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Folklore (ISSN 0015-587X, eISSN 1469-8315)
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Citation Details

Citation for the version of the work held in 'OpenAIR@RGU':

SMITH, R., PEDERSEN, S. and BURNETT, S., 2014. Towards an organizational folklore of policing: the storied nature of policing and the police use of storytelling. Available from <i>OpenAIR@RGU</i>. [online]. Available from: http://openair.rgu.ac.uk

Citation for the publisher's version:

SMITH, R., PEDERSEN, S. and BURNETT, S., 2014. Towards an organizational folklore of policing: the storied nature of policing and the police use of storytelling. <i>Folklore</i>, 125 (2), pp. 218-237.

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“This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in FOLKLORE on 3rd July 2014, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/0015587X.2014.913853>.”

Towards an organizational folklore of policing: Reflecting on the storied nature of policing and the police use of storytelling in an organizational context

Robert Smith, Sarah Pedersen and Simon Burnett

Abstract

Among police officers much of the working day consists of telling stories about every policing and events. Although the study of narrative and storytelling in organizational contexts is an expanding area of research the same cannot be said of the study of narrative and storytelling in a police context. As an area of study it remains under researched although not unexplored. Using the writings of management narrative theorists such as David Boje and Yiannis Gabriel as a starting point this paper considers policing organisations and agencies as storytelling organisations. To do so we conduct a literature review on the ‘storied nature’ of policing and of the police use of storytelling in an organisational context. Consequentially, this reflective paper contributes to the developing literature because it both reviews and maps the literature highlighting potential areas for future research.

Introduction

Consideration of the notion of organizational folklore amongst emergency services workers such as fire-fighters and paramedics has an established pedigree (see McCarl, 1985; Tangherlini, 2000). Among police officers, although much of the working day consists of telling stories about everyday policing and events (Van Hulst, 2013) studies of organizational storytelling in a policing context have yet to feature in folklore journals. Management and narrative scholar Yiannis Gabriel (2000, p.2) advocated “*studying organizations through the stories that are told in them and about them*”. According to Gabriel (2000, p.2) “*Stories open valuable windows into the emotional, political and symbolic lives of organisations*” and humanise an organisation. Indeed, “*stories transform into experience...and experience turns into stories* (Gabriel, 2000, p.18)”. There is thus a circular, cyclic nature to the process. Gabriel (2000, p.22) further asserts that “*...organizational stories develop their*

character and plots...from the personal experiences of individuals in organisations”.

Storytelling is a powerful narrative craft and performed discourse (Boje, 1991: Gabriel 2000). Moreover, for Connie Fletcher (1999, p.47) police organisations are filled with storytellers.

Merlijn Van Hulst (2013, p.625) suggests that police storytelling is a policing practice in itself and does not merely represent reality but brings new perspectives on reality. He argues police officers learn to police and what it means to be an officer, through storytelling practices (p.628). Nevertheless, theoretically and empirically police storytelling is an understudied aspect of police culture and has become a thematic area of study in itself (p.625). Despite extent attention given to police storytelling, it remains a mainly descriptive endeavour which has not led to a sophisticated analysis (p.625). This can be blamed on the fact that police storytelling has been poorly conceptualised.

In management studies, consideration of the use of narrative and storytelling and in particular the notion of the storytelling organization (Boje, 1991, 2008; Gabriel, 1991; Gabriel, 2000; 2009; Brown, Gabriel & Cherardi, 2009) is an established area of organizational research. Organizations, have, tell, and are stories (Parry & Hansen 2007, p.283); and there is an oral nature to much organizational storytelling (Boje, 1991, p.111). Organisational storytelling is of relevance to policing because narrative and storytelling play an important part in knowledge management in policing and criminal justice contexts (Burnett, Pederson & Smith, 2011).

The notion of organizational folklore is of interest to us because as Fletcher (2009) noted in policing settings, storytelling has a folkloric aura to it.ⁱ Moreover, Fletcher suggests that the police and other emergency services use of storytelling have more practical purposes too. According to Timothy Tangherlini (2000) stories provide

a psychological outlet for emergency service workers as well as being useful in negotiating power relationships. Thus it is surprising that there have been so few studies of narrative and storytelling in policing contexts. Nevertheless, Policing is very much a narrative-bounded and ‘storied activity. Management scholar Ellen O’Connor (2002) refers to the “*storied nature of business*” and we borrow the term to explore the storied nature of policing.

This study is essentially an ‘*organizational ethnography*’ (Orr, 1996), albeit one with an ‘*auto-ethnographic*’ undertone (Muncey, 2005). It is not a traditional auto-ethnography because although we present in the text we are not the central core of the story. We use the auto-ethnographic voice of the author Robert Smith to conduct a ‘*retrospective ethnography*’ (Watson, 2010) told for the purpose of sense-making and making sense (Patriotta, 2003) of police storytelling practices. Robert as a former police officer uses personal experiences and understanding as a heuristic device to help decipher police storytelling practices in general. As an academic in a Business School and whilst engaged in a literature review of police storytelling for a separate research project on police blogging (Burnett, Pedersen & Smith, 2011), he renewed his passion for police stories. We argue that paradoxically there is a basic misunderstanding of the way we understand the multiple, overlapping roles storytelling plays among the police. The literature review should be of interest to scholars of organizational folklore, policing and organisation scholars. We also review the extant literature on organizational storytelling as it relates to the police service to answer the question – “*What do stories tell us about the nature of the organisation and delivery of policing?*” In doing so, we tap into literature which documents and explores the living folklore of policing. At a theoretical level, an important issue that requires to be addressed is concerns the relationship between

story and 'facts'. The overarching research goal is to answer the fundamental question of storytelling, which is "*who tells whom what kind of stories, when and why?*" as understood within the context of my policing experience. We did not set out to develop a narrative theory of police storytelling because - 1) stories can act as proto-theories in their own right (Gibb Dyer & Jenkins, 1991); and 2) to try and do based on a single autoethnographic and retrospective study would prove unconvincing in terms of theory generation (as understood by Eisenhardt, 1989; Whetton, 1989). It is our hope that in highlighting the police use of narrative, we begin the patient process of theory building which one day will make an impact on our understanding of the importance of the subject. In the remainder of the paper, we propose a model of police storytelling and explain why that allows us to understand this better.

