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Ethnography and narrative

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the topic of police storytelling from an ethnographic perspective. Ethnographies have always been full of stories, but it took a while for storytelling as such to draw attention to it within the broader study of police culture. Lately, we have seen increased attention for storytelling in policing. Recent studies cover new ground: they comment on story tellability, on police storytelling among recruits, on the differences across settings, and more. Nevertheless, a more systematic treatment of this topic is still lacking. This paper reviews the literature on police storytelling. Its purpose is to come to a more thorough and critical understanding of storytelling in policing (studies), which allows us to identify some challenges and opportunities we see for future (ethnographic) research.

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Introduction

This paper explores the topic of police storytelling from an ethnographic perspective. As most readers probably know, police ethnographies have always been full of stories. It took a while, nevertheless, for stories and their production to draw ethnographers' attention. As a topic within the broader study of police culture, police storytelling first came into view in the 1970s and early 1980s (Van Maanen 1973, Punch 1979, Holdaway 1983). In the 1990s, the relationship between stories and police culture became the subject of discussion in criminology journals (Shearing and Ericson 1991, Waddington 1999a). Commenting on the writings up until a decade ago, Cockcroft (2007, p. 99) noticed that 'surprisingly little has been written on the specific area of police narrative'.¹ In recent years, however, we have seen increased attention for storytelling in policing (van Hulst 2013, 2017, Smith et al. 2014, Saarikkomäki 2016, Ugelvik 2016, Charman 2017, Kurtz and Upton 2017, 2018, Schaefer and Tewksbury 2017, Terpstra 2017, Turner and Rowe 2017, Rantatalo and Karp 2018, O'Neill 2019). More recent studies cover new ground: they comment on topics such as story tellability, police storytelling among recruits, and the differences across storytelling in different settings. Nevertheless, studies are spread out across criminology journals and beyond, and a more systematic treatment of the topic is still lacking.

The purpose and contribution of this paper, then, is to come to a more thorough and critical understanding of storytelling in policing (studies), which will allow us to identify some challenges to and opportunities for future ethnographic and fieldwork.² As such, this paper contributes to efforts in policing studies to see culture 'at work' (Campeau 2015), seeing how culture is reproduced and altered in practice (Fielding 1988, Chan 1997, Marks 2004, Martin 2007, O'Neill et al. 2007, Loftus 2009, Reiner 2010, Cockcroft 2013, Fassin 2013, Mutsaers 2014). In addition, this paper connects the study of police storytelling to the wider social science and humanities literature on storytelling

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(Czarniawska 2004, Riessman 2008, Shenhav 2015). Inspiration and insights can be drawn from many places, as stories and storytelling have been studied for quite some time in disciplines and fields such as organisation studies (Boje 1991, Orr 1996, Czarniawska 1998, Gabriel 2000, Brown 2006), public administration (Hummel 1991, Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, Ospina and Dodge 2005), psychology (Bruner 1990, Ochs and Capps 2001), philosophy (Herrnstein Smith 1981, MacIntyre 1985) and sociology (Labov 1972, Sacks 1992, Ewick and Silbey 1995, Gubrium and Holstein 2009). In addition, more recently, criminologists have invited others to a *narrative criminology* (Presser 2009, Sandberg 2010), defined as ‘the study of the role the telling and sharing of stories play in committing, upholding and effecting desistance from crime and other harmful acts’ (Sandberg and Ugelvik 2016, p. 129).

In the remainder of this paper we reach our purpose in three steps. First, we define ‘story’ and ‘storytelling’ and establish where and how stories and storytelling might matter. Next, we look at the ways in which researchers in policing studies, ethnographers in particular, have worked with and looked at stories and storytelling. For this, we review the literature on police storytelling. Finally, we point at some challenges in researching police storytelling and relevant opportunities for future research. Throughout this paper we use examples from ethnographic fieldwork to support the arguments we make.

Stories and storytelling: definitions, settings, work

Let us first explore the concepts of story and storytelling. What interests us here are stories as they can be encountered in everyday life (Ochs and Capps 2001), as they are told on street corners, in cafés, at home, or in the workplace. What do such stories entail? What are their basic elements? With a story we mean an account of events that happened in a setting (Chatman 1978, Czarniawska 1998). Events are crucial for a story to be recognised as such; something has happened, which is then turned into a story. Often, stories focus on human intention and action (Ospina and Dodge 2005). Setting is the time and place events took place. It might also point at the social and material embeddedness of events. Furthermore, following Aristotle, we might expect stories told to have an identifiable beginning, middle and end. In practice, however, storytelling does not entail clearly organised stories with a clear beginning, middle and end. Storytellers can tell just bits of stories (Boje 1991, Gubrium and Holstein 2009), leaving out, for instance, an explicit description of a story’s setting. Storytellers might use the telling to find out what has happened. Furthermore, the events a story speaks about might still be ongoing.

Storytellers also *emplot* (Bruner 1990, Czarniawska 2004) what has happened, suggesting what matters in what took place, what drove the events described. Storytellers do this, for instance, when they select some events for inclusion in the story and ignore others. They can also highlight or downplay the role a specific actor has played in the events described. Or they can implicitly or explicitly blame actors for what has happened or blame (aspects of) the setting (Burke 1969: Chapter 1). Emplotment might be an intentional act to promote a particular interpretation of events that suits a storyteller well, making him or his group ‘come off best’ (Bruner, 1990: 96). At the same time, storytellers – and their audiences – might not be that aware of the various ways in which stories emplot what has happened, as storytellers’ taken-for-granted assumptions and ideologies might shape the emplotment of their stories. The way storytellers emplot their stories might seem natural, obvious and non-arbitrary to them (Herrnstein Smith 1981, p. 213), even though telling other stories about the same reality is always possible (Gubrium and Holstein 1999).

