeing things differently and acting as role models for others in their organisational world.

In this article I challenge common academic concerns about researchers developing an 'over-rapport'<sup>1</sup> with those they are trying to study. To the contrary, my belief is that good research relations and outcomes between police and academics unfold when researchers are prepared to mix various self-identities and be aware that they have multiple positionalities.<sup>2</sup> Being reflective

multi-dimensional people provides academics with a greater possibility of bringing about change within police organisations. Creating a space for multi-dimensional positionalities also provides police officers with the ability to make use of the privileged position that academics have as knowledge producers.

In writing I have engaged in a process of what Margaret LeCompte refers to as 'an ethnography of the mind'. In so doing, I have tried to determine what motivates us (researchers and police officers) in our engagement with one another, and how we remain acutely aware of our own interpretive and interventionist biases. We have had to subject ourselves to 'the highest form of disciplined honesty'.<sup>3</sup>

## EXPOSING OUR MULTIPLE POSITIONALITIES

Over the past twelve or so years I have worked with police in a variety of different circumstances, both in Australia (where I lived for three years) and in South Africa. I will refer to two particular engagements with the police in this particular paper – my work with the Public Order Police (POP) unit and my engagement with the Police and Prison Civil Rights Union (Popcru). In both these engagements I have opted not to work as an outsider, but rather as someone who goes into the field to learn about the police world view and to share with the police concerned critical insights and observations informed by theoretical debates and research training.

In my view, being 'in the field' and being part of change processes is vital to really understanding the dynamics of an organisation like the police, or their representative bodies (the unions). The notion of praxis underlies my view of what good research is about. Research optimally should feed into social change. Effecting social change is only possible when worldviews come together, especially between unlikely collaborators like police officers and academic researchers.

What has this meant in real terms? It has meant being present with the police in good and bad

times. It means having to prove yourself as a researcher who is knowledgeable about your field, but also open to learning from the police. It means creating an environment where police and researchers are open to learn from one another. And, to achieve all of this, what is often required is a 'crossing over' from the researcher-practitioner relationship to relationships that embody friendship and even intimacy. Members of both the Durban POP unit (as it was then known) and of Popcru are my advisors, they are my sources of knowledge, they are my greatest critics, but they are also some of my closest and most trusted friends. This did not occur 'naturally' but rather emerged through working together as partners with shared concerns, prepared to acknowledge the challenges of our differing experiences, knowledge bases and points of view.

The challenge for police is to accept 'strangers' like academic researchers into a foreign world and to trust that they have their best interests in mind. For researchers, the challenge is to be in places that are sometimes uncomfortable, compromising and even dangerous. It means being able to find shared concerns but also to be able to confront with confidence by not acquiescing to a police mindset. Researchers are not there to simply service the police. They are there to challenge, to collaborate, to shift boundaries and create new ways of thinking and acting. In both my work with Popcru and with POP, an initial awkwardness led quickly to a sense of familiarity and a quick breaking down of any notion that academics lived in ivory towers far removed from the lives of ordinary people. But this only comes if both sides are prepared to embrace one another's humanity, their sense of commitment to better practice, and a willingness to respectfully tussle with one another's perspectives in ways that are non-defensive.

## **AN ALTERNATE WAY OF DOING POLICE RESEARCH – THE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH MODEL**

European police scholar, Maurice Punch, has argued for some time that ideally there should be

a positive and constructive engagement between the police and the universities. According to him, such an engagement would allow 'academics to scrutinise their theories in the "real" world, and policemen [to] test their practical experience against intellectual generalisations'.<sup>4</sup> But until fairly recently, such 'ideal' relationships seldom existed.<sup>5</sup> However, across the world, in the past ten or so years, the value of more collaborative and equalised relationships between police and academics has been promoted and even achieved. There are numerous examples of this.

