



THE FLUIDITY OF 'POLICE CULTURE': ENCOUNTERING THE CONTEXTUAL COMPLEXITY OF POLICING STREET-LEVEL DRUG USE

MONIQUE MARKS (DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY)

SIMON HOWELL (UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN)



THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICING FIELD – INTRODUCTORY POINTS

- A highly fluid and contradictory policy/legal framework (prohibitionist drug policy Acts/contrasting Drug Policy Master Plan and Constitution);
- A strong human rights advocacy lobby within a highly moralistic and conservative public;
- A fatigued police service tired of reform;
- A growing drug market and problematic drug use population;
- An absence of social development and social services for the drug use community;
- A criminal justice system that fails everyone.

RAPID ETHNOGRAPHY AND DELIBERATIVE ENGAGEMENT

- Observing (and participating) from the back of the van (result of long term praxis oriented research with police by the authors) necessary to understand the complexity of policing in SA;
- Provided opportunities to unravel the (complex and often contradictory) assumptions that street level police officers hold;
- Engaging in conversations from an immersed perspective rather than as an elevated moral and intellectual judge;
- Taking observations and interpretations forward through ongoing 'safe' deliberations.

LEARNINGS FROM THE STREET AND FROM DIALOGUE SESSIONS

- Police have very clear ‘interruptions of consciousness’ (Terrill et al 2003) in doing drug related work on the streets;
- Pressured to act in ways that they know are ineffective (performance management; public opinion; politicians interference; expectations of habit);
- High levels of discretionary intervention in regard to street level drug users (from abuse to empathy);
- ‘Law on the streets’ seldom meets ‘law on the books’ – not unexpected (see Beletsky 2015).

WHEN TACIT KNOWLEDGE MEETS HARM REDUCTION AND PUBLIC SAFETY MEETS PUBLIC HEALTH

- Police are acutely aware of the disjuncture between procedural obligations and structural ineffectiveness;
- Acknowledgement that current policing strategies and tactics may serve to strengthen the illicit drug market rather than weaken it;
- Police are acutely aware of the harmful and senseless impact of arrests – tactics limited by performance targets and a resource poor service environment.

WHEN SLOW BURN AND TACIT KNOWLEDGE MEET

- Given the space and due respect, police can and do generate new ways of acting and doing, prior to and even independent of legislative change (Burriss et al 2004) – the policing habitus is open to change and modification;
- Police constantly create new knowledge which can fundamentally reshape their mandate – and can even assist in achieving harm reduction and public health outcomes;
- One of the most effective mechanisms to change police practice is through engaging officers thinking actors in bottom-up and top-down processes;
- Such changes are not only concerned with policing – with reference to drugs, public health and public safety are closely intertwined.

TAKING TIME TO FIND A COMMON LANGUAGE

- Police (even if a small critical mass initially) have both in SA and elsewhere demonstrated their ability and willingness to craft alternatives to traditional enforcement approaches;
- Deliberative engagements with police that take account of their daily reality and sense making creates the opportunity for significant shifts in basic assumptions that are held;
- The challenge of academics is to be less fixed in OUR understandings, to maintain a sense of wonder, and to embrace messiness and discord as opportunity – the burn is slow for all actors!

UNRAVELLING IDEAS OF POLICE CULTURE IN THE POLICING OF DRUGS

- The shortfalls of monolithic conceptualisations of ‘police culture’ are easily observed in the drug policing landscape;
- Police have complex relationships both with the organisation they work in and the people they police – Police cultural knowledge is fluid and is therefore not simple to analyse;
- Public health and public safety are often legislated for separately yet are intimately interwoven in the daily needs of citizens – that they are structurally separate prevents both good policing and good health service provision;
- It is therefore important to both treat public safety and make safe public health.