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Introduction

Oral history remains a somewhat neglected methodology in the armoury of the social scientist. In many respects this might not be considered as particularly surprising given the fact that many of the funding opportunities available to researchers are tied to contemporary social policy and, more importantly, its implementation and evaluation. This means that the vast majority of interviews are concerned with assessing the views of a subject (or subjects) on some matter which either concerns their present life or their recent history. Such interviews, for example, might address anything from how to increase police engagement with marginalized groups in the community (Jones and Newburn, 2001) to the impact of mandatory drug testing on the level of drug use in prison (Edgar and O'Donnell, 1998).

Such policy-guided research tends to rely on interviewing techniques that address quite specific research questions, and assume a certain shared knowledge between interviewer and interviewee. Although oral history can be used to answer narrower or more specific questions, its greatest strengths lie in the opportunities it offers to us of opening up social worlds which have hitherto been closed to us. At the heart of the methodology is a distinctly empowering ideal – a desire to give a voice to individuals and groups often ignored by orthodox histories. The oral historian may concentrate his or her attentions on the lives of the marginalized or the disenfranchised and it is not surprising to note that most oral histories deal with non-elite groups be they the wives of striking miners (Gier-Viskovatoff and Porter, 1998) or labourers in 1930s Hackney (Hackney WEA, 1975). Oral history, like interview methodology, lends itself to both quantitative research (Thompson & Lummis, 1984) and qualitative

research (Anderson and Jack, 1998). Correspondingly, it is unsurprising that oral history, as a qualitative methodology, has been used by researchers from a variety of disciplines and was an influence on the Chicago sociological tradition (Lummis, 1987).

In this article I shall address the theoretical foundations of oral history as a methodology and the nature of the tensions between qualitative oral history techniques and more orthodox or traditional historical techniques. I shall then focus upon the suitability of qualitative oral history techniques in aiding our understanding of police history, police behaviour and police culture. Finally, I shall address some of the methodological issues which arose when using oral history techniques to study policing in the Metropolitan Force between the 1930s and the 1960s.

The Distinction between Oral History and Orthodox History

Literature in the area suggests an established tension between oral history approaches and those of orthodox history. Writers like Bloch (1954) have investigated this perceived dichotomy between unearthed 'traces' (i.e. discovered artefacts) and secondary data (e.g. an entry in a diary) a distinction first made by anthropologists and later investigated by social historians. Trace histories have for a long time been held in higher esteem due to the prevailing influence of the ruling paradigm of scientific modernism, a point made by Tonkin (1992) when she wrote, "...In an academic culture of objectivity, this is their moral charm. They are purely impersonal" (p.84). Thus, the predominant assumption that traces may be seen as objective and oral histories as subjective has become ingrained in academic culture.

Samuel and Thompson (1990) have examined this perceived difference between primary and secondary data and assert that the argument can be reduced to the differences between history and anthropology - documentary evidence tending to be the methodology of choice for historians and oral history techniques being favoured by anthropologists. Anthropology, as a discipline, treads a similar path to sociology. It looks at the fluidity of concepts such as culture and discourse rather than seeking universal truths or facts, whereas traditional history concerns itself to a greater extent with the empirical paradigm. Samuel and Thompson (1990) wrote, on the subject of orthodox history, that;

"...Our whole training predisposes us to give a privileged place to the factual, or...'exact knowledge'. We look for the reality content in our documents rather than what they may tell us about the symbolic categories through which reality is perceived. We build our arguments on empirically verifiable truths" (p.1).

Tonkin (1992) claimed that the failure by many to recognise oral history as a valid methodology has served to blind us to the advantages of the use of oral histories. For example, the depth of information which the method can deliver allows it to be used as a stand alone methodology or in conjunction with trace methods to create a more comprehensive social picture of a historical era. Vansina (1985) was the first academic to attempt to evaluate the varying methodologies which had become grouped under the umbrella term of 'oral history' and made the distinction between oral reminiscence and oral tradition, the latter being the transmission of oral communication which is at least one generation old.

Bloch (1954) developed the idea of the philosophy of historical theory by claiming that history (including oral history) is the interaction between the intellectual mode (our realm of understanding) and the subject matter (people in history). Crucial to this theory is the idea that the researcher starts his or her analysis not from a position of contemporary world knowledge but from one of critical questioning. Thus, it is believed that after obeying such criteria one can unearth a history which succeeds in maintaining its objectivity. Indeed, Tonkin (1992) quotes Leach (1957) as claiming that there could be no greater form of empiricism than when culture is comprised of only that which the researcher observes.