Reviewing storytelling in a policing context

Stories enable people to share experiences and pass on what they know. They facilitate what Simon Burnett (2010) and others refer to as the organisational learning process of "*knowing through narrative*". Storytelling is therefore a useful way of capturing and sharing knowledge because stories are told daily throughout an organisation in the corridor, over coffee, by e-mail or through social media. Indeed, recently there has been an increase in stories as carriers of knowledge in organisations (Ward & Sbarcea 2001). Telling stories can also be a way of processing a particular experience, and can be told for a variety of purposes.

Storytelling in other emergency service settings:

It is helpful to first examine the literature of storytelling in other emergency service settings. According to Tangherlini (2000) among paramedics, part of the working day consists of telling stories about emergency responses and rehashing the events that are

the *raison d'être* of their profession. Tangherlini suggests that paramedics have a deeply cynical and self-deprecatory storytelling tradition. They present themselves as anti-heroes to dispel the popular myth of themselves as silent heroes and resort to sardonic quips and black humour as a form of protective resistance and to manage their tactical engagement with others including police officers. Furthermore, Mark Wall (2006) argues that emergency services managers learn from practice yet practice is an expensive and sometimes a dangerous teacher hence the utility of using case study method to allow the development of vicarious experience and reflection on practice using stories. Other settings include the NHS (Bate, 2004) and Counsellors (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003).

Reviewing and narrating the literature on police story-telling:

The disparate literature on the police use of storytelling is sparse and is spread across a number of disciplines from sociology, anthropology and policing studies. This is important because rarely will a reader access all these literatures. The purpose of this section is to present an overview of the literature, before discussing it in detail and elaborating upon it in detail in the sections which follow. Much of the research has an American focus (Fletcher, 2006/2009) but many of the facets are nevertheless relevant in a British Policing context. Fletcher found that many storytellers exist in the police force and that “*storytelling is an essential part of the officer’s equipment*” (Fletcher, 1996 p.36). Thus Police officers, like Tangherlini’s medics recount stories to each other to warn or educate others about situations they have come across (Tangherlini, 2000).

Early narrative studies of policing included ethnographic studies (Bittner, 1967; Van Mannen, 1973/1974; Cain, 1973; and Punch, 1979). Moreover, the subject of narrative and in particular storytelling as common-sense organisational knowledge

features heavily in the policing and emergency services literature, particularly in relation to policing (See McNulty, 1994; Horton, 1995; Fletcher, 1996; Fletcher, 1999; Anderson & Muirhead, 2009).

In the policing literature, storytelling has been used to make sense of - the Police Station (Holdaway, 1980); Criminal Trials (Bennett, 1978); Organizational Drama (Trujillo, 1987); Police Humour (Holdaway, 1988); Police as Street Corner Politicians (Muir, 1977); Probationer Training (Smith, 1999); Police Culture (Wilson, 2000); Police Investigations (Leary, 2002); Violence and the politics of storytelling (Jackson, 2002); Police Parables (Ford, 2003); Policing Transformation (Marks, 2004); As Lived Experience (Sutton, 2004); Oral History (Cockcroft, 2005); Police Leadership (Rowe, 2006); Police Technology (Anderson & Muirhead, 2009); and Canteen Culture and police storytelling in the police station (Van Hulst, 2013). From this long list several interesting themes emerge. The majority of the studies on police storytelling focus on trying to understand the nuances of police culture and why police act in the way they do and are therefore concerned with how the police interact with their environment and the public. Many studies relate to understanding police actions, activities and duties as performances from training to investigation to trials. A lesser number of studies concentrate on the physical environment and organisational leadership. Learning from others is a common feature across all the story types.

Van Hulst (2013, p.626) discusses the story category of “*War Stories*” which are told about well known local criminals, past events and places that are important to a department (see Orr, 1996 for a discussion of war stories in another organisational context). These can be used by mentors in the field to reinforce particular elements of police practice and culture. They are used to highlight mistakes which can be made and how to protect oneself and others from making the same mistake. A war story is

an initially amusing, often boastful story which after many repetitions becomes boring (Orr, 1996). He does however stress that in organisational settings they can be useful for passing on situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Many stories act as a pep talk and are nostalgic (Waddington, 1999). In addition, the concept of 'dirty work' within policing and in particular how they storied and explained this in relation to their organizational identities is relevant (Dick, 2005); as is the fact that detectives trade in stories (Hobbs, 1997). However, despite this plethora of studies, very little research has been carried out in relation to how the police use storytelling in an organisational setting and as a knowledge management tool within the police service. Although the focus of many studies is on storytelling *per se* the studies stand alone and do not attempt to build upon the collective knowledge, or theorise why storytelling and storytelling ability are crucial to police performance.

Fletcher (1999/2009) stresses that police stories can be divided into two main categories – the personal and the organisational. Fletcher (1999) argues that the police use of storytelling is embedded in masculine forms of storytelling practices and that accomplished police story tellers are primarily men and that women officers seem to have trouble casting themselves in the role of an organisational storyteller. In a masculine environment such as policing storytelling is about control. Moreover, Fletcher (2006) argues that storytelling in police organizations functions on two well-known levels: the educational and therapeutic; and also on a hidden level, the social. At the educational level, police officers generate common-sense knowledge in everyday life routines through stories and storytelling mechanisms (McNulty, 1994). Such common-sense knowledge is not innate, or spontaneously generated, but must be actively transmitted from one generation to the next by storytelling practices making it highly valued in police culture because it allows an officer to deal with the

many ambiguous situations they face. For McNulty, police stories centre around work-related routines, or through the narration of work-based scripts.