In Australia, the Victoria Police have successfully exploited a uniquely Australian governmental research funding programme, designed to encourage university researchers to work with the public and private sector in the development of useful, applied research-based knowledge. Through this scheme the Victoria Police were able to collaborate with various academics (suitably successful in research track records and congenial to partnering them) in competitively applying for a limited set of federal government research resources.<sup>6</sup>

Another example is the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR). The SIPR describes itself as 'a strategic collaboration between twelve of Scotland's universities and the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, funded by the Scottish Funding Council, offering a range of opportunities for conducting relevant, applicable research to help the police meet the challenges of the 21st century and for achieving international excellence for policing research in Scotland'.<sup>7</sup>

There are a number of other similar type institutions across the world. There are also many smaller scale structured collaborative arrangements between police organisations and academic researchers/departments whose aim it is to improve police practice and enhance security outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Yet, even in places where great strides have been made, there are still a host of considerations that need to be accounted for in attempting to forge 'equal' research partnerships between police and academic researchers. Academics and police are still learning to work

together, to find common ground, and to see past the professional identity barriers. Three key challenges are likely to plague police/academic collaborations for some time to come, in South Africa and beyond.

In the first instance, there is likely to be ongoing strain between the police need for immediate action and the need of academic researchers for deeper, critical reflection.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, researchers will have to reconsider what constitutes valuable outputs, while not having to abandon 'academic freedom'. Like the universities, police organisations will need to value long-term strategic visions alongside short-term interventions.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, the research capacity on the part of the police may be limited. While police are well placed to identify problems, it may be more difficult for them to engage on an equal footing in research design. Their input into the types of methodologies and methods to be used might be restricted, as may their ability to actually conduct research. Third, and related to the second limitation, is the fact that police practitioners have little time for extensive reflection or writing about their work. This is particularly, but by no means exclusively, the case for rank-and-file police. Ongoing forums for reflection and analysis will better equip the police for independent reflection and may whet their appetite for such reflections in the future.<sup>11</sup>

Very few researchers (whether anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists or criminologists) are tooled up for working collaboratively with, or for dwelling within the world of, 'others'. Researchers march into 'the field' armed with concepts and theories (if we are lucky), and usually with preconceived ideas about how things do or should work. For researchers to forge partnerships with police and to have a say in the changes that are required, calls for a very different approach. Researchers need to 'permit themselves to experience the reframing of the "really real"'.<sup>12</sup> This means letting go of concerns about objectivity and bias. It means moving away from deeply entrenched ideas that researchers should be detached and 'neutral'. It requires an active effort from both police and academic researchers

to remove the 'artificial boundaries between researcher, activist, teacher and person'.<sup>13</sup>

How researchers actually *do* participatory action research (PAR) varies. The 'doing' can include using ethnographic methods. But it can also involve more distant participant observation methods such as observing operations and events, facilitating joint problem-solving processes, and working with police members in thinking through future possibilities. Police and academic scholars can also jointly devise and analyse survey instruments. Whatever approaches and methods are used, working within a PAR framework means being flexible and adaptable in achieving shared change outcomes. The ultimate measure of good PAR is creating a space for police and academics to dialogue, and through this dialogue to analyse, reflect and challenge one another's point of view. Good PAR leads to shared theoretical frameworks for understanding, and strategies that 'fit' with such theorisation.

Those who follow a PAR approach tend to work from the inside of police organisations, rather than from the outside. They adopt mixed positionalities as they present sometimes as researchers, sometimes as advocates, sometimes as challengers and sometimes as change agents. I have come to realise that these are not contradictory positionalities, but reflect the different aspects of their personas as well as the changing requirements of working for change with police organisations. I have a deep appreciation for the knowledge and experience of police as active change agents. While I value theory driven interventions, I know that theories need to be interrogated by lived realities. I have also come to realise that to really understand police work and to contribute to making changes within it, requires an involvement with the police beyond in-and-out interviews or drop-in surveys.

Those who adhere to PAR frameworks work together with the police with a basic acceptance that police knowledge has an equal (though different) value to scholarly knowledge. A PAR approach allows for the possibility of practitioners and academics opening themselves to real

dialogue, to interpersonal conflict, to struggling (personally and professionally) to achieve shared outcomes. It encourages a mutual respect for one another's knowledge and capacities. To achieve this, significant amounts of time need to be spent together as researchers and practitioners. To do this effectively, both police and academic researchers need to let go of what Schweder refers to as 'presumptive universals'.<sup>14</sup> Police need to be part of identifying the research programme, developing questions to be asked, analysing findings and problem solving. Police are not simply 'tellers of stories',<sup>15</sup> they are also listeners and script designers. They are deliberators and knowledge producers, as much as they are knowledge beneficiaries.