While the analysis of stories might, and often does, focus on the content (Gubrium and Holstein 2009), storytelling is a social practice that can be studied ethnographically. As a practice, storytelling involves one (or more) person(s) telling another person (or persons) about something that happened (Herrnstein Smith 1981). Typically embedded in another organisational or social setting and practice (think of storytelling during an interrogation, a briefing or a lunch), storytelling can help to accomplish all kinds of work (Herrnstein Smith 1981, Forester 1993, Gubrium and Holstein 2009, Sandberg

and Ugelvik 2016). Here are a few important ones. Stories can report on what events took place (Forster 1993). They can make sense of situations, diagnose them and help image what might be done next (Orr 1996, Czarniawska 2004, Weick et al. 2005, Abolafia 2010). They might help to educate and warn their audiences (Van Maanen 1973, McNulty 1994). Stories construct the identity of people in them (Tangherlini 2000, Brown 2006, Ybema 2014), can entertain, carry value and emotion (Gabriel 2000, Tangherlini 2000), and, in general, can provide access to the world being talked about (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Through their emplotment, stories also do political work. They might legitimate events as they took place (Van Maanen 1980, Maclean et al. 2012, Ugelvik 2016). They might support existing social relations, but might also subvert them (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Furthermore, we have to realise that the work of stories is not solely that of the tellers, but also that of a story's audience who might elicit, interpret, resist or co-author the stories being told (Ochs and Capps 2001).

Stories and storytelling are shaped by the social norms and conventions that govern a particular setting and practice in which they are embedded (Ewick and Silbey 1995). We might, for example, look at the questions: Under what conditions are stories told? What makes stories tellable? The social norm that would make a story tellable, researchers have often claimed, is that they depict events that are strange, unusual or uncommon, a violation of the expected. Stories about the plain, ordinary or everyday would not be told (Labov 1972, Polanyi 1979, Tangherlini 2000). Others, however, have pointed out that in the setting of relationships of trust, people tell each other about plain, ordinary and everyday as well (Robinson 1981). This is also what van Hulst (2013, van Hulst and Ybema 2019) found in police storytelling. In his research he looked at the canteen, the lunchroom or pantry, the briefing room, the patrol car and the desk area and found that *whether* stories are told relates to the setting.³ What is more, because officers often encounter the strange, unusual and uncommon, *and* because they spend considerable 'downtime' with each other – that would encourage telling more everyday tales – storytelling might be even more important in police culture than in other organisational cultures (Crank 2004, p. 55, Smith et al. 2014, van Hulst and Ybema 2019). Before we look more closely at storytelling in the police organisation, however, we should investigate the role of stories in early police ethnography.

Stories in police ethnography

So where do we encounter stories in policing studies and what specific work do they do there? Ethnography and fieldwork seem to be *the* way to get at stories. When ethnographers go to observe police officers and talk to them, they hear many stories. Stories are told, for instance, on the beat:

As we drove on we passed through a warehouse area, where the officers spent a good deal of time looking into alleys and kind of looking at doors and into doorways. I heard stories about some of the drunks, winos and bums one might find sleeping in the alleys, in cartons, under piles of papers and doing all sorts of things one would expect to encounter in this type of a neighborhood. (Bittner 1965/2013, p. 130)

In interviews and informal conversations, stories inform ethnographers about police practices, the way culture works and about what (and who) officers have to deal with. An example of a story from an ethnographic project of ours is useful here. It is a story told in an interview some years ago:

Well, I got a call about an article eight, so somebody who is driving under the influence of alcohol. It was six o' clock in the morning, end of the nightshift. The call was delegated to another car, but I was driving with Ted and I say: 'Hey, let's do it with the four of us, so we finish more quickly and we can all go home at seven.' So we drive to that street. The car is there, with the engine running and there is an enormous Antillean with Rasta-hair standing next to the car, shouting, shouting: 'You bitch this, you bitch that!!!' A lot of people around it. So I address the guy. Like, 'Hey, why don't you calm down man.' Well, by the moment I had pronounced the word 'calm', he had already hit me. So we all went for it and then his wife or girlfriend also came out. Then you get: 'I'll stab you to death, I'll stab you to death!' and he was walking towards her and we had to take them apart. He started hitting and kicking and it became one big fight. And then the four of us were on top of him. We fought for three quarters of an hour, with pepper-spray and all. But he reacted to nothing. He just had so much cocaine in his system. We were fighting to

the max. I had never fought like that with suspect before. (Interview 26-01-2012, translation from Dutch by the author, fieldwork has been reported on in van Hulst 2013)

This 'fighting-to-the-max' story tells us about events of policing. It gives us a taste of the kind of aggressive, drugged individuals officers might encounter. It also tells us about the way officers go about handling such a case. Here, the officers tried not to use their firearm (which all officers, in the context of the fieldwork the story comes from, carry). In many ethnographic and fieldwork accounts, we find stories that speak in this manner of the events officers live through. Here are the first lines from some of the officers' stories recounted in classic and new books and papers written by fieldworkers:

One time Joe and I found three guys in a car ... (Westley 1953, p. 36)

I'd been out there for a couple of months but we hadn't done much ... (Van Maanen 1973, p. 414)

I was taking a broad down a flight of stairs and I got a little careless ... (Rubinstein 1973, p. 273)

There was this old chap, over eighty he was, and I met him one night and he was a bit the worse for drink. (Cain 1973, p. 107)

A fight between the husband and the wife. The guy had come unglued. (Muir 1977, p. 27)

I had my pistol out once, but did not fire ... (Punch 1979, p. 134)

At a certain moment there is a call from the emergency room that in one of the villages there is a man walking on the street with a gun. (Terpstra 2017, p. 24)

They denied my promotion for years. (Campeau 2018, p. 614)

One kid on Steve's beat stole his Nan's car and smashed it. (O'Neill 2019, p. 58)

When they hear these stories in the course of their research, ethnographers might take their truth for granted. They might accept them as mini-portraits of policing: this is how the work is done. The work stories do then is that they (are meant to) *report* on who you run into on the beat, how to work with them, and so on (Richman 1983). In the hands of researchers like Westley or Rubenstein, however, stories did more. Spread across an ethnographic text, they helped to provide access to the world of police officers, to their 'lived experience' (Schutz and Luckmann 1973). The police ethnographer, then, was on the mission to expose the native's point of view (Van Maanen 1988).⁴ Officers used and use stories to tell about their work. Researchers, in their analysis, use them to reconstruct *typical* police practices and *typical* beliefs that go with them, and then later use a selection of stories to illustrate patterns of culture:

The following situation, [...] tells the tale from the policeman's viewpoint. Although it has obviously been selected to place him in an advantageous light, it nevertheless illustrates the difficulties inherent in the situation (Westley 1970, p. 58).