The study by Van Hulst (2013, p.638) sheds some more light on the craft of police storytelling by suggesting that through storytelling, police officers make sense of things that are going on in their district; through their narrative practice, police officers shape their identity and give meaning to their experiences, work, and environment. Indeed, he identified two apparently opposing cultural elements of police storytelling. The first is as a learning mechanism to enable officers to learn the craft of policing, vicariously. The other element is the role of storytelling in police canteen culture. A third element of storytelling at the police station, suggests that storytelling is a crucial part of every day police life. Van Hulst also identified several different categories of policing scholars interested in storytelling. The first category he identified was classic police studies from the first generation of police researchers (such as Westley, 1970; Skolnick, 1966/67; Rubinstein. 1973; and Van Maanen, 1974). Their over-riding methodology was ethnographic in nature. Van Hulst speaks of a second and third generation of policing researchers and stresses that their work demonstrates that neither culture nor police storytelling are monolithic entities, thus police stories vary across time and space.

Jerome Bruner (1990) argues that stories do not need to be true or complete, what matters is that the stories seem lifelike in the way they depict what happens. This is important because Van Hulst (2013, p.627 echoing Shearing & Erickson, 1991, p.491) stresses that one should not be concerned about truth in evaluating police stories but rather whether the knowledge they capture works in practice. Van Hulst (2013, p.630) therefore suggests that police stories are subject to the concept of 'tellability'. First of all, the story must be capable of being told which is important because some stories

take time to tell. Also, some subjects are so sensitive that they cannot be told truthfully and factually and it may be necessary to change names or places and anonymise a story. Storytellers will vary the story according to their audience and that each rendition of the story may differ from previous ones (p.630). Furthermore, he highlights the common police practice of the co-production of stories where two police officers share the telling of the story (p.630). Moreover, he posits the story categories of police “*desk*” stories and “*tough*” stories (p.637). Van Hulst (2013, p.626) stresses that whilst many police stories are told and that these are capable of being ordered into various themes, the storytellers and collectors seldom analyse the story content. Moreover, those that write about police storytelling are invariably outsiders and not insiders.

From these readings, we identified a further three elements of police storytelling namely the political, evidential and legal thus expanding the theoretical knowledge base. When taken in cognisance with Fletchers dimensions of educational, social and therapeutic, they form a potentially useful model, as presented in section below.

The political dimension:

Fletcher (2006) stressed that at a social level storytelling can serve to ratify some members and ostracise others which suggests that politics, power and patronage is a distinctive area of police storytelling in its own right. Gabriel (2000) also acknowledges this element of control in organizational stories. Stories can act as instruments of oppression as well as inspiration and that one must be storied as a leader by others (Parry & Hansen, 2007, p.290). It is not a self-serving narrative but can serve self and others. Leadership and being in control are key issues in police stories and a feature of storytelling. Parry and Hansen (2007, p.282) identify

congruence between the nature of leadership and the properties of other organizational stories and suggest that followers, follow and are influenced by organizational stories which mirror shared leadership values. Consequentially, they frame story making as a leadership activity with the potential to inspire followers because stories are an excellent medium through which to enact leadership. Leaders often provide a compelling storied vision that inspires followers to act to fulfill their vision by ‘telling stories’ which relate to the espoused vision. There is a need to separate the story teller from the story because the stories themselves can operate as leaders because followers follow the story as much as the leader. It is easier to discredit a theory than a passionately held storied belief. This approach dictates that instead of developing the leader it is necessary to develop leadership narratives which resonate within organizations and the epistemological basis of the thesis is that it is constructed on a scaffolding of narrated events which include coming from humble beginnings, overcoming adversity and succeeding via self-education and hard work.ⁱⁱ Moreover, Parry and Hansen advocate that to appreciate leadership one must concentrate on stories of leadership and follow the link to authentic, charismatic leadership (Turner & Mavin, 2008). For a leader to be seen as authentic they must story themselves as being a ‘copper’s copper’.

The ethnographic research of Mike Rowe (2006) examined the attitudes of junior officers towards those in senior positions suggesting how these could be used to formulate improved models of police leadership, or at least allow them to tell better stories. Rowe found that frontline officers valued leaders with considerable direct leadership experience and used this storied knowledge about their leaders to circumvent and resist reforms to which they did not subscribe if the leader did not measure up to expectations. Thus ‘butterfly men’ were viewed with suspicion. Rowe

points to a ‘credibility gap’ to be bridged when trying to impose transformational leadership on the police service. Interestingly, the knowledge is transmitted via stories of acceptance or rejection. Competitiveness is also an issue as according to Tangherlini (2000, p.46) police officers vie with each other to tell the best stories.

This discussion of storytelling and leadership suggests that police stories may be a variant form of ‘Great-Man-Stories’ (Carlyle, 1888; Cawthon, 1996) as Police leaders and ambitious officers go in search of opportunities to narrate compelling stories which illustrate their leadership ability. The thesis brings narrative based subjects of heroism and hero-worship into play and appeal to the emotive.ⁱⁱⁱ Cawthon suggested that it is still a powerful heuristic device because it was based on everyday observation and common sense blended with innate qualities, distinctive experiences, or some combination of both narrated in terms of leadership. These combined experiences coupled with trait based characteristics such as charisma can be used to re-story officers as ‘Great-Leaders’ particularly those seen to be made of the “*right stuff*” required for leadership. However, we do not yet know how and why police officers tell such stories. There are few ‘Great-Woman-Stories’ and in police storytelling practices the female officer is practically silent invisible making this particularly masculinised theory fits police storytelling practices perfectly. Although ‘Great-Man’ thesis operates best at a narrative level it can be enacted as a leadership style because leadership can be viewed as a dramaturgical performance, or performed role (Gardner & Avolio, 1998) whereby heroic leaders adopt the ‘Great-Man’ persona espousing male-centric characteristics and traits.