Tonkin goes on to address the socio-economic dynamics of the methodology and the direct application of oral history techniques to the study of those who are often excluded from more orthodox histories. A traditional historical discourse may attempt to deconstruct a myth in order to uncover 'truth'. Such an approach, however, fails to address the possibility that, to many people, both myth and ideology serve to structure their social understanding with greater clarity than any pre-ordained truth, a point acknowledged by Susman (1964). Tonkin (1990), on the subject of the validity of such myths, wrote,

"Many historians live by the myth of realism. This may seem a silly-sounding claim: and anyway, is it not a contradiction in terms? I want to argue that to believe in the natural veracity of any narrative form is a false faith; and also that since realism is a predominant mode of historical writing, it is too easily accepted as the opposite of myth. Myth is a representation of the past which historians recognize, but generally as an alternative to proper history. I think we should dissolve this dichotomy" (p.25).

Samuel's assertion that, "...it might be the task of the historian to question rather than to affirm" (1976, p.197) further fuels the controversy of the purpose of historical enquiry. Thus, there may be a growing detachment from the notion that there is a universal truth with regards to history. Tonkin (1990) investigated the multi-faceted nature of history and claimed, "Histories are arguments created by people in particular conditions. These conditions include the very social worlds in which they live, and which, by their telling, they model and sometimes seek to alter" (p.29). The views of such writers might add support for the possibility that the culture of police work provides police officers with a ready made framework in which to formulate their thoughts and ideas on the subject. At the same time, such a framework might *inform* police opinions although this should not be seen as an invalidating or falsifying factor.

We must take care, however, not to become staunchly uncritical of oral history methodologies solely because they themselves do not subscribe to the empirical sphere of understanding. Criticisms of the methodology range from concern over the reliability of memory (Seldon and Pappworth, 1983) to its 'facile democratisation' and 'complacent populism' (Passerini, 1979). Thompson (1978) warned of the dangers of middle-class historians mis-interpreting and mis-representing the oral recollection of the lower classes whilst Grele (1998) saw mainstream historians as being highly questionable of both the scholastic status and worth of oral history. Oral history techniques have been criticised for advocating a 'solitary universal' and for representing the views of solitary individuals, but Tonkin has responded that human beings are part of a wider social world and, therefore, ingest and disperse social knowledge as part of a living whole. This may be true, yet it does highlight the tension between 'historical fact' (i.e. what documentary texts purport to be) and 'oral history' (which has strong social roots). If we can regress further, the

argument comes down to whether one believes that knowledge is a monolithic slab of 'fact' (whatever that may be) or a social construct borne of everyday social interaction within a particular culture. If one believes that the latter is the case then it might be possible to argue the case that 'fact' is ever-changing and ever-evolving.

It could be said that such a debate is ultimately articulated in Weber's (1949) '*verstehende*' sociology. Weber's approach saw the importance of making all scientific judgements value free, thus advocating that the social sciences should be concerned with factual knowledge (the way things are, that is, fact) rather than normative knowledge (the way things should be, that is, values). Thus, when observing social action or interpreting someone's account of social action the perspective decrees that we should assess it in relation not to our own values but in relation to its own 'cultural significance'. Such an approach stresses the impossibility of separating values and facts and subsequently renders impossible any true objectivity. Weber (1946) states that, "Every interpretation attempts to attain clarity and certainty, but no matter how clear an interpretation as such appears to be from the point of view of meaning, it cannot on this account alone claim to be the causally valid interpretation" (p.96). Ultimately, therefore, the argument over the relative objectivity of various methods might be considered flawed given that what Weber (1946) termed the 'subjective' point of view influences our interpretation not only of the social actor but also the social context within which they are studied (Henderson and Parsons in Weber, 1946). Central to this perspective of sociology, therefore, is the importance of addressing the meanings which individuals attach to their actions rather than seeking objective verification. I shall now address some of the issues which arise when attempting to use such a technique to conduct research into police culture.

The Theoretical Application of Oral History Techniques to the Study of Police Culture

The last 30 years have seen a wealth of research that seeks to explore the culture or cultures of the police. The work of scholars such as Skolnick (1994), Holdaway (1983) and Chan (1997), amongst others, have all sought to explain how the police undertake their role and the meanings, understandings and values that inform such behaviour. Reiner (1992) provides a substantial overview of the research in this area. He argues that cop culture is integral both to the ways in which police officers make sense of the social environment in which they work and also to the ways in which they attempt to legitimise any behaviours which might be deemed inappropriate, unauthorised or illegal. Such shared 'knowledge' serves both to instil camaraderie between officers and, simultaneously, to alienate the wider public. The work of Skolnick (1994) highlights the importance of three exclusive core characteristics of police work (danger, authority and the pressure for efficiency) which converge to make the culture of the police a highly distinct guiding framework for social behaviour. Research in the area has generally concentrated upon gathering information from studying serving police officers and by analysing such information in relation to current policing contexts. A typical example of this is the work of Chan (1997) which addressed in detail the problem of racism amongst police officers in the Australian police and the entrenched cultural norms which need to be tackled to succeed in initiating cultural change.