But there is more to those stories and their telling. In this quote, Westley actually points at another dimension, when he says that the tale 'obviously' has been selected. Stories and storytelling, to be sure, are cultural artefacts as such. As we noted above, stories can accomplish all other kinds of work, besides reporting. They are ways of making sense, ordering, legitimising, and so on, *themselves*. Officers' viewpoints and beliefs are not just reported on with the use of stories. They also shape stories and stories in their turn contain viewpoints and beliefs. Stories help to dramatise the job (Trujillo and Dionisopoulos 1987, Manning 1997), as most of the time it is as 'boring as can be' (Van Maanen 1978a, p. 118). Westley also observed that his 'policemen [...] magnified the danger in the tales they told each other' (1970: xiii). In fact, he showed how the construction of the police culture in his ethnography builds on stories and the storytelling he heard:

Typical of the stories the police seem to remember and tell each other about is the following tale a policeman tells of his experience at the hands of the sister of a drunken girl. [...] Here is an allegory of injustice, which the respondent

takes care to make explicit after he finishes the story. [...] So it is seen by the men. From it they derive the conception of a public hating the police. Out of a conception of a hostile public and out of this sense of injustice comes a need to strike back (Westley 1970, p. 75).

Westley claims that some stories are remembered and shared, and that they form the basis of the way officers view their world. This should make us interested in storytelling in everyday policing and the influence of particular settings on this storytelling practice. We need, then, to move from ethnographies built from stories to an ethnography of storytelling.

The ethnography of storytelling

The first police ethnographer who devoted more sustained attention to police storytelling as such was Van Maanen (1973). His account is a crucial one in painting a picture of the way storytelling and police cultures are connected, as he describes how recruits are socialised with the help of stories. Even before experiencing the reality of policing the streets, recruits hear about it through stories. Van Maanen (1973, p. 410) speaks of ‘partial organizational history which details certain personalities, past events, places, and implied relationships’ that the recruits will learn about mostly through *war stories* experienced officers tell them in the classroom. The recruits discuss the war stories amongst themselves and out of these discussions collective understandings begin to develop. Some years later, Punch (1979) spoke of the ‘verbally transmitted folklore’ of the Amsterdam police station where he did his ethnography. Over a cup of coffee in the early morning, ‘an older hand’ might ‘start recounting a horrible accident or decomposing bodies stories’ (Punch 1979, p. 87). What researchers came to see was a repertoire of stories, a ‘rich narrative catalogue’ (Trujillo and Dionisopoulos 1987, p. 205, Fielding 1988, Smith et al. 2014) that officers tend to share. This repertoire encompasses not only well-known war stories of a particular office, but also stories that depict events all, or most, officers live through at some point in their career (Van Maanen 1980, p. 149).

Van Maanen (1978a) and Punch (1979) pointed at the tension between what officers actually do and the stories they tell each other and researchers about their work. Still, for Punch, just as for Van Maanen, stories transmit important warnings meant to protect younger officers from ‘a false sense of security’ and prepare them for the day that ‘the routine explodes into the unanticipated and the dangerous’ (Punch 1979, p. 95). Others went on to suggest something different. Holdaway (1983, pp. 56–57), for instance, argues the following:

Why are [stories] so popular, and why are they told during quiet periods? When policing seems slow and dull [...], stories stressing speed and action serve to remind officers of what they believe policing is really like. [...] Elaboration does not matter; accuracy is not central to the story. The important point is to heighten the sense of excitement and speed which is central to the occupational culture.

Truth, in terms of accurate descriptions of what has happened (or might happen), according to Holdaway, is not what stories contain and neither is it what the audience should be expecting (cf. Gabriel 2000). Stories construct an image of the police officer as the (macho) hero and simultaneously try to release the group of heroes from their boredom. With a certain skepticism, Bayley and Bittner (1984, p. 46) noted that some stories

are so common among officers that they should probably be taken with a grain of salt. The same stories crop up too often, suggesting that they have become part of the mythology of policing passed on uncritically from officer to officer.

Stories, this suggests, contain the same patterns and repeat the same kind of message over and over again. If there is truth to the stories told, it is a cultural truth: the stories are truthful as they show how officers give meaning to policing life (cf. Terpstra 2017).

The image of officers as the heroes of the stories they tell received further specification in Fielding’s (1994) idea of a cop canteen culture. As he saw it, ‘[e]xcitement and status attached to physical danger are crucial in policemen’s self-image and lifestyle’ (Fielding 1994, p. 50). Officers’ ‘occupational

imageries' feature 'exaggerated stories' (Fielding 1994, p. 50) and in the canteen one can hear 'rehearsals of macho action [that] function as pep talks, and hasten the prospect that the story will again be made real in the future actions of officers' (Fielding 1994, p. 54). Fielding's suggestion of masculine dominance in the canteen talk received a confirmation in Fletcher's observation that storytelling 'within policing is almost exclusively a male domain' (Fletcher 1996, p. 40). Fletcher also encountered a *core story* that illustrates this observation. More of a scenario, it is told in the following manner:

[W]hat would you do if you found yourself in an alley with a big 250-pound man comin' at you? What would you do?

Fletcher argued that this scenario is 'universal in the police world [and] enforces the idea that policing is about force and that women necessarily have no place in this macho organization' (Fletcher 1996, p. 37). Storytelling in the canteen is thus not only male dominated; stories told might also provide legitimisation of male dominance in police culture as such. What perpetuates the situation, Fletcher (1996) saw, is that in order to counter the story, women should have a say in the storytelling, but they don't.

Waddington further elaborated on the general idea of a canteen culture. In the canteen, he argued, officers 'retail versions of events that affirm their worldview: the canteen is the "repair shop" of policing' (Waddington 1999a, p. 295, 1999b). The canteen offers its occupants narrative treatment, so to speak. Canteen storytelling helps to sustain 'the sense of a crime-fighting mission [that] provides ideological justification for the authority that is exercised against fellow citizens' (Waddington 1999b, p. 120), which brings us back to Westley's comments on story-exchange and how that feeds into police culture.

