

Some Elements of Methodical Police Work

Egon Bittner

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The role components of policing discussed in the preceding sections are all of a formal nature. That is, neither the restriction of occupational duties to serious police work and its licensing as a marketable occupation, nor the severance of ties with military origins and alignment with academic scholarship, nor the institution of the emphasis on educational requirements, specify what a policeman must know and what he must be able to do, in substantive terms. It was merely proposed that the introduction of these formal role components will further the development of a disciplined and explicit body of knowledge and technical skill, and that without introducing them such a development is not likely to take place. But it is possible to go beyond that to the tracing of fragmentary outlines of substantive knowledge and technique, albeit merely in a tentative manner and mainly for purposes of further exploration.

In the following remarks, we will attempt to sketch several elements or aspects of what appears to be professional, purposeful, and responsible police work. It is important to emphasize that, in accordance with our earlier expressed view, the substance of police professionalism must issue mainly from police practice and police experience; none of the points discussed is based on purely invented desiderata. Indeed, the following features of police work are not being presented as necessary and proper in the same sense as the formal role components discussed in the foregoing three sections. Instead, they are presented because there seems to attach to them a sense of rationality and methodicalness. What commends them is not that they are right but that they are based on reason, rather than on feeling, and in this sense professional. All of the following topics are based on observations of police practice and on extended conversations with

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policemen of all ranks and all kinds of assignments. That is, the to-be-described knowledge and methods are already in use. But what will be said is merely descriptive of some policemen and not of others. The possession of this information and skill, and its use, are optional in police work under present conditions. They are usually perceived as elements of a personal style of work and they are neither urged upon others nor recognized as superior to alternatives. In fact, even the officers of whom what we will have to say is descriptive typically do not undertake to advocate the propriety and usefulness of their own ways, nor do they express disapproval of alternative ways. They recognize that in the present system they can have their own peace only by leaving everybody else in peace, even if this goes against their better judgment.

THE USE OF AREA KNOWLEDGE

As is well known, there are two schools of thought concerning the organization of activities of the uniformed patrol. One emphasizes the need for familiarity with the area that is patrolled and frequent contact with people, and the other a high degree of motorized mobility. Both sides agree that both objectives are desirable. In general, however, arguments favoring mobility have the advantage, and the overall tendency in most departments is to put as many members of the patrol as possible into radio-monitored vehicles, where they can be readily reached and quickly dispatched to troublespots. Continuous connection with dispatchers requires that officers do not leave their cars except to handle assigned incidents. It is readily granted that this reduces contacts with citizens, makes surveillance more cursory, and attenuates the officers' opportunities to become familiar with the areas they patrol. But it is felt that this is not an excessive sacrifice to achieve the ability to respond rapidly to distant needs for services and a high mobilization potential in general.¹ It is possible, however, that this felt preference is due to an inadequate appreciation of the importance of area knowledge in police work.

For rather obvious reasons, the effectiveness of both control and help is greatly enhanced when specific situational factors can be taken into account. To be sure, it is always possible to cite some needs that can be met by universalistic approaches in which the helping and controlling agents can act, or at least can pretend to act, 'according to the book,' regardless of circumstances. More generally, however, the neglect of situational realities produces the impact of inconsiderateness as far as the subjects of the interventions are concerned, which in itself impairs the effectiveness of the agent.² Beyond that, and all policemen will agree on this point, methods that *simply* follow universalistic rules are also ill considered. Thus, very often one hears officers explaining that while some procedure is *normally* indicated, in 'this particular situation' the norm must be suspended in favor of certain

particular considerations. Since this kind of explanation is exceedingly frequent, it seems quite clear that what is referred to as *the* norm is merely a formalized paradigm of action, that 'departures' from it are not exceptions or evasions, and that the proper application of the norm always involves attuning it to circumstantial factors.³ To give circumstantial factors their correct weight in decision making it is necessary that they be intelligently appraised. That is, patrolmen must be able to draw on background information to be able to discern what particular constellations of facts and factors mean. In the case of the carefully deliberate policeman – by which is meant a man who organizes his activities with a view towards long-range peace keeping and crime control objectives in the area of his patrol, knowing that what he does from case to case can create more or less calculable advantages or liabilities for himself in the future – the background information consists of an enormously detailed factual knowledge.⁴ When one accompanies such a man in his patrol duties, he can hear countless variations of stories like, 'This is Jack S. He used to own a Dime Store, but for the past ten years he has been working for the T. Company. His marriage has been on the rocks ever since his daughter got married. He owns several old automobiles and he quarrels with his neighbors on account of taking up all the curbside parking. He and his wife spend a couple of evenings a week in the X Bar. But when I see him there alone, I know that more likely than not he will get dead drunk and I will have to take him home. We once had him up on receiving stolen property, with one of his cars, but they let him go,' and so on. Ordinarily such stories are told with minute precision, mentioning specific names, places, and dates, and they are told in great profusion. That is, many people are known in considerable detail. In addition to this, patrolmen know the shops, stores, warehouses, restaurants, hotels, schools, playgrounds, and all other public places in such a way that they can recognize at a glance whether what is going on in them is within the range of normalcy.