This is not to assume that oral history techniques have not been used to broaden our understanding of police work. Brogden (1991) used the methodology to investigate the everyday reality of police in Liverpool between the First and Second World Wars. Similarly, Weinberger (1995) used oral history as a means of creating a social history

of the English police during the 20th Century. Transcripts of the interviews undertaken by Weinberger¹ hold a wide variety of data concerning police officers' views of their occupational roles. Such data are immediately striking to anyone who is acquainted with the often rich qualitative quotes that are prevalent in many studies of police culture. The transcripts of the interviews conducted by Weinberger recount a wide variety of officer recollections such as the motivation of individuals to join the police, the difficulties experienced by police officers in relating legal procedures to practical police work and the difficulties experienced by many police officers in detaching themselves from the role of police officer on retirement. What such research does do is inform us of the utility of oral history techniques in providing us with rich qualitative data of the type that is not generally reported within orthodox histories.

Oral history is an ideal means of exploring the occupational culture of an institution like the police. At first sight, the use of such a methodology with such an occupational grouping might be considered incongruous. Oral history is traditionally used as a means of learning about those groups in society that are considered to be marginalised or whose activities remain unknown or who are not, generally, encouraged to publicise their opinions. The police might not be considered by many to be synonymous with such notions of exclusion. However, when one begins to explore both the historical and academic literature of police work it soon becomes apparent that much police work, and the views of its practitioners, can be considered to be 'hidden'. Two factors may account for this.

First, the very nature of police work dictates that there is an ideological as well as physical chasm between the police and the public. Manning (1977) wrote that, "a

sacred canopy is drawn over police work...ideological mechanisms suffuse policing with a moral integrity and by doing so conceal as well as reveal the realities of police work" (p. 5) and it appears that these attempts to conceal the nature of police work are determined by either internal or external mechanisms depending upon the country in which it is occurring. In the United Kingdom it appears that the police themselves draw the 'sacred canopy' whereas in the United States, according to Skolnick (1994), it is the public who, he claims, are more hostile to the idea of police work and therefore attempt to distance themselves from it. Police work, therefore, may be seen as a marginalised occupation in that knowledge of it might not be readily accessible to non-occupational members. There exists evidence to indicate that the police might have a vested interest in restricting knowledge of the intricacies of policework from a wider public. For example, Van Maanen (1983) wrote that, "...police agencies resemble symbolic or mock bureaucracies where only the appearance of control, not the reality, is of managerial concern" (p.277) thus signifying that the police force may not wish the discretionary nature of much policework to become commonly known. One ex-officer interviewed for the present research spoke of how the 'outsider' perception of police work was, perhaps, unrealistic. He claimed "...people are cagey about telling newcomers too much about the job...revealing too much of the mystique...and then they find there's no mystique about it at all...it's all quite common-sense". The 'sacred canopy' which is drawn over policework may function not only to mask the discretion involved in much police work but also the mundanity.

Van Maanen's notion of the police representing a 'symbolic' or 'mock' bureaucracy might prove enlightening in the attempt to further explain the 'hidden' nature of policework. This issue of police discretion (especially among beat officers) can be

explained through one of the fundamental contradictions of policework – that it is concerned with ‘law and order’. Skolnick argues that the dual concepts of ‘law’ and ‘order’ share a complex relationship adding that the two are often incompatible. The police are meant to impose order *legally* which, according to Bendix (1964), means with recourse to formal procedure. However, the complexities of the situations within which the police are expected to apply the law, coupled with acute resource limitations, means that a lot of crimes observed by officers do not result in any action being taken. Thus, two competing views of law and order emerge. The first is a legalistic view where the law is an abstract ideal to be applied through formal procedure. The second is a practical view where the law is viewed as an instrument of control to be applied through informal application of the law based upon an officer’s use of discretion.

The practical approach stresses that the complex array of issues that confront police officers necessitate a reliance on the use of common sense and discretion. Correspondingly, it views justice as negotiable and it has to be so because of the variety of contexts within which infringements of the law may occur. One officer interviewed for the present research articulated this point as follows;

“Generally speaking, it doesn't matter what regulations they've made...the individual PC would usually do what he thinks...I don't say it's right but they will usually place their interpretation upon it and do that...I hope that the time will never come when everyone works absolutely to law because I think that would be the ruin of the police...”

Banton (1964) supports the above notion by stating that the full enforcement of the law is neither desirable nor possible given the present administration of the police. This practical approach to the law, advocated by Banton and many of the interviewees, is fundamentally at odds with the competing legalistic approach that stresses that the law can be uniformly and equitably applied in all appropriate situations. Van Maanen's view that policing is a bureaucracy in name only and solely concerned with *appearing* to be in control converges with Manning's view that the mystique with which policework is imbued, "...removes the matter from everyday discourse and places it in the realm of the nebulous and the mystical, that which stands to serve *all* in a removed and fair, almost dispassionate fashion" (1977, p.325). In short, despite the police using informal and discretionary procedures to implement the law the public need to believe that the law is implemented through the use of formal and non-discretionary procedures.

