

# Delinquents, Time-wasters and Informants: Contrasting constructions of community in PCSO training

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**Introduced in 2004, neighbourhood policing (NP) represents a considerable change in the way some police officers perform their role. Rather than focusing on maintaining public order and investigating crimes, neighbourhood officers are expected to engage with members of the public, allow them to help determine policing priorities and provide better support to the victims of crime (Quinton and Morris 2008). These objectives were intended to answer criticisms that the police service had become a discriminatory organisation that did not reflect or understand the diversity found in modern communities (Savage 2007). The malpractice and abuses of power that resulted from this has had a significant negative impact on public attitudes towards the police service. NP is intended to address a 'them and us' attitude amongst officers and promote better relations between the public and police service (Lloyd and Foster 2006).**

**However, a large body of extant literature suggests that the police service has often been resolutely resistant to change. Previous research has found that police officers have highly rigid understandings of what their role should entail and how it should be performed (Thomas and Davies 2005). This draws heavily on policing culture and the privilege it places on 'real' policing activity (often involving the use of force or the apprehension of criminals). Duties that do not fall into these categories are usually seen as lesser forms of policing, with NP having previously been described as 'pink and fluffy' (Davies and Thomas 2008). The gendered connotations of this description are evident and further communicate the extent to which NP represents a shift in policing practice. The clash between established interpretations of policing activity and NP, its perceived femininity and the masculine gendered culture of policing, and the way in which these contrasting ideas are enacted in the identity performances of officers (Kelan 2009) make this a fertile area to explore how Police Constables (PCs) reconcile and reconstruct discourses of change within the organisation.**

Based on two months of ethnographic observation in a PCSO (Police Community Support Officer) training school, this article explores how the concept of community is reconstructed by PC instructors. PCSOs are civilian members of the service who have fewer powers than PCs and whose main role is to deliver NP functions in their community. Their training largely takes place in group sessions delivered by PC trainers who no longer work with the public. Observation identified three key representations/constructions of the public by PC instructors at the training school. The first two constructions provide evidence of a clash between NP and established cultural values of policing, while the third shows some acceptance of the intentions of NP, but

only insofar as it assists the performance of traditional policing activities.

### *Delinquents*

A prominent representation of the community within the training school was as delinquents who had an adversarial relationship with the police. This was most notably articulated by one PC instructor through his views on the traveller community. During one training session, at which none of the other instructors were present, he stumbled onto the subject of how working in the Police Service was likely to have an impact upon the societal views of the PCSOs saying: *"you come into contact with the most deprived and criminal sectors of the population"*. He continued to use the example of his interactions with travellers during his career as a response officer.

Prefixing his remarks with a statement that made it clear that these were his own personal views and that he understood that they were inappropriate and based solely on his own subjective experience, he described how his interactions with the travelling community had led him to form a very negative opinion of them:

*"Now I know it's not politically correct. to say this and these are my views based on what I've found from being a PC but travellers...most of them are thieving and very dodgy, they must be because they don't work but they've got cars and can afford to live quite a nice life. I've been to traveller's sites and it's disgusting, the kids are running round, none of them go to school and they're playing in the rubbish and in the shit from the caravans. We'd go round there because we've had a complaint from someone, or someone has been linked to a crime and are wanted by the police and they'd close ranks, protect their own like, to the point where they'd actually hide people in other caravans so we'd never find them."* (PC instructor)

The instructor explained how he was required to put these feelings aside and treat the travellers in the same way he would treat anyone else and advised the students that if they were ever in this position then they should ensure that they remain professional and always offer at least a 'minimum standard' of respect:

*"But you know, you have to deal with them and put these feelings aside and get on with the job, that's the only way things are going to get done, you just have to focus on the work and make sure that you do that properly."* (PC instructor)

This 'delinquent' construction of this community seems to have emerged from the instructor's previous experience as a response PC and reflects the findings of other research that found response PCs often view the public in very stereotypical ways (Jackson and Sunshine 2007). It suggests that some members of this particular community have no interest in working with the police and are, as a result, unworthy of police engagement. The instructor's own reference to how inappropriate these views were reveals the difficulty that the instructors had in divorcing the training they were delivering from their own experiences of policing. This construction of the delinquent community is aligned with the broader 'them and us' discourses that have traditionally characterised police-community relations and not those intended in NP (Savage 2007).