## PERSONALITIES AT WORK – REFLECTING ON THE UNTHINKABLE

Academic researchers enter police organisations with their own personal ethnographic histories. They are shaped by the people they work with, the ideas they are exposed to, and their broader personal experiences and preferences.<sup>16</sup> The way we do research and the types of research endeavours we choose to engage in is as much dictated by our training and our knowledge base as it is by our individual personalities. The truth is that not all social researchers would choose to be out at night with paramilitary police units or toy-toying with police unionists. Many would prefer to understand police/community relationships through documentary analyses or by doing archival research. And there are social researchers who adhere to the belief that researchers should maintain some distance from those they research to be able to provide 'objective' analysis. This is not an understanding of social research that I share.

If researchers are to choose to use a PAR approach they have to be prepared to practice what LeCompte refers to as 'disciplined subjectivity'.<sup>17</sup> They must know what they bring to the research field, what they can cope with, and what the conscious and unconscious sources of their predispositions are. And the police need to

be comfortable with the personalities that researchers bring into their organisations.

The truth is that members of the POP unit would not have given the time of day to a researcher who was timid and not prepared to participate in the daily life (both the good and the bad) of the unit. In addition, given that the unit had not been open to researchers previously, a researcher who really wanted to understand and assist with change processes had to demonstrate integrity, *verstehen* (interpretive understanding) and a good knowledge of the policing field. Being a woman researcher in this police unit required me to share knowledge in an accessible way, while at the same time being somewhat flirtatious, and game for almost anything. Similar personality traits were important in my work with the police unions.

There are considerable consequences that might result from working collaboratively in research-based change processes with this approach in mind. It means that relationships that might have started off on a 'professional' basis might become highly personal. Equally, police and academics can find themselves in the unlikely situation of acting in solidarity with those previously considered the 'other', even the enemy.

I had to deal with these difficulties in my own work with the police. I began working with Popcru as a young academic activist who had often been on the receiving end of police brutality. I started out as an advocate for police labour rights, believing that police were workers and that police were more likely to respect the basic rights and freedoms of others if they were afforded these rights themselves. To work with the police unions (many of whose members had been part of the state police agencies at the height of apartheid), I had to find the 'good' in police officers.

In my early working years with Popcru, I had to prove that there was an alignment between my research interests and the goals of Popcru. Through my advocacy role and through contributing directly to policy and shaping

Popcru programmes, I became a 'friend of Popcru'. Through actively engaging with Popcru in research and policy programmes and participating in Popcru-led forums, I became a trusted collaborator. Through my years in doing research on, with and for Popcru I have found myself being called upon to assist with writing official documents such as annual reports, and even formulating speeches and press releases. The recent General Secretary of Popcru has even co-authored an article published in an international journal. This is not to say that the relationship has always been smooth. I have had heated debates with Popcru about their refusal to take a stand when the corruption case against former commissioner Selebi first emerged. I have argued with them about their political allegiances. I have been openly and publicly critical of their lack of proactive engagement in police and criminal justice policy. But the relationship holds because we share common goals and a commitment to a research agenda.

My 'cosy' relationship with the police union is somewhat unique in the South African context and has given rise to questions from other researchers and scholars about my 'over-familiar' relationship with the union. I have been interrogated about my sensibility in working so closely with police unions who are often viewed by ('progressive') researchers as being obstructive with regard to reform, and conservative in the demands they make. Despite these criticisms I remain an advocate for the police union movement, a position that is often not popular with policing scholars who align themselves with critical criminology.

Acknowledging these unspoken aspects of doing research with police with a shared vision of change (big or small) may raise eyebrows. But it is important to reflect on what makes collaboration possible, to think more about how as a researcher one is able to get close and personal with police in a non-instrumental way. Being flirtatious, being intrepid, being open to learning and to teaching are all traits that have opened up collaborative relations and enterprises. What is equally important, both from the perspective of the police

and academic researchers in collaborative endeavours, is to be able to confront with confidence.

Academics and police will not always be in agreement on the way they see the world, policing strategies or theoretical frameworks. Part of being able to work together across vast occupational divides is being confident about what you know, being flexible about what you can learn from one another, and being prepared to be confrontational when points of view conflict. For both police officers and academic researchers, real collaborative working relationships require taking risks, acknowledging weakness, feeling at home in each other's occupational spaces, and letting go of the need to monopolise knowledge production and truth. Lastly, working within a PAR framework requires all actors to be committed to developing the capacities of individuals and of the organisation.