Second, despite the fact that the police service has made great efforts to appear 'transparent' in recent years, such 'transparency' is only partial. The police service, like the armed services, is stratified through hierarchy and rarely do lower ranking officers conduct press conferences, announce new initiatives or court the media. Conversely, high-ranking officers rarely walk the beat, deal with public disorder incidents or question suspects in criminal investigations. Such hierarchical differentiations reflect great differences in role. Paradoxically, those individuals that engage in what the public view as 'police work' are relatively silenced and this has led, historically, to somewhat one-sided accounts of police work reaching the public domain. One particular reason for this is relatively straightforward. For the first half century of the 'new' police's existence, according to Rawlings (2002), beat policing

was viewed as 'low-skilled work' (p.181) a point supported by Emsley (1996) who described police training as involving mainly drill practice and learning by rote. Despite the growing attempts at professionalisation of the police over subsequent years, Neyroud (2003) draws on the work of Friedson (1983) and Waddington (1999) to describe how policing falls short of either 'profession' or 'public service'. Such ambiguity over the status of policing as an occupation may have served to ensure that the views of lower-ranking beat officers rarely entered the public realm.

One example of an historical account of policing is 'The Metropolitan Police at War' (1947) which was written by the former Secretary to the Metropolitan Force, H.M. Howgrave-Graham. The book is a detailed orthodox account of police work during World War II and the author's use of language makes it clear that it would not present a revisionist view. For example, the author wrote,

"The task of presenting a coherent picture of the many acts of gallantry performed during air raids by police officers is not an easy one. Even if it were possible to describe every incident which earned a decoration or a commendation, half the story would still remain untold. It is common knowledge in the Force that many courageous acts inevitably escaped notice...Much of the work was done unobtrusively, often under cover of darkness, and those who did it were not likely to proclaim their achievements. Even the incidents which did in fact come to light would in many cases not have been heard of had not some eye-witness come forward spontaneously to tell the story" (p.22).

Such accounts convey to the reader only one 'reality' of police work during the Second

World War for lower ranking officers. An example of a different ‘reality’ came from an officer interviewed by Weinberger who spoke of the widespread use of the controversial ‘sus’ laws in London during the same period. He said;

“I was working the East End at the time, and the people were thieving so much that it was like picking ripe fruit...They used to steal tobacco, steal tea, steal wine, anything from the docks because the docks were then half open you know...Well, I had the old Section 66, where you could stop, search and detain anybody...which now this new policing has killed that stone dead. I know people say it’s silly but you work up an instinct. You can sort of stand on the corner with your mate and say, ‘I don’t like this one’...and fifty per cent of the time you’d be right” (National Sound Archive, Collection C684)

The contrast between the two extracts is evident yet we should exercise caution in assuming that one is of more benefit to the researcher than the other. Lummis (1987) rightly suggests that to assert the supremacy of oral history over documentary history or vice versa is a basically fruitless exercise as both approaches have weaknesses and strengths. Thompson (1978) argues towards the wider notion that all data, be it qualitative or quantitative, represents, “either from individual standpoints or aggregated the *social perception* of facts; and are all in addition subject to social pressures from the context in which they are obtained” (p.96).

The Practical Application of Oral History Techniques to the Study of Police Culture

Oral history techniques were applied to a piece of research which aimed to investigate

the culture or cultures of police officers within the Metropolitan Police Force in London between the 1930s and the 1960s. Firstly, there was a desire to find out to what extent accepted correlates of police occupational culture applied to police work in the period prior to the 1960s when it was first investigated. Secondly, if there did appear to be differences between the findings of the research and those of authors charting post-1960s police culture, ideas would be forwarded in an attempt to explain such variations. The Metropolitan Police Force was chosen for a number of reasons. It was the first official police force to be formed in England and due to its size and location can be considered unique. The diversity of both the area and the particular crime and order problems that have an effect on it means that the Metropolitan Police provides a varied environment in which to study police behaviour.

Twenty-six retired police officers from the Metropolitan Police Service were interviewed during the course of the research. All had served between the 1930s and the 1960s. One had served in the Flying Squad, eight had served in CID and seventeen had worked as uniformed officers. Nineteen of the sample never rose above the rank of police constable, five reached the rank of sergeant and two reached the rank of inspector.

The interviews were unstructured although, as Britten (1999) indicates, such interviews do have structure if not a defined rigidity regarding content of response or a pre-defined order for particular issues to be addressed. The one structural condition imposed on the interviews was that each one had to address twenty seven issues, pertaining to police culture, which were pre-defined as important to the research (see Appendix 1). These issues were chosen, after conducting a literature review prior to

fieldwork, as they relate to key issues in the study of police culture.