The evidential dimension:

From an evidential perspective storytelling ability is an area of interest. For example, consider the art of storytelling in police investigations from a practical evidential perspective (Leary, 2002); and the police and suspect use of storytelling in an interview context (Holt & Johnson, 2006); and that trial lawyers are basically articulate storytellers (Webster, 1990; Reid, 1997; and Johansen, 2006). Holt and Johnson found that in police/suspect interactions interviewees are encouraged to give extended and detailed accounts of an incident and that suspects are encouraged to reformulate these as extended tellings to provide more details. In this case, storytelling forms part of a specialised speech-exchange system. Johansen discussed the issue of the ethics of storytelling in court room scenarios arguing that stories can never convey the whole truth because they are incomplete analytical tools, and can be deceptive. Nevertheless, Johansen stresses that despite the incomplete nature of stories they can be powerful tools of persuasion.

The legal dimension:

This dimension is the most under researched in the literature. In telling stories in court and at other legal tribunals' police officers must narrate stories via a legalistic framework of laws, statutes, ordinances, regulations, and by-laws and must learn to re-story their experiences into such legalese. In court, their stories must clinically and forensically, prove or disprove facts or act as denials or rebuttals. A fundamental difference between paramedics and police officers is that the former do not have to go to court and give evidence. In court, 'stories' are not spontaneous; they are scripted and under cross-examination must stand as evidence. They must have a fairly tight relation to facts or else they are essentially well-crafted lies. There is thus a tension between Gabriel's distinction between reports (which are factually based) and stories

that use poetic license to deviate from facts. Police folklore is crafted in this perilous space between officialdom and reality. For instance, police officers may tell one story in court and a different story to their colleagues in the canteen, thus generating organizational legend which may over time morph into organizational folklore. The contrasting stories need not necessarily point to a lie, merely a different interpretation with the canteen story being designed to entertain an audience.

Building a model of effective storytelling and organisational regeneration in policing contexts:

In seeking to analyse organizational stories Gabriel (2000, p.36) posited eight poetic tropes or tropes of story work which guide how good stories are told. These are in the form of attributes or attributions:-

- Motive
- Causal Connections
- Responsibility (as in blame/credit)
- Unity
- Fixed qualities
- Emotions
- Agency
- Providential significance

These are helpful because they help us structure and make sense of police stories. In police stories, agency, actions, motives and assigning responsibility and blame feature heavily, as do emphasising the nature of personal and organisational qualities. Police stories encourage a sense of unity and belongingness because to participate one must

belong to the collective body. Police stories are stunted in terms of emotions and emotive expression. Gabriel further divided organisational stories into genres:-

- The Epic Story
- The Tragic Story (of the undeserving victim)
- The Comic Story
- Cock-Up Stories.
- Practical Jokes

These are useful in relation to understanding policing as a performed narrative and many police stories are epic stories of ‘derring-do’ with elements of tragedy in them. Many police ‘war-stories’ are told for either personal aggrandisement, or for passing on detailed knowledge are epic in proportion, whilst comic stories, cock-up stories and wind-ups may be told to amuse, entertain and educate simultaneously. However, Gabriel (2000, p.25) also differentiates between stories; proto-stories; morality tales; and reports. A proper story must have a beginning, middle and an end and be told for a purpose. Proto-stories are narratives or vignettes that are ill-formed because they have missing storytelling elements. A morality tale is a story with a moral purpose – these are common in policing culture. A report is a logical story told in chronological order with a factual content. Again these are common in policing but if the report is the official version there is usually an alternative counter-narrative (Andrews, 2002) in the form of an entertaining story. A story need not be true so many police stories have an element of the ‘tall-tale’ or ‘apocryphal-story’ about them. Gabriel (2000, p.113) also refers to stories of control and the role of stories in counter-culture and organisational resistance; and of nostalgic stories (ibid. p.177). Gabriel (2000, p.240) refers to the notion of “*Narrativities*” which is an excellent descriptor for the actions of police officers whom perform and enact living narratives by doing ‘story-work’.

From the above readings, it is apparent that many police storytelling practices generate and regenerate organisational knowledge, or facilitate organisational learning. Thus, we assemble a model/potential theoretical framework to map the variety of scenarios in which police make use of storytelling. See figure 1 below for a representation of this model.

Insert figure 1 here please.

These six areas are connected. The political domain signifies the ideological underpinning of the police as an organisation and the stories told relate to the way things are. The educational domain relates to important stories and how we learn them. The social domain contains stories of how and where we fit in to the organisation. The legal domain shapes how we shape official stories and the evidential domain relates to how such stories must be told. Finally, the therapeutic domain deals with the 'Restorying' process (if required). The model is tentative in that some of the storied components could fit into different domains. We appreciate that in reality the model may not prove to be so cyclical.

A Methodological justification of retrospective ethnography

The methodology used in this study is based upon empirically derived remembered data, or knowledge, gained from twenty five years practical experiences in the police. Retrospective ethnography (Tilly, 2007; Watson, 2010; Smith, 2010) is an accepted qualitative methodology used by sociologists, historians and anthropologists. The sociologist, Charles Tilly (Tilly, 2007) describes retrospective ethnography as a distinctive way of thinking about historico-sociological relationships and of organizing analysis conducted after the event. The power of the methodology is that it allows one to reconstruct actors' dispositions from historical record and from lived

memory to re-explore specific events (Kornblum's, 2004). It offers unique insights into organisational behaviours, beliefs and meaning by taking cognisance of situation (Hannabuss, 2000). Thus a researcher's personal experiences possess autoethnographic, reflective elements, but retrospective ethnography exceeds autoethnography with the focus being on recording social history as it happened. One is effectively re-recording memories formed within the researcher's mind. This becomes data for later reconstruction as the retrospective ethnography draws on memories to reconstruct social texture (Bryman, 2008). It is an unplanned ethnography and methodological framework which moves the research context away from the pejorative label of simply being post hoc research (Smith, 2010).