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### Time wasters

Another account of the community arose in a different training session on Partners and Communities Together (PACT) meetings and centred on the communities' role in determining policing priorities. PACT meetings had been introduced as part of the NP agenda for improving community relations and allowing the public to attend and highlight any problems they have in their communities. The training session on PACT began with an instructor highlighting the benefits of PACT, which also appeared in the training material given to the PCSOs. The material described the following benefits:

*"PACT gives a structure that will deliver the main requirements for Neighbourhood Policing to be effective...It means delivering community engagement and problem solving policing of low level localised policing and partnership issues, whilst gathering community intelligence. PACT means giving everyone the chance to see members of their neighbourhood team at least once per month and is about communicating with local people and telling them what their neighbourhood team is doing for them."* (PCSO training material)

One interesting issue that emerged during this training on PACT was how the PCSOs should go about conducting a PACT meeting. The instructor infused the PACT process with a sense of pointlessness and opposition; during the initial stages of the session he asked the rhetorical question:

*"You know why the public will be there? To moan..."* (PC instructor)

Similar to the previous construction of the travelling community as delinquents, the instructors constructed another part of the community as 'time wasters'. In this example, instead of viewing the PACT process as a venue for useful interaction, it is presented as one of limited value to the police. This was compounded when an instructor warned the PCSOs to be conscious of the 'ambush'. Described as a meeting which is dominated by a small number of people who have personal agendas, either linked to an individual problem or to a vendetta against someone else,

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he warned that it could result in unimportant or inappropriate policing priorities being set. This idea was further evidenced by a set of prepared responses within their training material that the PCSOs could read out if they felt that the PACT meeting was being dominated by individuals with their own agenda or if a discussion of an

irrelevant topic had gone on for too long. This instruction was coupled with a warning to the PCSOs that they should be firm in their chairing of the meetings and be prepared to control anyone who tries to dominate the discussion, presenting an adversarial portrait of the PACT meeting. Instead of viewing PACT as an opportunity to engage with the public, the emphasis seemed to be on how these meetings can be managed and on the need for PCSOs to maintain their authority and discretion.

Constructing the community as 'time wasters' drew on the idea of police expertise and on how they, rather than uninformed and emotional community members, were better able to determine what issues the police should focus on. The way in which the instructor described the

community's increased involvement in policing as 'moaning' as well as preparing them for potential difficulties in PACT meetings is evidence of his attempt to downplay the benefits of community involvement in policing, perpetuating the traditional distance between police and public. The construction of the community as 'time wasters' seems to be based on the instructor's privileging of the police's expertise in dealing with community problems, drawing upon discourses not only of police expertise but also of police legitimacy.

### *Informants*

At other times during the training programme, positive constructions of the community were observed which the PCSOs were encouraged to embrace. The instructors were very positive about the potential benefits of using members of different communities as a source of information about crimes in the area. During the training course this issue was often linked to the recent increased threat of terrorism and interaction with community members was promoted as an ideal way for the police to be better informed. During one training session, the PCSOs were addressed by a guest speaker who took them through the link between NP and intelligence-led policing. The PCSOs were instructed about the importance of submitting information gathered from their community and that recent terrorist plots had been averted as a result of such community intelligence. This understanding of community is constructed as a useful resource for the neighbourhood team and one that can benefit other functions of the police service. Community members are understood as the

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'eyes and ears' of the police, favourably positioned and a valuable resource in the prevention of crime and terrorism. This more favourable view of the community seems to emerge from its role in supporting primary, 'real' policing activities and the apprehension of criminals. As such, it could be suggested that this concept of community policing supports rather than challenges the values of policing culture.

### *Conclusion*

This article has sought to highlight the role of PCs in contesting NP. It goes some way to illustrating that although NP represents a new approach to policing, it is not immune to reconstruction by PCs in light of established discourses of policing culture. It highlights the struggles that officers face in navigating the clash between highly contextualised ideas of what policing should entail and how communities should be understood. The impact of this process

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not only assists in a better understanding of the pervasiveness and importance of policing culture, but also the impact that it may have on the PCSOs in the training school. The role of PCs as educators suggests the normalisation of cultural values and behaviours that may be contrary to the objectives of NP and could have a significant effect on the how PCSOs understand and perform their role in the field.

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