Finally, Shearing and Ericson (1991), after Holdaway but before Fielding, Fletcher and Waddington, had proposed a contrasting take on culture and storytelling. In their account, built on ethno-methodological theorising, storytelling is not about the 'deceitful' construction of an identity or about entertaining those who are bored or whose pride is hurt. Stories, rather, offer a worldview and guidance to action. This does not mean that according to Shearing and Ericson stories are depicting the truth of policing more accurately than for Holdaway and the others. Rather, the stories that officers hear and tell offer a metaphorical model for policing. They are resources for understanding what policing is about. Stories form a toolkit that represents incidents that '*any cop* [...] could experience' (Trujillo and Dionisopoulos 1987, p. 206). What is more, police officers appear to reason narratively, as 'when asked how police work is done officers are unequivocal, they cite experience' (Shearing and Ericson 1991, p. 488). Officers know through experience and communicate what they know through stories, which feed into new experiences. Storytelling, as Shearing and Ericson (1991) saw it, is fundamental to the craft of policing. It offers officers a way to understand their experience and that of their colleagues and digest not just knowledge about policing, but also a way to form a perspective on it. Police culture, and not just canteen culture, is to a large extent built from stories.

Recent refinement

More recent field research brought theoretical refinement to this topic (Tsoukas 2009). van Hulst (2013), teasing out the difference between Waddington on the one hand and Shearing and Ericson on the other, argued that storytelling varies with the settings in which it takes place – the canteen, patrol car, briefing, desk area and (research) interview room. Smith et al. (2014, see also Kurtz and Upton 2017, p. 547) confirmed this on the basis of Smith's own experience as a police officer. Like Van Hulst, they pointed out that storytelling has multiple purposes in policing and that stories are typically told (or not) in particular settings in a way that fits the setting. The authors speak of a political, an educational, a social, a legal, an evidential and even a therapeutic dimension to storytelling. Differences between settings are also what Schaefer and Tewksbury (2017) found when they compared detectives' storytelling in two distinctive settings: the squad car and the canteen. In the canteen, stories 'provide the image of a unified team where all participants (apparently) agree and see the world in similar ways' (2017, p. 46), while in the squad car

'the viewpoints expressed are linked to an officer's existing personal beliefs, which typically lends nuance and often broader interpretations to the telling of a critical incident' (2017, p. 47).

Next, Charman (2017) wrote about the importance of stories in the training and socialisation of recruits (see, also Ford 2003). She noted that 'war stories can contribute significantly to the patterned responses that new recruits develop in order to cope with the challenges presented in the early years of their policing careers', and 'the content of [...] stories is then important to appreciate, for it is within those stories that the meanings regarding what policing is about and what are standards of "good" and "bad" policing will be conveyed' (Charman 2017, p. 118). In their contribution to our understanding of storytelling in the classroom setting, Rantatalo and Karp (2018) showed how it helps recruits make sense of and construct an identity. They also note that 'storytelling practices supported students in regards to the question of how one should ideally feel about encountered phenomena and how one should handle, overcome or contain certain feelings' (Rantatalo and Karp 2018: 172).

Furthermore, it was found that many events can become tellable in policing, when, for instance, officers sit in a patrol car together for long periods (van Hulst 2013, Smith et al. 2014, Schaefer and Tewksbury 2017). More tellable in the canteen were the more recent events, encounters with people well known on the force, and the more spectacular and exciting police work – which suggests that not too much has changed in this (Holdaway 1983). Rantatalo and Karp (2018), in addition, found that the stories told in the classroom, just like those in canteens, gravitated towards the unusual and the extreme. This contrasts with what is tellable in a meeting like a briefing, for instance, where the purpose of the meeting helps to decide what stories are appropriate to share. What is tellable, thus, depends on the sum of the characteristics of a setting (which colleagues and how many are present, how much (down)time officers spent in the setting, what practices are engaged in, etc.).

Finally, recent studies have further zoomed in on the content of tellable stories. Kurtz and Upton (2017), in particular, stress that the stories told in the canteen and elsewhere often simplify realities and do not match personal experience (see also Fielding 1988). Zooming in on war stories told among officers, they encountered a core story they call the 'occupying soldier narrative'. This story revolves around 'the ever-present tension associated with policing communities perceived as dangerous, and officers describe patrolling certain neighborhoods like combat patrols in a war zone' (Kurtz and Upton 2017, p. 550). Kurtz and Upton (2018) specifically contributed to the investigation of the gendered aspect of police stories that Fletcher (1996) brought to our attention. The police stories they encountered and the storytelling they heard about still 'reproduce existing masculine ideals of physical strength, violence, and heroism' (Kurtz and Upton 2018, p. 283).

Comparisons that extend beyond the single police station and groups of officers enable us to differentiate further. We already mentioned Schaefer and Tewksbury (2017) who encountered well-known storytelling patterns amongst detectives. However, whereas Waddington (1999b, p. 111) saw 'a remarkable similarity in the core elements of [canteen] rhetoric found across a broad variety of police organizations in a wide variety of jurisdictions', others have found differences. Terpstra (2008), for instance, in his study of community policing, noticed the importance and endlessness of storytelling in small stations:

[E]specially in small police stations with a tightly knit team, officers often use the coffee and lunch breaks to talk endlessly about experiences colleagues have had, mainly on the streets. The purpose of this is not just to exchange facts. More important, so it seems, is to use concrete events to come to adequate interpretations of problems, persons and situations with which the police has to deal. Often this is done with the help of constantly reiterated stories and anecdotes, which are updated with the help of new experiences featuring the same persons and locations (Terpstra 2008, p. 108, translation from Dutch by the author).

In a more recent article on rural policing, Terpstra (2017) pointed out that rural officers in their stories talk about the differences between working in cities and working on the countryside. Stories that officers in rural areas tell, for instance, stress the importance of knowing the people you encounter and about talking instead of using force. Loftus (2010) also noticed differences in the talk between

the settings in which she did her research – two British police stations – when it came to the way policing was portrayed. van Hulst (2017) found that storytelling during breaks differed between different Dutch police stations. Most recently, O'Neill (2019), in her study of the occupational culture of Police Community Support Officers, saw the importance of storytelling to this group. Their use of stories differed from that of regular police officers. Through stories, they made sense of their unique occupational position and justified their work as important to policing.