Nevertheless, retrospective ethnography can be problematic (Benyon, 2008) as there can be resounding silences (relating to Van Hulst's un-tellability) in which the ethnographer is unable or unwilling to discuss and divulge everything learned during the ethnographic experience because it may have personal or legal consequences. This raises ethical issues and may question the veracity of the stories. Issues of false memories, researcher bias and the dangers of nostalgia and re-authoring legend (Smith, 2005) are also relevant although ethnographic research (via covert participant observation) has been used to good effect in policing research (Holdaway, 1983).

A Retrospective ethnography on police storytelling

In this section Robert reminisces on his understanding of police storytelling. As a former officer, I maintain an interest in policing studies. I became a full time academic in 2008. Reviewing the literature on police storytelling caused a nostalgic resonance within me as I remembered past stories. I joined the police in 1983 and was sent to work in an industrial town with a criminal heritage. Ironically, Simon

Holdaway's book was the first book on policing that I read upon joining the police. Not coming from a policing background, I read voraciously any book on policing and crime to augment his knowledge. From personal experience and through reading books such as Holdaway's and Graeff's 'Talking Blues' (Graeff, 1989) I soon came to realise that there was a substantial difference between truth and reality as perceived by the public.

I learned the art and craft of policing by listening to and learning to repeat police stories, effectively engaging in conversational storytelling (Polanyi, 1985). As a probationary constable and young officer, I learnt on the job from listening to the stories of other more experienced officers. I was surrounded by stories and storytelling opportunities and learned that part of being a successful police officer is learning to be a competent storyteller. I became one. However, Police storytelling opportunities are hierarchical and one has to learn the right to tell them. Lack of service and experience places one on the margins of the stories. An abiding memory of my probation is of being constantly told to 'shut up' by older officers and repeatedly told that '83 numbers' cannot tell '63 numbers' anything^{iv}. Time is a valuable commodity and in policing there is a lot of down time when you are guarding, watching and patrolling. I learned to use the time effectively and productively. Down time is structured in that it may be for a defined period (as in a lunch break or whilst guarding a property or crime scene) or an undefined period (Such as while patrolling or waiting to give evidence in court). This is of importance in relation to Van Hulst's concept of tellability because different types of police stories require a different amount of time to tell.

Also the investigation of crime and intelligence gathering entails listening to the stories, or whispers, of criminals and members of the public with whom I came into

contact. Police stories and storytelling sessions are often interrupted by calls and one learns to resume the story at an appropriate time. I spent countless hours on patrol swapping work stories with colleagues. I avidly sought out war stories from detectives and other ‘thief-takers’ to gain knowledge of detective ability and thus improve my ability to detect criminals. Listening to war stories helped me build up an encyclopaedic knowledge of local criminals to the extent where I became known as ‘the oracle’. This was the knowledge base upon which I build my ability to source useful criminal intelligence and I valued such stories because often one learned important facets about criminals that can not be narrated in intelligence logs such as rumoured sexual proclivities and in the case of criminal businessmen – ‘who was at it’. Through the passage of time I assembled living biographies of entire criminal families and was able to add to them and update them by deciphering even small clues. Work was never dull – a sighting here, an informant’s tale there added to hard work and luck and one had another capture and case to build one’s legend as a ‘thief-taker’ on.

I now provide further examples of police stories from memory using the rubric of retrospective ethnography. However, some of the best stories cannot be told because they would have consequences thus they are at the limits of tellability (Van Hulst, 2013). I will discuss the stories as organised in figure 1, beginning with the Political Dimension. I have numerous memories of the political dimension of Police storytelling and in particular of the politics of power and patronage. Police tell ‘Great-Man-Stories’ about former and current organisational heroes. It is easier to tell such stories about retired officers from a bygone age. One such series of stories related to a village policeman renowned for his explosive temper and his propensity to use violence. One story told of him is that whilst dealing with a street disorder he was

attacked by a woman whose partner he had handcuffed. In danger of being overcome by an angry mob he lashed out at them all including the women with a brick he picked up in the street. Another story related to him quelling an unruly drunk by hitting him with a torch. In the 1970s and 1980s violence was more open and accepted in many cultures including police. Neither of the incidents resulted in a complaint and the stories became legend. This officer was also a respected 'thief-taker' and these qualities earned him 'Great-Man' status. A second example of a 'Great-Man' story relates to a Police Inspector (in)famous for using violence. One day (allegedly) he was in his office in a neighbouring town when he received a phone call from colleagues that a suspect was refusing to confess to a particularly nasty assault. The Inspector allegedly drove to the police station where the suspect was being held - walked straight into the interview room and knocked the suspect off his chair. The suspect confessed. Another story related to him single handedly dragging a drunk into the Station and telling the duty sergeant to lock him up because he was annoying him. The drunk was later released without charge. Such stories although tame illustrate how police stories and legends are built. Great-Man and hero stories tend to become conflated. Police hero stories are generally told about officers who have received a severe beating. One such story related to an officer who was beaten up at a dance by drunks using fence posts. He was beaten unconscious but later received a commendation. He did not feel particularly heroic and suffered flashbacks for years. The problem with such stories that is unless one was present oneself then there is no way of actually knowing if the story is true or not or whether it is merely an 'apocryphal' or 'putative tale'. However, the stories I remember the most and enjoyed were police war stories in which stories of local villains were recounted and how they cleverly avoided detection. Tales of how individual officers had caught clever villains