One primary issue, when investigating police culture between the 1930s and the 1960s, is to formulate an interview content which does not merely attempt to transpose the relatively contemporary concept of police culture onto a bygone age. The massive societal changes which have occurred in the 20th century have had a profound effect upon our cultures, societies and our police and, consequently, the culture of the police. Thus, it is unrealistic merely to look at the literature in the area of police culture and try to force it upon a past period. It is necessary to look at the history of the police force and the social history of the period being studied and, at all times, to bear in mind that the culture of the police is inexorably linked to the wider culture of the time.

With regards to looking at the culture of the police it is possible to argue that the core universal constructs that inform policing have not changed. Skolnick (1994) and Reiner (1992) both emphasise the importance (and uniqueness) of danger, authority and efficiency to the police officer and these may be viewed as a constant within policing. Given the possible presence of universal reference points between both areas and eras it may be possible to counter some of the charges of presentism made of such an approach. That said, at all times it is vital for the researcher to be aware to the fact that whilst common reference points and police roles might transcend spatial and temporal boundaries, the shifting societal structures and relationships within which they occur will make any direct comparison between contemporary and historical accounts of policing difficult. One possible example which displays the danger of using contemporary frameworks of knowledge to interpret the past concerns the subject of the treatment of prisoners in police custody. In 1984, the Police and Criminal Evidence Act was introduced

which, simultaneously, extended some police powers and imposed greater safeguards over the use of others. The introduction of this legislation implemented a greater degree of transparency with regards to the treatment of suspects within custody and, according to Irving and MacKenzie (1989), led to a substantial decrease in the use of inappropriate police practice to extract information. Given that the introduction of such legislation, according to Foster (2003), can have a substantial impact on police behaviour, it has to be noted that to impose a post-1984 framework on the behaviours of pre-1984 police officers could be self-defeating. Much police practice would undoubtedly appear inappropriate at best and brutal at worst and one would have to guard against judging past behaviour through the light of subsequent legislation and changes in practice. One of the greatest dangers of such presentism is that it can lead to unfounded moral judgements as it neglects to analyse recollection in relation to the context within which it occurred.

Fortunately, access was granted to a collection of oral histories which spanned policing in England throughout the 20th century and these helped to provide some degree of necessary background research. The transcripts of Weinberger's interviews were instrumental in familiarising me with the discourse and rhetoric of police officers which itself may serve to reflect the cultural dynamics of the occupation (and the era). This was extremely helpful in providing me, I believe, with an acceptable historical framework within which to search for indications of occupational culture.

The procedure for collecting the data was as follows. All interviews were tape-recorded using a Sanyo Talk-Book micro cassette recorder and transcribed on an Olympus Micro/Mini transcriber. Following transcription, the transcripts were analysed in the following way. First, the researcher read through each of the transcripts a number of times

to acquaint himself with the nuances of each of the interviews. It became clear that there was a significant amount of variation in the particular interviews with respect to duration and clarity. One of the interviews was only about 20 minutes in duration whilst two of the interviews exceeded three hours in duration. Likewise, a number of the interviewees displayed a high degree of eloquence in their recounting of working lives whereas others tended to use more restricted language.

Such variations in data could be considered to be both advantageous and disadvantageous. They might be considered advantageous in that such a variety in styles of response might convey a wider array of meaning and of experience. Conversely, they might be considered disadvantageous in that such a lack of consistency in the style of data leads to difficulties in maintaining a degree of consistency in presenting findings. For the purposes of the research being reported, however, such variations were considered beneficial in that a uniformity of data might fail to reflect the diversity which this research aimed to investigate.

The process of coding the interview data was both time-consuming and intricate. It was considered time-consuming in that there were a total of twenty-six interviews being analysed and considered intricate in that there were twenty-seven themes being analysed. The greatest problem encountered was the fact that several of the themes that were addressed drew responses which were of relevance to one or more themes. That is to say, the categories or themes, and more importantly, the responses they produced were not mutually exclusive. Two possible explanations immediately present themselves with regards to this occurrence. First, that not enough thought had been given to the issues to be addressed in the interviews during planning and, second, that the themes that were being

addressed tended to permeate through different areas of a person's working life. It was believed that the latter view was the more likely explanation given the themes that were being explored. One example of this is contained within the following extract of an officer's interview. When addressing the issue of police corruption, he said;

"...Terrible, terrible...planting of evidence, all that stuff. If you got caught up in it...you had to do one of two things...you had to turn a blind eye, pretend it wasn't happening which, to be frank, everybody did...and I'm ashamed to say I've done that myself because if you did anything about it...you were dead, you were out, finished...we had the old 'sus' laws in those days and what the young, budding CID man would do to bring himself to notice for his role as a CID officer...they would bring these guys in under the old 'sus' laws and if the lily needed gilding a little on the way then...so be it. And that's what used to happen. But, it was a very close knit community so everything was hushed up...and, of course, the guy's lying isn't he? If a guy stands up in the dock and says, "The police planted evidence on me"...the magistrate or the judge would say, "Tut tut tut...disgusting...the police wouldn't do that..."