## **SEARCHING FOR OUTCOMES – THE SMALL STUFF COUNTS**

PAR has at its heart a concern with effecting change. This is achieved via the 'engagement of participants within and beyond the research encounter'.<sup>18</sup> The broad anticipated outcomes of PAR approaches are participatory working arrangements, social improvement (better policing and enhanced security) and knowledge production (new ways of thinking and problem solving around safety issues). PAR outcomes reach far beyond academic papers and conference papers, opting rather for a focus on non-hierarchical knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

When we think about change as an outcome, this does not necessary mean major structural or organisational change. As we are all aware, big-scale change is difficult to achieve. Getting all actors on board a participatory endeavour is difficult to achieve. This is especially the case in hierarchical organisations like the police where cultural and structural change is slow, always requiring authorisation and buy-in from those at the apex of the organisation. In trying to effect police organisational change, it is important to

work closely with powerful individuals. But the truth of the matter is that real power lies at the bottom of the police organisation, where professional discretion is used at the coalface of every-day street policing.<sup>20</sup> For any change to occur and take hold there needs to be joint thinking about outcomes and challenges, as well as oversight of projects between academic researchers and practitioners.<sup>21</sup>

Police organisational change should not be viewed as a parabolic leap in organisational structure, managerial style and strategic direction. Rather, change occurs in 'waves', in bits and pieces, in new little ways of thinking and acting which, if strung together properly, can buzz as exemplars of organisational innovation. What should be at the heart of PAR outcomes is identifying and establishing the conditions that allow for the introduction of new ways of thinking and acting on the part of individual and group members of the police, regardless of rank. For this to occur we need to focus on change from a micro-cultural perspective, and highlight that ways of thinking and ways of acting are mutually constitutive.<sup>22</sup> In thinking of police as individual change agents it is important to employ research methodologies that promote the capacity of police officers to resist, accommodate and shape police organisational reform. PAR is premised on the belief that police cultural change is possible and that rather than coming necessarily from the top downwards, it tends to bubble upward and outward as small groups of police officers engage with new possibilities and reconfigured social arrangements.<sup>23</sup>

Through working with Popcru and other police unions across the world, new sensibilities have been formed about the important link between police rights and democratic policing practice. Working with police union leaders in joint research projects has created the space for police unionists to think more critically about their programmes and their defensive stance with regard to change. Doing PAR with police unions from South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the United States has led union leaders to rethink the role of non-state or auxiliary groupings in

creating safer communities. It has also created the space for police unions to open their previously closed organisations to the gaze of researchers.

My three-year engagement with the Public Order Police unit in Durban also led to more micro-level change. Over the years members of this very closed and maligned unit came to see that there was value in having an 'outsider' provide a considered view of what was taking place in the unit and what changes needed to still be made to reach 'transformation' policy goals. Discussions between myself and platoon commanders allowed for a consideration of alternate ways of managing platoons more in line with participatory values. My direct engagement, as an ethnographer, with all aspects of the unit's work, provided police with a new lens through which to understand academic researchers, not as distant cynics, but as engaged partners.

## CONCLUSION

In South Africa we already have an excellent network of policing scholars and researchers, many of whom have worked very closely with the police and with police policy makers. What we lack, however, is discussion and reflection about how we do research with and on the police. What is equally missing is reflection on how we forge collaborations that lead to new and more thoughtful police practice and considered solutions to the significant problems of crime and social disorder that we face in South Africa.

What we are facing at present is a situation where police leaders and policy makers are developing plans without accounting for (or trusting) the possibilities that PAR type collaborations could bring. We are in a place where police officers on the street are receiving conflicting messages about what is expected from them. To overcome these problems we require police and researchers to commit themselves to participatory action research programmes aimed at more informed, smarter policing. This needs to occur at both the most localised level and the highest levels of decision making and planning. More 'in the field' research work needs to be done to understand the

dilemmas that the police face, and we need to share time and space with them to learn about what informs the decisions that they make. At higher levels, what is required is a policy think-tank made up of researchers, practitioners and politicians who can come together to identify problems, develop research programmes, interpret findings and strategise waves both big and small.

Our current crisis in policing is an indication that both police and researchers have failed to find ways of coming together to share knowledge, forge trusting and respectful partnerships and engage in robust debates without this leading to ruptures and fall-outs. I declare myself a failure in this regard as I retreat into my small academic world when I hear about 'new' regressive remedies (from the top) to old problems.



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## NOTES

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