were also popular. These were often epic stories on a grand scale and acted as a form of biographical intelligence (Smith, 2008). These were wonderful mechanisms for passing on intelligence that could not be recorded because of its risqué nature. Some of the stories took hours to tell and would require a book to recount in their entirety if one could legitimately tell them. Sometimes these were ‘Detective Tales’ with a twist where it was alluded to that the detective prevailed through wrongdoing. In most stories the actual wrong doing was only alluded to. A less common type of story are ‘tales-of-oppression’ (and Machiavellian tales) often told against particular officers in positions of power who abused their power to transfer and reprimand officers. One Chief Inspector had a grudge against a particular Constable with an alcohol problem and repeatedly belittled him by writing comments in the Station log book regarding his spelling or any mistakes he made in investigating a crime. The Chief Inspector would walk into the muster room and rant at the unfortunate victim and everyone present would walk off in embarrassment at this abuse of power.

The Social elements of police storytelling are both complex and fascinating. My tutor who was a very moral man told me many ‘Good-Cop-Stories’ and counterbalanced these with ‘Bad-Cop-Stories’ to socialise me into how to police properly and honourably and to treat the public with respect. Thus one heard stories about police corruption and alleged ‘fit-ups’. However, my tutor was careful never to divulge names unless a story was so infamous that it could not be avoided. In this manner, one learned about bad policing practices and how to avoid them without actually having to personally experience them. My tutor had a hatred for anyone who he considered corrupt. He loathed the CID but refused to divulge why. In ‘Bad-Cop’ stories the ‘Bad-Cops’ usually got their come-uppance and were beaten up by the public and in one case thrown into the harbour fully clothed. Stories of and about

'Maverick-Cops' were also deeply entertaining but these are untellable. Rebel stories were told about cops who were unbending to authority and one particular tale relates to an officer at a single station who was given a bollocking by his Chief Inspector. On leaving the Station the senior officer realised he had left his cap and gloves. On returning to the Station he found his cap in the waste bin covered in cigarette ashes.

Much has been written about Police Canteen Culture but it would serve little purpose to repeat it here. However, the Canteen was a wonderful venue for telling stories whether acceptable stories or not. The point of many police stories is to socialise individual officers into the practice of telling acceptable stories – stories which are acceptable to police culture and in court. Police Stories educate one into how to behave and the mores of behaviour. Thus one never knowingly contradicts another's story or version of events and one never tells stories about even 'Bad-Cops'. One probationer who did was ostracised for months because he encountered a fight in a corridor between a member of his shift and a criminal and tried to stop it.

I shall deal with the themes of evidential and legal as one. Another abiding memory of my early years in the police was of learning to write police reports and of struggling to learn the nuances and intricacies of what was acceptable to say and what was not. Writing police reports that routinely result in a conviction is an art and a craft. I was particularly singled out because I always told the truth as I saw it and it took me a long time to learn how to write properly as a police officer. To prove a case one has to stick to a time honoured script that is acceptable to the courts. When you join the police you do not know the script and reading police reports teaches you the scripts that are acceptable and actually moulds the investigative processes in a manner which eventually makes you an effective police officer. I am not suggesting that officers lie but there are ways in which actions must be phrased and until one learns

how to articulate these instinctively one can get into trouble in court. One example springs to mind. I had read in a text on police interrogation about the concept of a 'thieves stare' whereby a thief carrying stolen property will involuntarily look through you when they have stolen property on them. One day in court I was being pressed by a clever solicitor who challenged my evidential script that the accused had acted and looked suspicious. I resorted to telling the truth and give an explanation of the behaviour (minus the 'thieves-stare' label) because when giving evidence one cannot mention prior convictions. The solicitor had fun at my expense because of a scriptural issue. The thief was convicted but had I introduced the concept of the 'thieves-stare' by name I would have been in disciplinary trouble. In gathering evidence and intelligence I learned to listen to stories and re-script them into acceptable formats which proved either guilt or suspicion.

Another similar story of the difference between the legal script and the truth relates to an officer in an unmarked car who was tired and drove to a lay-by on the edge of town to have a sleep. He slept past his shift and on awakening found that a local criminal was also parked next to him. On investigating the car he found the criminal in possession of stolen property and arrested him. The resultant report and commendation did not mention serendipity or sleeping and read like a scripted police report should. Thus giving evidence in court entails learning the script (the police report) and recounting it in a logical and reasoned manner without deviating from it even under pressure from the defence. One of the stories of which circulated and may or may not have been apocryphal was of officers fainting in the witness box under such pressure when they realised that they had made a mistake with evidence. One has to learn the Laws, Statutes, Ordinances, Regulations and By-laws verbatim and learn how to re-story these within acceptable legal frameworks as evidence.

The educational and organisational learning aspects of police storytelling are fascinating – we have already discussed how one learns how to script and enact work based scripts. We have also discussed how morality tales and cautionary tales are widely used. Another interesting angle is stories of inept officers or ‘Stupid-Cop’ stories of officers who do something stupid like encounter a crime in progress and not realise that they have done so. Stories of officers helping push start a car of villains on their way back from a robbery are legend in many forces. One Officer even helped an inept officer through his probation claiming it as his revenge on the police service. As a story it became an ‘open secret’ in the folklore of the Station and of course the probationer in question, who went on to become a senior officer was sublimely unaware of the story. This also evidences the dark, cruel, ironic humour of much police story telling. This story also evidence the ‘putative’ nature of many police stories in that they are commonly regarded and acted upon on as if true when there is no (or inconclusive) evidence that the story actually happened.^v For all the apparent truthfulness of these stories they may well have been an ‘apocryphal tale’ akin to many urban legends. In any case, the purpose of a putative story in a police setting is to act as a form of parable to educate future generations of officers in what to do, or what not to do in specific circumstances. One can accidentally become a hero in an organizational legend. I was a passenger in a police car involved in a chase of a ‘fleeing felon’ wanted on warrant when I opened the car door to jump out, assuming that the driver was going to slow down but instead he accelerated causing me to knock down the running man. It had the desired effect and the felon was duly arrested. In the aftermath, my colleague and I looked up to see a man standing watching us with his mouth open. We quickly drove off but when we got to the station we saw him at the front desk talking to the Sergeant. My heart sank as I knew