The above quotation was coded under the theme of police corruption yet shows a great deal of relevance to other themes which were addressed during the course of the interview such as the day-to-day use of discretion, the pressure for arrests, the camaraderie of the police and, finally, the nature of the relationship between police and magistrates. Despite complicating the process of coding the interviews such responses did impress upon the researcher the difficulties of imposing structure on recollection and trying to infer simple causal links between variables.

Despite the seemingly entwined nature of many of the responses and themes the data was eventually coded. Sections of the data were allocated under the twenty-seven themed headings although many of the quotations, for reasons mentioned above, were coded under more than theme. Once the quotations had been coded they were ordered so that the information under each heading was placed in a systematic way. Firstly, general quotes regarding a subject were placed towards the beginning of a section whereas more in-depth quotes were placed towards the end. This was done so that the information under each heading would begin with a more general overview of the subject before looking more deeply at any subtleties which may have emerged. For example, the analysis of police solidarity begins with a quote which supports the view that there was widespread solidarity within the Metropolitan Police Force and ends with an interviewee talking of the, "...intellectual ghetto state of the police". Thus, from a general overview under each heading separate themes were allowed to come to the fore.

When each quote had been placed in the order in which the researcher believed it should be addressed editing had to be undertaken as the file was extremely long and would need to be shortened so that a commentary could be provided to link the quotes. The editing process was systematic in that quotes were only edited out of the text if the point being made was covered by another quote. That is, if five quotes made an identical point, three of these might be deleted. Similarly, if the majority of interviewees appeared to have similar views on an issue the point was made as such.

Methodological Issues Encountered in the Research

Seldon and Pappworth (1983) raise a number of methodological problems associated with oral history. These fall into three main categories: limitations of the interviewee, limitations of the interviewer and limitations inherent in the nature of interviewing. Lummis (1987), writing on the subject of such methodological issues, claimed that, “Questions of authenticity raised in the specific context of oral evidence are pertinent to a much wider body of historical evidence as well as to the widespread use of the interview method in the social sciences” (p.12) Given that there is a specific overlap between different methodologies, only those issues that pertain specifically to oral history, or that were of direct concern to this particular piece of research, will be addressed in this paper.

The first is that of the unreliability of memory. This potential difficulty with oral history is quite hard to detect or assess, within interviews, unless the interviewee either admits to it or implicitly shows that he or she is encountering difficulty in remembering a certain incident. It may indeed be the case that individual memories are bolstered or 'patched up' by more contemporary knowledge yet it is, of course, difficult to prove whether or not this actually occurs. Generally, it was found that the respondents in the study appeared to have very little trouble remembering events that may have occurred as far back as 50 years ago. The fact that the sample failed to exhibit a total consensus of opinion regarding police matters serves to neither support nor refute the suggestion that the reliability of memory is an issue. An associated factor which might limit the potential damage of problems related to memory loss and age is that the research, although partially concerned with the recollection of events, was also concerned with the

measurement of the opinions and motivations of the interviewees. These may be viewed as variables which may not deteriorate in the way that memory traces do.

Another problem that we might associate with oral history is that of to what extent do respondents describe what they feel that they ought to have done rather than what they actually did. Then tension between ‘was’ and ‘ought’ has been highlighted by Thomson (1998) and Grele (1998) amongst others. Thomson used the recollection of Australian soldiers who fought in the Great War of 1914-1918 to differentiate between private memories and public memories – the latter being a recomposition of the former in the light of what might be considered publicly acceptable. Grele draws on the work of Susman (1964) to further investigate the problem of discerning between recollection which relates to what happened or what should have happened. Susman explores the dialectic tension between historical visions and mythic/ideological visions which, “through combination and interaction...produce a variety of historical visions” (Grelle, 1998, p.46). In short, therefore, it appears impossible to actively separate ‘was’ recollections from ‘ought’ recollections. Similarly, it is difficult to assess under what conditions such dialectic tension operates and whether or not it operates solely as a means of removing or reducing cognitive dissonance or if we actively recompose our private memories in the light of ideology even when it relates to ‘acceptable’ behaviour.

Seldon and Pappworth also referred to the potential problems of interviewees exhibiting excessive discretion when recalling events which might make them appear, for example, disloyal or portray their actions in a negative light. This was viewed as a major potential problem prior to the fieldwork taking place. Given the significant gap in age between the interviewer and the interviewees, a concern was held that interviewees might not feel

comfortable enough to divulge information regarding certain aspects of police behaviour to the interviewer. Such a possibility represents a potentially significant barrier to a piece of research aimed at investigating, amongst other issues, corruption, racism, sexism and the use of unauthorised discretion by police officers. These concerns were exacerbated by the fact that the interviewees were to be drawn from an occupation which, traditionally, is viewed as being 'closed' to non-members (Skolnick, 1994, Reiner 1992). The research did reveal a certain amount of 'discretion' amongst some members of the sample but it is hard to tell to what extent it was excessive or not. Discretion usually arose when the matter of police corruption or scandals within the force was broached although, fortunately, the majority of the sample appeared to be very open towards discussing such issues. The possibility that interviewees might fail to divulge information on certain subject areas may have been lessened by the fact that all the interviewees had retired from the police force and may therefore not have feared professional repercussions. Throughout the course of the interviews officers spoke to me about, and gave examples of, police racism, police sexism (including sexual assault), police theft (including burglary), police perjury, unauthorised use of police force (including, in one case, the systematic beating of an individual arrested in connection with a charge of child rape and murder). The frankness of many of the sample is highlighted by the following response in which an officer admits to committing an act of perjury. He said;