No matter how rich such factual knowledge of an area and its residents is, however, it can never encompass more than a fraction of reality. Many places have not been visited and most persons are not recognized. Thus it appears that though interest is directed to the accumulation of factually descriptive information, as opposed to the desire to achieve a theoretically abstract understanding, the ulterior objective is to be generally knowledgeable rather than merely being factually informed. That is, patrolmen seek to be sufficiently enlightened to be able to connect the yet unknown with the known through extrapolation and analogy. By this method they are always in the position to reduce the open and unrestricted variety of interpretative possibilities that baffles outsiders to a far more restricted range. They always have, as it were, something to go on. Thus, the factual area knowledge, far from being merely a desultory array of data, functions as a powerful scheme of interpretation. It partakes of the nature of a good

ethnographic grasp in that it employs typifications without sacrificing interest in and respect for individual variation. Every person and every event is always seen as a particular instance of a class, i.e., neither merely unique nor merely a type.

In calling the patrolman's area knowledge ethnographic we intend to indicate that it is methodical in ways quite akin to the knowledge of sociologists and social anthropologists.⁵ Social scientists, of course, engage in participant observation field work for limited periods of time and for the purpose of writing scholarly work about it, while the policeman acquires his knowledge on an indefinitely continuing basis for practical purposes. Moreover, since policemen ordinarily do not write books, they feel no compulsion to formulate their methods explicitly. Thus, many of those who are obviously methodical in their orientation and practice tend to say that what they do 'comes naturally when you like working with people'. This view is not entirely mistaken. Many people could probably never become either good ethnographers or area-knowledgeable patrolmen. But it is established that the competence of those who want to be ethnographers can be vastly increased by study and guided experience. There is every reason to suppose that this could also be true of area knowledge in police work. But under present conditions every patrolman is left to his own devices in mobilizing and using this resource.

There is a particular reason why the cultivation of area knowledge in existing police departments is left entirely to the initiative of individual officers, and is treated as a non-communicable style of work. It does not possess any recognizable high value as far as departments as a whole are concerned. The drunk whom the patrolman escorts home, knowing who he is and where he lives, will be neither the victim nor the perpetrator of an assault. How should one measure credit for the prevention of relatively rare and unforeseeable contingencies? Moreover, area knowledge helps 'only' the officer who uses it. Though knowledgeable patrolmen could be 'the eyes and ears' of their departments, in fact they are not. This is due to the pervasive information denial and the absence of upward communication channels which we described earlier as characteristic of military-bureaucratic police systems. Of course, no one objects when individual policemen do well on their own and many high police officials applaud it, but only if it doesn't involve any special costs.

TECHNICAL CONCERNS

Closely associated with area knowledge is a range of types of information about, and approaches to, problems that are typically associated with specialization in police work. It is important to emphasize that while this complex of knowledge, technique, and attitude is presently observable almost exclusively among officers

assigned to specific crime control fields, there is no necessary connection between the two.

Perhaps it is best to explain what is meant by technical concern through an illustration. An officer whose duties are limited to dealing, let us say, with shoplifting will tend to develop knowledge about it of the kind that can be found in the book by Mary Owen Cameron.⁶ That is, he will know the varieties of techniques associated with the crime, the types of persons who engage in it, and the opportunities that exist for it in the community. Beyond that, however, he will seek to be continually appraised of changes in the population of shoplifters operating in his jurisdiction by keeping tabs on roving gangs of shoplifters who move from city to city and by investigating the ever-changing patterns of association between shoplifting and other kinds of illegal activities, such as prostitution or the sale of stolen goods. Finally, he will be observant of innovations in merchandizing with a view to whether or not they lend themselves to theft. In a manner of speaking, his interest is not unlike that of the 'professional' criminal and his attitude is business-like. While the activity of some daring criminal causes indignation in everybody else, it presents a technical challenge to the policeman to whom we refer. But contrary to the sleuth celebrated in detective fiction, our man does not concentrate on a particular case by carefully assembling the plot of an individual crime. Instead, he focuses on a crime problem in general and he is moved by the desire to achieve maximum control over it. He may be occasionally zealous in his work, but he guards against letting his pursuits develop into a vendetta.⁷ He is apt to feel that 'you can't let things get to you if you don't want to end up with a bleeding ulcer'. He knows that criminals are not nice people and he expects neither politeness nor candor from them. He also knows that they will try to elude him and outwit him, and he prepares to meet these difficulties rather than relying on a strenuous chase or a head-on clash.