Finally, the debate on talk (among officers) and action (on the streets), is one of the most complex issues in the study of police cultures (Shearing and Ericson 1991, Waddington 1999a, Charman 2017). Loftus (2010) confirmed the manner in which the lingering tension is still present in the way Holdaway and Waddington encountered it:

Although actual episodes of dangerous encounters were rare, officers routinely told each other (and me) stories that glorified violent and confrontational encounters with members of the public. [...] Police narratives celebrated a confrontational approach to policing, and this created and reinforced a thirst for excitement and action. (Loftus 2010, p. 7)

Turner and Rowe's (2017) recent contribution to the literature, by contrast, takes us further down Shearing and Ericson's (1991) path and their idea that police cultures are sustained through storytelling. During their ongoing ethnographic fieldwork, Turner and Rowe have become convinced that a narrative approach forms a useful way to get to police culture. They came to recognise the way storytelling is not only crucial to officers in the canteen, but also when they are 'in action'. Officers, Turner and Rowe noted, work with *speculative stories*, combining what they see (e.g. actor A making a certain movement) with what they know (e.g. actors in setting B deal drugs) to come to an action (stop the actor A when making a suspicious move in setting B). Events placed within a speculative story, in such instances, not just form metaphorical guidelines for action (Shearing and Ericson 1991), but quite directly help to diagnose situations and script police action. In addition, stories that officers see as plausible accounts of what is going on, subsequently serve as legitimisation of their actions – when officers have used them to make an arrest, for instance.

Challenges and opportunities

In the preceding, we have seen two basic ways in which stories and storytelling can and have played a role in police ethnography and fieldwork: first, stories have formed the basis of descriptions of practices and beliefs (i.e. police culture) and, second, storytelling as a cultural phenomenon has itself been investigated. In the first sense, stories are *the means* through which we learn about policing; in the second, the production of stories becomes *the object* of study (Ewick and Silbey 1995) and stories are seen doing all kinds of work: legitimisation, education, emotional release, identification, diagnosis, guiding action, to name the most prominent. In narrative criminology, the second idea has been labelled a 'constitutive view' of narrative (Presser 2009, Sandberg 2010). Let us now point at the challenges and opportunities we see for future research.

Challenge 1/Opportunity 1 – When stories are considered a means to study policing (culture), the 'part of the world brought into focus through the stories that are collected need not have anything to do with what constitutes a narrative and the ways it is produced and functions in social life' (Ewick and Silbey 1995, p. 203). Precisely for this reason, a theorist of interviewing, Alvesson (2011), is skeptical about the use of interview stories as a means to build solid social theory. He argues that interviews are, in the end, products of the interview situation (cf. Holstein and Gubrium 1995, Atkinson and Silverman 1997). Stories told in interviews, the argument would be, are to a large degree told the way they are told *because* of the setting that the interview creates. Interviewees, for instance, can be expected to want to legitimize their past action and construct their interview stories in a manner that presents them and their compatriots in a positive light. Stories can never merely mirror what has happened, they re-construct it. It is meaning, not facts, that we should look for in stories (Gabriel 2000, Presser 2009). This challenges the interviewer whose intention it is to describe

true reality beyond the interview setting. There is no true – or at least never one single – story that waits to be told (Presser 2004).

One way to deal with this problem is to bypass the officer as storyteller and become the storyteller yourself. This is quite a common practice in police ethnographies:

One night, we (a sergeant, a PC, a temporary detective constable, and myself) were in a plainclothes car. (Manning 1997, p. 161)

A slow weekday afternoon is interrupted when the sergeant is called to the scene of a domestic dispute. (Herbert 1997, p. 40)

As we drove back to the station, Guo volunteered that I had just witnessed a prime example of good policing. (Martin 2007, p. 669)

We all went into the canteen. Just as everybody was eating, an immediate response call came over the radio for police assistance on Park Street - a part of the student union at the local University. (Loftus 2010, p. 7)

Such ethnographic narrating lends credibility to the writing, as it shows that the ethnographer was *there* (Geertz 1988, pp. 1–24) at the scene described. It does not, however, turn fiction into (mere) fact, as ethnographers themselves cannot escape the need to order experience, make sense, and so on, when they write text from observation. To be sure, you might write in a style that presents your ethnographic stories as realist(ic) accounts (Van Maanen 1988), but that does not relieve you from their narrative nature either. As said, other accounts are always possible (Gubrium and Holstein 1999).

Participant observation, nevertheless, has been seen as a crucial ‘instrument’ to derive credible accounts. It can get us, literally and figuratively, to places interviews cannot (Becker and Geer 1957). It can be a way not only to see storytelling as it happens (Czarniawska 2004), but also an attempt to get behind or beyond interview stories or canteen stories that officers tell and through which they legitimate, obscure, misrepresent or ignore events that actually took place. In this manner, it can also help students of police culture to be(come) critical. Still, being *skeptical* about working with interview data is not the same as being *cynical* about what officers tell us and each other. To understand police cultures, apart from observing, we need people in the field to talk to us. First, even if storytellers emplot reality, interview stories can give us insight into the way their work is done. If interview stories conflict with our observations (e.g. did the officer fool the suspect or not?), that is not merely an indication of a validity problem to be solved with more rigorous testing. It may just as well be a puzzle that reflects tensions in social and professional life, and storytellers’ and audiences’ efforts to make sense of it all.

Second, stories help us construct officers’ beliefs about their world and those who populate it. Ironically, as Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003, p. 32) comment, ‘The more a story deviates from historical accuracy, the more fully and richly it depicts norms, values, and beliefs because these accounts more fully embody the storyteller’s interpretation of events’. Important here, in terms of methods, is that researchers offer the space needed for officers to tell their stories. We can therefore treat stories as an entry into understanding policing (e.g. Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003): (a) if we keep in mind that narratives are mediated insights into events and experience, and (b) if we compare interview stories with stories told in other settings and the ethnographer’s own observations in and beyond the interview (Atkinson and Silverman 1997, Alvesson 2011).