"...One time...some of the blokes in CID had...basically...bodged a case...they'd been informed that a warehouse was going to get broken into on the 12th...I think it was...of a certain month...They'd bodged it up by going in for them before the villains themselves had actually got in...Anyhow...they needed some extra evidence and...basically...they asked me to say something in court...say

that I'd seen so and so do so and so on the evening of the 12th. Anyhow, I went to court...and did what they asked me...It wasn't until I left the court that I realised I hadn't even been on duty on the bloody 12th!..."

The influence of hindsight is, as Seldon and Pappworth rightly note, potentially problematic but only when an interviewee makes a statement which is informed by such an influence and does not acknowledge it. Generally, in this research, it was found that individuals looked back at certain incidents in the light of later knowledge but did so in a way that acknowledged this use of hindsight. For example, one interviewee, when asked about corruption in the CID, replied,

"I think anyone who's a decent person and has worked in the CID, especially at that time, can't look back without regretting a lot of the stuff they've done...a lot of it was wrong but we were young and we thought what we were doing was right"

It appears that this statement was made with the influence of hindsight by virtue of the fact that the interviewee now believes that some of the things he did were wrong. However, the influence of hindsight has not obscured the fact that at the time incidents happened he did not believe that he was acting unfairly or unjustly. On the other hand, it might be possible to argue that he knew at the time the actions he was undertaking were wrong but did not wish to admit it to the interviewer.

I shall now address the advantages of oral history forwarded by Seldon and Pappworth and assess their relevance to the present research. One area where the oral history technique was advantageous was that of 'personalities'. During the research I was able to assess not

just what officers perceived of having happened in a particular situation but also their perceptions of *why* it happened because individuals had the chance to express their own particular motivations. When ex-officers do talk about their personalities and attitudes it is possible to explain the 'myths' of policing and, for the first time, to see officers not just as officers of the law but to see them as human beings. The oral history technique also proved beneficial in the area of what Seldon and Pappworth termed 'personal and organized relationships'. By interviewing ex-police officers I succeeded in gaining a picture of how such personalities interact within the hierarchical police institution and also in addressing the power dynamics which occur in the relationship between, for example, uniform officers and CID officers. Following one interview, I was given an interviewee's personal journal in which he had noted recollections from his working life. Amongst the anecdotes, was one that described the effects of a bomb hitting Holborn Police Station during a World War Two blitz;

"...Insp XXXX (from the Grenadier Guards prior to police service) restored some sort of order; including a water-pail chain of men on the stairs because the C.I.D. office was ablaze. It had been empty at the crucial time, but while still burning fiercely the C.I.D. men erupted from a neighbouring pub and ignoring calls for assistance emptied their filing cabinets on to the burning furniture!..."

Such information allows us to explore a largely unaddressed aspect of police hierarchy (referred to in Weinberger's interviews). The relationship between CID and uniform officers is one dynamic of the police hierarchy that tends to sit uneasily with many of the basic assumptions of police culture literature. Skolnick (1994), amongst others, refers to the solidarity and the camaraderie that exists between officers and the present research

discovered much to support this notion of police camaraderie. However, it also uncovered much information to possibly indicate that, as far as CID and uniform officers were concerned, the relationship between them recognised very distinct demarcations associated predominantly with issues of status and ability.

Seldon and Pappworth noted the advantage of 'additional personal documents' and whilst undertaking this research two ex-officers lent me personal journals that contained reminiscences of their time in the police force. In such instances, the journals were read and any pieces of the text which corresponded with the main research questions of the study were copied and coded in the same way as the interview transcripts. These were useful in two main ways. First, the journals often articulated a given situation that had been recounted to me in the interview yet did so with more precision thus allowing me to rectify any possible ambiguities. Secondly, they often provided me with relevant information and anecdotes that were not recounted within the interview. This advantage is directly related to Seldon and Pappworth's next advantage of 'further information after interviews'. One officer, about a week after the interview, wrote me a letter detailing some more points regarding his time in the police and another rang me about five hours after the interview to recount another anecdote to me. The advantage of 'additional personal documents' can be seen as a form of triangulation in that it allows the researcher to use another form of data to enhance the depth of the research. It should be noted, however, that when using personal documents to enhance the interview data in this research we should not assume that these carry 'empirical neutrality'. Taking the example of police officer's personal journals, these do not strictly represent another source of data – merely the same source of data (i.e. the respondent) relaying information through a different medium (i.e. the written word) in another era (i.e. the past). Likewise, official police records might not