Such officers, whose description we have already idealized for purposes of emphasis, are certainly not above losing their patience and striking out in anger. But contrary to the crusaders against crime who act mainly on impulse, they consider impulsive action sometimes excusable, occasionally even useful to put the fear of God into someone, but generally inferior to calculated and informed procedure. That is, for them the preference for wits over brawn is a matter of principle, which, once accepted, becomes a fixed habit of decision making.

In crime control technical concerns are of direct and readily understandable importance. The more an officer knows about shoplifting the more likely he will be to solve such crimes by arresting offenders. But the attitude of dispassionate interest that is naturally associated with technical concerns is perhaps more important than the resulting volume of arrests. The point is simply this: in an occupation that is directed principally to dealing with things that stir up feelings

of hatred, indignation, contempt, and fear in most people, it is doubly important to bring such feelings under control. A policeman who acts merely in ways everybody else would act naturally forfeits the claim to practicing a specialized occupation, of any kind, let alone a profession. For in this case it is not he, as a person, who is employed by society, but merely the deeper and more visceral levels of his psyche; it is scarcely possible to imagine a more degrading status, no matter what the objectives behind it.

A policeman who hits a verbally abusive suspect and turns to an outside observer to ask, 'Wouldn't you have done the same thing?' might well get the answer, 'Yes, but *you* shouldn't!' The assertion, '*you* shouldn't,' though it might be fundamentally determined by legal and moral considerations, cannot be argued exclusively, or even principally, on these grounds. People always tell others to be ethical and high-minded! To draw an analogy, physicians refrain from sexually exploiting access to their patients' bodies not so much because it is immoral but more because eroticism wrecks havoc with sobriety needed for good judgement. Similarly, the interdiction, 'You shouldn't act impulsively,' directed to a policeman must be related to practical occupational interests. That is, it must finally rest on the realization that in any kind of purposeful work, impulsive action is inefficient, uncontrollable, and obstructive of the attainment of the worker's own interest. It might be a source of emotional gratification but it defeats every kind of other purpose the agent might have in mind. It submits the impulsive person to the control of anyone who has a mind to provoke him and it makes the impulsive person to that extent unfree. Only the resolutely calculating approach, i.e., a technical concern, leaves the options in the hand of the agent. A detective sergeant with twenty-two years of work experience in one of the great American police departments put this view into words upon which it is difficult to improve: 'In all these years as a cop I was always up to my ass in things that would turn your stomach and make your blood boil. But to me they don't mean anything but work. I might have lost my patience more often than I should have, but I am not proud of it. I have learned a long time ago that in this racket it is always better to be smart than to do things in ways that make you feel good at the moment. A lot of guys don't know that, and when they get to be forty years old and no longer feel like wrestling in the gutter with everybody who calls them a dirty son-of-a-bitch, they figure there is nothing left for them to do.'

NOTES

1. See the arguments contained in *Task Force Report: The Police*, *op. cit. supra*. Note 56 at pp. 54ff. and 190. The prevailing American view is that the foot patrol is useful but too costly. This opinion is not sustained by the results of experimental studies conducted in

England, which show that the presence of a patrolman on the beat results in very substantial reduction in the incidence of offenses: see Ben Whitaker, *The Police*, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964, p. 33.

2. Frank Elmes points to the seemingly trivial mistakes English policemen sometimes make – such as calling a ‘Sir’ type ‘mate’ and a ‘mate’ type ‘Sir’ – which are sources of non-trivial consequences, at p. 519 of ‘The Police: 1954–1963,’ *Criminal Law Review* (July, 1964) 505–528.

3. As a point of methodological interest, it may be mentioned that researchers who study police activities are almost always given legalistic explanation by policemen. But careful probing reveals, as Nathan Goldman observed, that, ‘their interpretation and enforcement of the law cannot be considered in any way as constant’ in his *The Differential Selection of Juvenile Offenders for Court Appearances*, New York: National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 1963, p. 97.

4. Egon Bittner, ‘The Police on Skid Row: A Study of Peace Keeping,’ *American Sociological Review* 32 (1967) 699–715.

5. The patrolman’s information gathering contains certain elements of the type of inquiry described in B. G. Glaser and A. L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1967, without, of course, leading to theory formulation.

6. M. O. Cameron, *The Booster and the Snitch: Department Store Shoplifting*, New York: The Free Press, 1964.

7. J. H. Skolnick and J. R. Woodworth describe a case of conflict between two officers assigned to the ‘morals detail’. One of the officers zealously treats all persons accused of statutory rape as serious sex offenders. The other avoids treating young men whom he recognizes as being merely amorous Lotharios in this way, explaining, ‘Not that I care if he has to register; but I hate to clutter up our file of pictures with these non-sex-criminal guys’ at p. 115 of their ‘Bureaucracy, Information and Social Control’ in D. J. Bordus (ed.), *The Police: Six Sociological Essays*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967.