Taking into account the nature of interviews, an opportunity that we think has not been sufficiently taken is that of generating stories from a wide range of perspectives within the police (Terpstra 2017, O’Neill 2019): officers with different backgrounds, experiences, ranks, specialisations, and so on. In addition, we should compare those stories with stories from beyond the police organisation; those of jurors, suspects and victims of crimes (Bennett 1978, Komter 2006, Johnson 2008). This initial opportunity being suggested could also lead those who study police culture and stories to team up with others who do narrative criminology (Presser 2009, Sandberg and Ugelvik 2016, Pemberton et al. 2018) or who ethnographically study the police starting from disciplines such as

anthropology (e.g. Fassin 2013, Mutsaers 2014). We could in this way enrich, refine or question the understanding built on the basis of stories from a limited range of storytellers, and pose new research questions, without holding 'a naively "optimistic" view that the aggregation of data from different sources will *unproblematically* add up to produce a more complete picture' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, p. 232, italics added). Rather, it would help us better understand if and how the same events become part of different stories and might subsequently guide action in a certain direction.

This also calls for ethnographic work that starts not from the (police) organisation and its members, but from events or processes and *all* those who are involved in them. For this, we could build on the idea of 'studying through', where the ethnographer 'follows a discussion or a conflict as it ranges back and forth between protagonists, and up and down again between a range of [...] sites', with the aim 'to follow a flow of events and their contingent effects' [...] (Wright and Reinhold 2011, p. 101). Think, for instance, of eliciting stories about a conflict between a local police force and residents. An ethnographer can better understand such a conflict when eliciting stories from multiple angles. Studies like those could be particularly powerful if they study the process *as it unfolds* (van Hulst et al. 2017), because this can show how actors are struggling to understand the process and form a story about it. Taking it one step further, storytelling might become a way in which officers and others share the difficulties, uncertainties and pressure that led them to act in the ways that they did (Fawcett 2016).

Challenge 2/Opportunity 2 – Next, the focus on stories told in (one-off) interviews and canteens tends to increase a bias for certain types of stories (i.e. the unusual, the dramatic, the epic). This is the result of story tellability in such settings. As Becker (1998, p. 96) tells us: 'Something is always happening, it just doesn't seem worth remarking on'. Ethnography allows us to reach the more mundane, what might not seem worth telling or is hard to put into words. Let us give an example here. This is a short story Officer Jim told us during a participant observation, just after he had entered the house of a woman who had to be taken to hospital:

There she sat, drinking in her underwear. She only spoke in German. We spoke Dutch. That was no problem. ... She was a real believer. Mein Gott. I explained to her that she would have to go in the ambulance. If not, we would need to take her down to the police station. ... She was really caught up in her own world. Manic. Curtains closed. ... She had to get dressed. I helped her find some clothes. At a certain moment in the ambulance, she gave me a hand. That, I found beautiful. It meant she did not feel we forced her. This way I try to learn from every call. (van Hulst and Tops 2010)

One could ask, what is the difference between this story and stories from a so-called regular interview? Well, the difference is that Jim and the ethnographer went to the place together. Jim went into the house and the ethnographer (who did not want to intrude), remained by the patrol car. The story Jim told when he got out of the house (the story above) is a story about service work – one that became tellable *because* the ethnographer was there, at the scene. Because of its mundane nature, we might not have expected it to have reached an interview in which the officer was asked for his experiences, let alone a canteen filled with colleagues. What is interesting, is that Jim gives meaning to his work by pointing at a simple gesture, being able to see something important in what others might see as the most 'dull and slow' (Holdaway 1983, p. 56) part of the work. Surely, Jim engaged in identity work when he told this story. It would be naive to think that Jim would share the same story to his colleague if the ethnographer had not been there. It would be cynical, however, to think that Jim only performs being a certain kind of officer to please the ethnographer. Sandberg (2010), a narrative criminologist, offers an interesting view upon this issue. He shows how storytellers tell ambiguous, alternative and possibly conflicting stories to come to terms with the past and do identity work. Shadowing officers over longer periods (Muir 1977, Fleming 2008) and conducting multiple interviews over time with the same agents (Charman 2017), for instance, could lead us to better understand how officers such as Jim are able (or not) to give meaning over time. It would create a social setting in which less common, but no less valuable, stories might be told.

Challenge 3/Opportunity 3 – Going back to the ‘fighting-to-the-max’-story that we shared earlier will help us to point at a related challenge. After telling about the fight, the officer – we’ll call him Alex – told us that he and the person he fought with, pseudonym Fred, had had ‘blood-contact’. Alex had a wound and Fred did as well, and during the fight they were in physical contact with each other several times. After the arrest, when Fred was booked, he told the officers he had HIV. Therefore, Alex had to go to hospital. Alex explained what this did to him and his family:

Yeah, I [talked] with my girl about it Because, for me, what I get to go through here [at the police], that’s all fine with me, but at tonight at eleven, I close the door and go home. That is why I live quite far from here. It’s all fine with me, but it is work, you know. And I don’t want to take it home. That is what I hated most about it, that I took it home, to my girl. She was hoping to have a second [child]. We had just sort of decided to take a shot at it. Well, that had to be postponed. (Interview, 26-01-2012)

Officers, like all of us, have a particular social and personal background and ongoing life, in and beyond the police. Alex, Jim, and their colleagues are ‘whole persons’, so to speak. Their narratives give meaning to what happens in their jobs, in their private lives and how these two interrelate. Although we might hear about those private and policing lives in ethnographies, they are not often thematized as such (Cockcroft 2005; 2007). This is, for instance, what we think makes Muir’s (1977) descriptions of individual officers particularly interesting. Professional life histories allow us to look at ‘those aspects of policing not usually covered in formal histories of the police’ (Cockcroft 2005, p. 381). What should be avoided in this are characterisations that only pigeonhole officers, turn them into flat characters (the risk citizens encountering the police run as well, Van Maanen 1978b). Professional life histories (Mishler 1999, Cockcroft 2005) offer the possibility to understand how officers experience their life as officers in combination with other roles as they develop over time. Again, we should be careful not to expect interviews to offer a window on the authentic self of the interviewee (Atkinson and Silverman 1997). Life stories have ‘no fixed or necessary essence’ (Presser 2009, p. 179). Storytellers might attempt, struggle and fail to give coherence to their lives in terms of stories (Presser and Sandberg 2015). Shadowing officers over a longer period could, therefore, offer a useful complement to or contrast with life histories.