always provide a high level of accuracy regarding historical events. Police duty rosters might, for example, be manipulated by officers to give the impression that they were in a given location at a given time when they were in fact somewhere else. Triangulation of oral history data through the use of documentary evidence should not be viewed as a 'quick fit' towards verification. Documentary evidence, it must be noted, is socially constructed in the same way that memories are. This might be especially true of historical documents, a point made by Leff (1969) when he wrote, "No amount of pretence can conceal the relativity of historical knowledge and its dependence upon the historians who write it" (p.122).

Seldon and Pappworth noted that oral history was useful in that it gave accounts of various events a sense of 'atmosphere and colour' and this did prove to be the case within the present research. Oral histories, once transcribed, tend to give a much more 'realistic' and readable account of a certain happening when compared to a 'dry' piece of documentary evidence. Thompson (1978) highlighted the ability of oral data to provide us with, "...social clues, the nuances of uncertainty, humour, or pretence, as well as the texture of the dialect" (p.98) and these added elements, often lacking in other forms of data, serve to highlight the personalities behind our history. Such histories, by providing us with a human element, allow us a deeper understanding especially when, for example, investigating the relationship between the public and the police.

At all times, however, we must remain aware to the fact that the subjective nature of the information gained from the interviews must be treated with caution. Despite the views of academics who champion the use of oral history techniques we need to realise that any methodology that utilises the in-depth views of individuals is open to real problems

with regards to generalisation. That is, real care needs to be taken to ensure that one does not attempt to transpose the views of those officers who were interviewed onto all those officers who served within the Metropolitan Police Force between the 1930s and the 1960s. Finally, however, it can be argued that this piece of research did succeed in uncovering a large amount of information which might help us to understand the complexities of the culture of the police. Samuel (1976) argued that, “A man or woman talking about their work know more about it than the most diligent researcher is likely to discover” (p.199) and that such information allows one to escape the view of marginalized groups often presented by documentary sources. Correspondingly, the use of oral history techniques allowed the research to amass substantial data on those aspects of policing not usually covered in formal histories of the police. Such accounts (for example, Howgrave-Graham, 1947) tend to concentrate on the exceptional occurrences rather than the mundane and perhaps it is the latter, rather than the former, that needs to be investigated when addressing police occupational culture.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to provide both an introductory critique on the use of oral history techniques and an analysis on their relevance to a study of police culture. Such research attempts to extend a theme initiated by the work of both Brogden (1991) and Weinberger (1995), namely that oral history can be of great use in furthering our understanding of an occupation which has, for much of the period since its inception in 1829, remained off-limits to researchers. Despite the growing transparency of policing as an institution, much of its history and the history of its practitioners, is in danger of being lost. Oral history allows us to address those tensions, discourses and contradictions which

not only shaped the culture of the institution historically but which also continue to fuel speculation, debate and recrimination in the present.

The use of oral history proved crucial to the success of this piece of research as it allowed not only for greater understanding of both the history (or histories) of the police and the culture (or cultures) of the police but also the relationship between the two. Indeed, it soon became apparent during the course of the research that police culture and police history are inevitably intertwined and that many of the problematic cultural issues associated with the police of today are anything but contemporary in origin. Integral to any real understanding of the culture of the police therefore has to be an appreciation of the shifting sands of social, political and legal history and their ability to influence the future.

Appendix 1

Themes to be addressed in the interviews;

Pressure for Arrests or Summonses

Use of Discretion in the Police Role

Use of Common Sense in the Police Role

General Discipline in the Police

Attitude of Older Officers to New Recruits

Camaraderie

Social Solidarity

Social Isolation

Attitudes to Policewomen/The Role of the Policewoman

Attitudes to Women in General/Female Members of the Public

Attitudes to Ethnic Minority Groups/ Relations with Ethnic Minority Groups

Complaints against the Police

Corruption amongst Officers

Relationship with Barrow Boys and Street Bookmakers

Relationship with Prostitutes

The 'Rubber Heel Squad'

The Relationship between CID and Uniform Officers

The Relationship with Magistrates

The Relationship with the Public

Differences in the Police/Public Relationship between Areas

Perceived Changes in the Police/Public Relationship over Time

Differences in Cultural Dynamics between Geographical Areas/Police Stations

Relationship with/Attitudes to Left and Right Wing Organisations

Relationship with Law-Breakers

The Role of the Police

Police Cynicism

‘Once a Copper, Always a Copper?’

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¹ The transcripts of these interviews are currently held at the National Sound Archive, London under the catalogue reference Collection C684. I would like to acknowledge the help of the Curator, Dr Robert Perks, in granting me access to the documents.