that my actions could be construed as an assault. My colleague was busy telling everyone in the muster room about me ‘banjoing’ the suspect with the car door to the hilarity of the rest of the shift. At this point the Sergeant came through, slapped me on the back intimating that the man had remarked how delighted he was to see the police acting in such a robust manner reminiscent of an episode of ‘The Bill’.^{vi}

Also many police stories become embellished upon by repeated tellings over the years and actually become ‘tall-tales’ in that the storied version bears little resemblance to reality to those who were actually present at the scene. There is little point in correcting them because they add to legend and reputation. In such stories small scuffles become epic fights and accidental shoves become deliberate actions.

Some of the police stories we told each other were also stories (or more appropriately ethnographies) of place (Mayne & Lawrence, 1999) and thus we told each other stories of criminal places and infamous streets where serious and organized criminals lived and created criminal legend. Our tellings and retellings were attempts at narrating an ethnographic re-reading of place so that others would learn from our knowledge of the occupants and happenings in particular locations. We told stories of past crimes and of the dangers of straying into the areas unawares. Thus we passed on knowledge of where it was safe or unsafe to park a police car unattended or where never to go alone. In doing so, we were engaging (unknowingly) in applied ethnography (O’Reilly, 2013).

Taking stock of the storied nature of policing

It is time for us to take stock and ask ourselves what do stories tell us about the nature of the organisation and delivery of policing? The stories police officers tell play appear to play an important part in their engagement with the public and with the

politics of everyday policing in a variety of contexts. Stories help them structure their daily lives in the organisational setting. Firstly, policing is very much a narrative driven activity. Officers speak to victims, witnesses and accused and turn their knowledge into stories and evidence. They use stories as ‘sense-making’ and ‘sense-giving’ heuristics and in the social construction of ‘knowledge’ to create ‘common-sense’ and order in their world to bring evidential order from dramatic and the chaotic. They use stories to pass on their knowledge and train their peers. However, from personal experience, common-sense knowledge when tested in court may be found to be based on prejudice or stereotype. They also use stories and jokes as stress release mechanisms. Stories thus provide an antidote to boredom and provide entertainment value and thus act as a therapeutic safety valve. Officers story the investigation process into evidence and give scripted, storied accounts in court. One also has to consider the notion of the storytelling cycle and how one ‘stories’ or ‘restories’ oneself into a role – e.g. storying oneself as a leader of men, a detective or a community constable. Stories of leadership provide inspiration (or demotivate us). In telling ones stories, one has a choice as to whether one tells stories of conformity or non-conformity. For example in telling organizational ‘rebel stories’, ‘black-sheep-stories’, or ‘prodigal-son stories’ one is narrating oneself as a maverick and thus making an organisational statement of intent.

This review and reflection, via the analytic rubric of retrospective ethnography tells us that police stories are important from an organisational context in terms of initiating and perpetuating the social and political dimensions of police knowledge and for teaching officers of all ranks and length of service important organization philosophies. Stories (as doxa) pass on and replicate the organizational DNA.^{vii} In answering the second research question – *who tells whom what kind of stories, when*

and why – it would appear that police officers have an individual and organizational stock of stories which they use for a variety of different purposes. Police storytelling is therefore contingent upon setting, context and purpose. Police officers may tell one story in court (the official version) or to members of the public; another in the canteen (to entertain others); a more stylised version to either ridicule others or make a situation into a joke; they may tell a more nuanced version in a promotion portfolio for self-aggrandisement or advancement; and an entirely different more reflective one in their memoirs. Some of these versions could be said to be lies, but equally could be interpretations and in their own settings may all be equally true.

We make a tentative and incremental contribution towards building a narrative based theory of policing in terms of novelty and timeliness in that it is emerging at a time of great transformation in the British Police Service. It is to the best of my knowledge the first time anyone has attempted to assemble the various documented elements of police storytelling into a model to provide description coupled with explanation in a fairly comprehensive and relevant framework. It thus deals with the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the subject thus extending knowledge to begin to push back boundaries. By viewing the protean model we begin to visualise connections and relationships between variables and thus potentially causality. The model is applicable to UK Police Forces and perhaps Government Agencies. By developing a model which combines extant research on police storytelling with observations, common-sense and personal experience, we have challenged our knowledge and understanding of the importance of police storytelling although we have yet to alter it.

On reflecting on writing this paper it strikes us that one of the ironies of official methods for educating police officers is the concentration on pedagogies such as learning by rote when storytelling is so effective.^{viii} This paper also makes a

contribution to the emerging literature because it begins to address the plea of Van Hulst (2013, p.638) for future research to concentrate on the actual stories themselves. Only by concentrating on actual stories can we categorise them into universal themes. From personal experience, this will be a difficult process as gaining access to stories as they are told remains problematic. Outsiders in a patrol car experience an entirely different (inauthentic) and staged narration than do police insiders. As an ex-police officer and academic, Robert is now an outsider. Policing as an activity is conducted in a semi-private domain, to which the public and researchers do not have full access. For this reason, retrospective and reflective ethnography are wonderful narrative methodologies which insiders (and ex-insiders) can use to good effect to shed light on the issue and tell insightful stories. Nevertheless, there are many limitations to this study. The first is that by focusing primarily of the UK, we limit its potential transferability to other policing organizations some of which may have different storytelling traditions. Secondly, by using the unusual methodology of retrospective ethnography, we have further limited its potential for developing theory and in particular for a '*narrative based theory of policing*'. We are painfully aware that reflections, musings and truncated war stories often frustratingly skirt around addressing the fundamental question set in the introduction. Robert started to write many stories before realising that he could not tell that particular story for a variety of reasons being constrained by several factors.^{ix} As a consequence, he simply cannot tell readers some stories because there is a danger that readers may identify themselves and/or scenarios discussed. Muncey (2005) alludes to this impediment to writing authentic stories in her informative and deeply personal text on her struggles to tell auto-ethnographic stories of her nursing experience. We may be accused of providing weak summaries of what is a very rich oral storytelling tradition and accept