Challenge 4/Opportunity 4 – Yet another challenge that researchers face is understanding the relationship between talk and action in policing, discussed above. Fielding (1994), Shearing and Ericson (1991) and Waddington (1999a) took positions in this debate. We think Turner and Rowe’s (2017) recent work advances this debate. They argue that stories are used in scripting police action. Their fieldnotes (2017, p. 60) brilliantly illustrate the way this works:

A man rides out of the park on a mountain bike and continues along the pavement. He looks briefly into the car as we drive past him. Owen and Harvey are both looking at him. Harvey says to Owen ‘did you see that? His hand went to his pocket.’ Owen says ‘he’s come out of the park. When he saw we were police he went for his pocket’. Harvey winds down his window and tells the man to stop. (Italics in the original)

The officers see a cue, which they combine with their knowledge of the setting and of characters, making a certain story plausible enough to propel them into action.

This way of looking at a story as a sense-making device is consistent with and can be supported by ideas and findings in organisation studies. There, sense-making and narrative theorists have been arguing for some time that actors enact narratives (Boje 1991, Weick et al. 2005). What Turner and Rowe (2017) call ‘speculative stories’, and others might call ‘emergent stories’ (Weick et al. 2005), work as springboards for action. As we argued in the beginning, stories, in practice, might be ongoing while they are being told. Boje (2001) speaks of the ante-narrative, that which comes before a BME (beginning-middle-end) story form. If the storyteller uses the telling in the action situation to advance it, the speculation helps to clarify what is emerging.

Weick et al. (2005, p. 401, Hummel 1991) write that actors at times pause and ask themselves the question: ‘What is the story here?’⁵ Storytelling and (street) action might thus be seen as part of the same process. If the events of life are turned into stories, why wouldn’t stories become a guide for living, as the philosopher MacIntyre (1985, p. 212) wondered? Thinking in story terms allows

'people to comprehend a complex flow of action and to act appropriately within it' (Carrithers 1992, p. 78). When officers act on an emergent story, they often become characters in the stories themselves. Would it surprise us if officers at times acted on the streets with precisely this in mind: *Later today, we will tell our colleagues about this*. They have learned to be an officer, both on the street and in the police station. We should certainly be careful here, however, not to confuse action with storytelling. There is more to action than telling stories. Still, we think it would be a fruitful endeavour to further explore the study of speculative and emergent stories. Again, ethnographic fieldwork during which the researcher shadows agents or follows processes would be advisable.

Challenge 5/Opportunity 5 – As we suggested above, when it comes to settings relying on what happens in interviews and the canteen makes us undervalue what happens elsewhere. Stories are 'tailored to the interactional concerns' (Edwards 1997, p. 289). Take, for instance, storytelling to diagnose a situation as can happen in a briefing. Here is a short (anonymized) excerpt from a police briefing we taped:

Then there has been a burglary on Elmstreet, nr. Thirty-three. Take into account that such things can happen in broad daylight or at least in the early evening. This one took place between three and a quarter past seven, so there are burglaries during the day. [...] this is an example of that. So keep that in mind when you are on the streets. (Briefing 7-1-2015)⁶

The story proper is just one line. Apparently, there was not much more to share. We clearly see reporting being done. What is interesting, though, is that the briefer, Susan, is making a point of the story being part of a pattern. She is building a *policing meta-narrative* – which could be defined as 'over-arching comments or generic stories that involve the depiction of a phenomenon police officers have to deal with' (van Hulst 2017, p. 364). In this case, a story that joins several cases to tell a more abstract story – the meta-narrative – leads to a request for action. In contrast to many of the stories told in canteens and in interviews, this little story is part of the formal information-flow in which complicated pattern-matching is the game (nowadays, of course supported by intelligence units).

Other settings will lead us to see yet other work that stories can do. Beyond the canteen, the interview and the briefing, the desk area and the patrol car have been studied (van Hulst 2013, Schaefer and Tewksbury 2017). Think, for instance, of other kinds of meetings than briefings, the classroom, interrogation rooms, the streets, the buildings of partner organisations where officers meet others, houses of citizens and all other places where officers get a chance to hang out or are forced to do so. 'Don't forget the locker rooms and local bars', Muir (1977, p. 183) might have said. Ethnographic fieldwork uniquely allows us to see the impact of setting on storytelling (Fleetwood and Sandberg 2019). Nowadays, of course, we should also think of online storytelling, whether on official websites and blogs or in online groups (Lane 2019). Furthermore, comparisons with other and broader settings and between groups, including non-Western ones, might tell us much about the similarities and differences in the work of stories, and about the policing cultures more in general. Here, as discussed above, some exploratory work has been done and some observations have been made more recently (e.g. Terpstra 2017, O'Neill 2019, see also, Macvean and Cox 2012, Charman 2015), yet much more could be done.

Challenge 6/Opportunity 6 – Another challenge for police ethnographers is understanding how events are not just turned into stories, but how those stories travel through time and space. We know that stories are shared, especially stories about exciting events. As an officer told Kurtz and Upton (2018, p. 290):

Usually on that shift, at the end of that shift, everybody talks about the call that Joe Blow was on. We did this and we did that or the suspect did this. We replay our calls with each other. Usually by the end of the shift everybody's aware of all of the good calls ...

But what exactly happens to stories after they have been told for the first time? What gets lost or might be added in their retelling? Is there a core that remains, as Bayley and Bittner (1984) suggested? Does that mean that experiences are turned into stories that fit cultural beliefs (Ford 2003) that would

help, for instance, to ‘add coherence to masculine police culture’ (Kurtz and Upton 2018, p. 294) and work as ‘a cultural tool of reinforcement’ (Charman 2017, p. 156)? And, do stories that do not fit the beliefs simply disappear or were they not tellable to begin with? The study of the travel of stories or narrative repetition (Dailey and Browning 2014) would help us see how police cultures absorb events and experiences. To be sure, stories might not be repeated as much as one might expect from early contributions to the literature on organisational storytelling (Martin *et al.* 1983). At least, that is our experience in the field. Officers build a partly shared repertoire of stories (Trujillo and Dionisopoulos 1987, Fielding 1988, Smith *et al.* 2014). When an officer tells a story in the canteen, others often are able and willing to tell a story with a related theme or with the same (cast of) characters. This then is a moment when culture and social relations are reproduced. At the same time, even though a cultural repertoire might be limited, its use and reproduction is an accomplishment, not a given (Sandberg 2010). It is therefore worth the effort to find out how the repertoire gets (collectively) updated over time (Herbert 1998: 349) and, in addition, whether we can find moments when some shared stories have been displaced by others that subvert them (Loftus 2009, p. 196). To study this phenomenon, it would be advisable to take a longitudinal approach where the fieldworker would, at intervals, record stories in the same location and study the conditions of story production over time.

Challenge 7/Opportunity 7 – Finally, storytelling performances could be placed on a continuum between monologue and dialogue (Ochs and Capps 2001). Beyond the question of what stories are told and what work they do, we could also investigate the dynamics of storytelling performances. Rantatalo and Karp (2018) recently found that stories in the classroom were often not finished BME stories and that they were co-constructed. In the light of debates about policing cultures, it would be interesting to see which officers get to tell their stories and contribute to stories, while others might be silent or silenced. We might investigate if stories are confirmed with other stories (likely) or whether they might be challenged (less likely). Again, we could think of the canteen and the manner in which that setting has been dominated by a certain group of (masculine) officers (Fielding 1994, Fletcher 1996), but other settings are also of interest here and we might in a new way investigate the masculine nature of present-day canteens.

We might be inspired by the classic works of socio-linguists like Sacks (1992) and Polanyi (1979) on storytelling and turn-taking in conversations. They would help us see storytelling as a joint accomplishment of and negotiation between storytellers and audiences. Furthermore, although formal analyses of narrative interaction can become quite technical, we can learn much from the more recent work of psychologists Ochs and Capps (2001). To be sure, ethnographic fieldwork can help us to gain more insights here. It might also help us to see what role new technologies can play in the settings where stories are told. van Hulst (2017), for instance, observed young officers with their eyes glued to their mobile phones during breaks and thus not partaking in narrative interaction with others. Tapes of conversations or video would allow us to further tease out what happens during their interactions. These data, however, are challenging to obtain, which might help us understand why there is not much published research in this area. Below (Table 1), we have summarised the seven challenges

Table 1. Challenges and opportunities for research into storytelling.

| | Challenges | Opportunities |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | Limits of (interview) data | Bring in other views; Study ‘through’; Connect to other (narrative) studies in criminology and beyond |
| 2 | Hearing mostly stories about exciting, unusual, etc. | Uncover how officers make sense of the mundane |
| 3 | Seeing officers as whole persons | Study life histories & use shadowing |
| 4 | Talk & action | Study speculative, emergent stories as a basis for action in practice |
| 5 | Limits of settings studied | Study storytelling in more settings |
| 6 | Understanding the travel of stories | Study stories as they travel through time and might become part of officer’s repertoire |
| 7 | Understanding dynamics of storytelling | Study interaction (preferably also with the help of taped conversations) |

and the research opportunities we see. We do not claim that this list is complete, nor would we want to suggest that one challenge or opportunity is more important than another.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper, we have argued that storytelling can be found both in ethnographies and in policing itself. In what we could call *police ethnography through narrative*, storytelling can be seen as a means to explore policing and policing cultures. If ethnographers themselves take a more active role as storytellers, it might turn into *police ethnography as narrative*. On the other hand, in what we could call *ethnography of police narrating*, the storytelling officers and others become *the object of study*. If this leads us to see policing itself as a narrative activity, this would turn the study into *ethnography of narrative policing*. Whatever perspective we chose, we need to keep in mind that storytelling always takes place ‘within particular historical, institutional, and interactional contexts that shape their telling, its meanings and effects’ (Ewick and Silbey 1995, p. 206). It is an interplay between ‘experience, storying practices, descriptive resources, purposes at hand, audiences and the environments that shape storytelling’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2008, p. 250). As for other topics in the broader domain of police cultures (Marks 2004), ethnographic fieldwork is very well suited to delve deeper into the questions that surfaced through our challenges and opportunities. That does not mean that other approaches and newer ways of generating data and specific forms of analysis would not be helpful as well. Indeed, narrative research could be seen as ‘a multi-disciplinary collection of supplementary perspectives and methods that may generate very different insights and conclusions’ (Sandberg and Ugelvik 2016, p. 131). What is more, we could combine some of our stated opportunities when studying how storytelling dynamics differ from one setting to the next.

Furthermore, on a more general level, we would like to argue that those readers who are interested in police cultures and police storytelling should work with ideas and findings in other disciplines, like organisation studies, and with those working in the upcoming field of narrative criminology. This will allow us to more fully explore the nature of stories and storytelling, follow stories as they travel through time and space, and hear the voices of those whom we have not listened to enough. Taking at least some of these opportunities, we think, would advance not only the study of police storytelling, but also the ethnographic study of police cultures, as the two are and probably will remain intimately related.

Notes

1. Following Riessman (2008) and others, we treat stories and narratives as synonyms.
2. We would like to make a distinction between ethnography as a set of methods (which refers to the use of participant observations and includes formal and/or informal conversations with people in the field) and fieldwork, as the use of methods in the field (which typically includes the use of interviews and might also involve (participant) observations). Some sociologists, like Becker (1998), seem to treat fieldwork and ethnography as synonyms. Here, when we speak of ethnography we think of fieldwork that includes sustained observation. Important to note, however, is that in practice there are many ways in which one might engage the field to learn about storytelling. Nowadays, observation is more often done on multiple sites, in the form of shadowing people, combined with focus groups, diary studies or visual methods, etc. (see Czarniawska 2007). Ethnography and fieldwork, furthermore, might also be seen as sensibilities (Schatzman and Strauss 1973, Pader 2013), efforts to understand life in the field from the perspective of those who inhabit it. Finally, ethnography might refer to the written result of (ethnographic) fieldwork (Van Maanen 1988).
3. He also included the research interview. This last setting is of course no ‘natural’ policing setting for stories to be told, but it is important to notice that many of the stories that we encounter on the pages of ethnographies contain such interview stories (we come back to this below).
4. Van Maanen (1988) calls the stories ethnographers tell – not to be confused with the ones officers themselves tell – ‘realist tales’.
5. This does not mean that officers are often reflecting deeply before acting, as they will make use of stereotypical expectations regarding individuals and settings (Skolnick 1966).

6. The fieldwork during which this short excerpt was taped took place in 2014 and 2015. During this fieldwork, the fieldworker conducted participant observations in four Dutch police stations. He observed 38 briefings in total. A part of the briefings were taped and transcribed. Another part of this fieldwork has been published on (van Hulst 2017).

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