this criticism. In relation to additional accusations of incompleteness and evasiveness which could be cast against us we appreciate that it may be impossible for readers to (a) fully evaluate the ‘storytelling practice’ that we allude to as a key component of police work; and (b) it may be impossible for them to get a sense of the performance of any single story variant because they have to take our word for it. In reality we choose to accept a story or disbelieve it. The test of this paper will be how well it resonates with academics and laypersons with knowledge of policing and organizational storytelling. In future research we will seek access to conduct empirical research via fieldwork to gather and test actual stories against the protean storytelling framework developed in this study.

Gabriel in summing up his book on storytelling in organizations remarked that “*Few organisations are spontaneous storytelling cultures*” and opined that “*..organisations do not appear to be the natural habitat of storytelling*” (Gabriel, 2000, p.240). We agree with Van Hulst (2013, p.639) that the police are a notable exception to this rule and the folklore of policing is worthy of further research.

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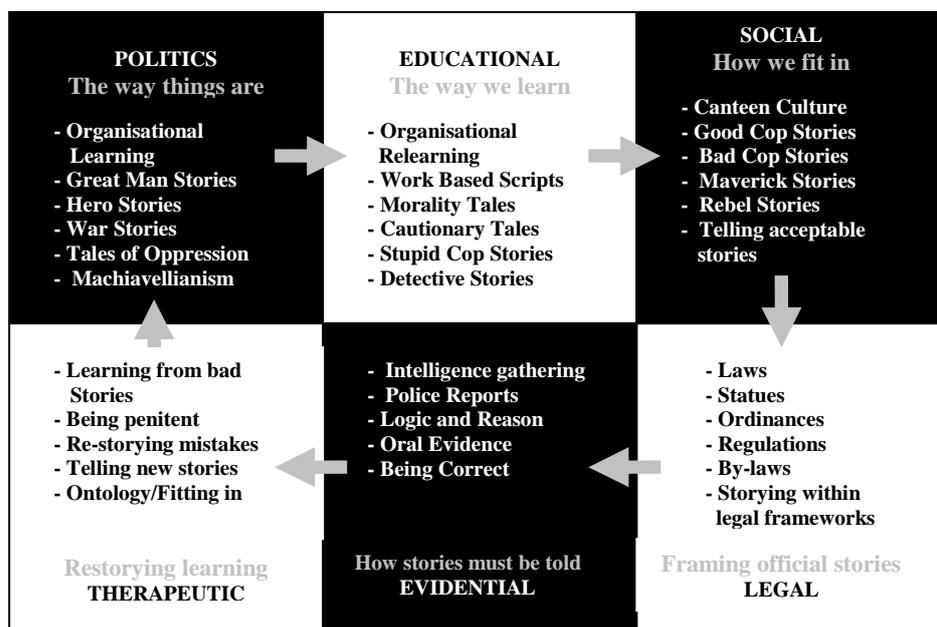
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Figure 1 - A story telling model of organisational regeneration in a policing context



ⁱ An aura is a type of light purportedly seen around people and in this respect the very notion of folklore may be said to imbue the qualities of writing with an aura. Presumably, Fletcher is referring to the writings on / by police as containing such an aura associated with folklore.

ⁱⁱ This thesis resonates with entrepreneurship and leadership scholars.

ⁱⁱⁱ Great-man theory is criticized by scholars such as Spencer (1896) as being a hopelessly primitive, childish, and unscientific position in that ‘Great-Men’ were merely products of their time and social environment. This holds true for police stories too because such men are made by society via their particular organisational culture. Cawthon (1996) argues that situational forces and leadership theories cannot always account for the emergence of great leaders and that it is remiss of leadership scholars to refuse to recognize ‘Great-Man-Theory’ as a legitimate and meaningful avenue to understanding.

^{iv} UK Police officers have shoulder numbers the first two numbers of which represent the year they joined hence a 63 number has twenty years more experience than an 83 number.

^v We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out. A putative story is one in which the speaker does not have direct evidence of what they are asserting, but has inferred a meaning on the basis of some other knowledge or something else (in this case on an existing body of police knowledge or folklore which to listeners ‘rings true’ with the facts they already knew). Many TV and movie representations of police narratives for example the TV series *Cops* had such putative stories told by officers and acted upon by other officers.

^{vi} The Bill is a British crime drama about ‘Sun Hill’ a fictional police station in London.

^{vii} They are doxa because they are seldom written down but contain important information passed down verbally through generations of officers.

^{viii} Police training revolves around book learning by wrote and favours those with prodigious memories. Street based learning is learning by doing or mimesis. This is where stories, come into their ‘own’. However, much police doxa cannot be codified nor written down.

^{ix} The first is the *Official Secrets Act* which Robert signed upon joining the police. He is not free to discuss many of the nuances of the actual cases he dealt with. Also because of the nuances of academic research ethics regulations which relate to consent none of the subjects of the reflective stories have been approached for consent, nor given the opportunity to

challenge, or amend the stories. Robert proceeded on the basis of ‘morality’ and moral judgment in doing no harm to others.