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PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND THE POLICE IN THE INNER CITY OF AMSTERDAM

by

M. PUNCH

Sociologisch Instituut
Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, Nederland

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My first murder - this is not, I hasten to add, a confession - was that of a young woman whose suspected infidelity had caused her husband to stab her to death. That evening I had arrived at Police Headquarters in Amsterdam for a night duty with a young inspector who was responsible for supervising major incidents in the town. Almost immediately we were called to a suspected murder which involved a long interrogation of an English suspect (which I helped to translate) and the dragging and searching of a canal by divers for the body. It was a bitterly cold night and the eye-witness' account of the alleged murder became increasingly discredited as old bicycles, but no body, were brought to the surface. After several hours of interrogations and several hours of standing by the canal, the suspect was sent home and we sat down for a welcome cup of coffee at about four o'clock. Immediately the telephone rang and the inspector said "it looks like a murder in Amsterdam-South".

We drove through the slumbering city to a quiet and respectable street where the only indicator of trouble was the patrolcar parked outside a neat row of low-rise flats. We climbed the stairs, met the two policeman who had been first on the scene, and entered a small flat, conspicuously clean like most Dutch homes. The gas-fire was still burning, a woman's clothes were tidily folded over the back of the chair, there were momentoes from Sicily on the shelves, and there were family photos on the walls. The bedroom was slightly ajar and a foot was visible on top of the bed. The inspector entered the room end returned to talk in a hushed voice to the policemen. Steeling myself against an innate fear of death I entered the bedroom. A young, attractive woman lay on her back on top of the bed with her legs slightly drawn up and her arms wide. Her open eyes stared glassily like those of a stuffed animal. There were stab wounds in her stomach, neck, and face and the sheets and walls were spattered with blood. The holes in her neck were a brown-purple colour with surprisingly little blood around them while a slit on her upper lip made it appear that she was grinning. With only the hiss of the gas-fire breaking the silence we waited for the other services to arrive. The uniformed men sat quietly in futile recognition that their role was over. The husband had discovered some evidence of his wife's unfaithfulness and had stabbed her about thirty times with a stiletto, He then phoned the police and brought his two children downstairs to the neighbour and began walking to the station but was intercepted by a patrol-car on his way. Below there was an attractive little girl of three and a boy of about nine. The little girl cried when she saw the uniforms and the inspector went down on his haunches and started talking kindly to her. "Mummy is dead" she said. Upstairs, the reverential silence in the flat was soon broken. A procession of people arrived - two detectives,two ambulancemen, a doctor, a photographer, and an officer from the detective branch - and joined the four people already there (the two patrolmen, the inspector, and myself). Each new arrival introduced himself and shook hands and the conversation became less stilted and more jovial as old acquaintances met and began to chat amicably. Each new-comer went to inspect the body and then the routine surrounding a murder - the removal of the body to the morgue for an autopsy and the bringing of the children to relatives - took over from the particular circumstances of the case. We went to the station and opened the spy-hole in the cell-door; the husband raised a weary head from beneath the blankets. He looked quite ordinary. I went home and slept until mid-afternoon. When I woke up I felt ill and went to the toilet where I was sick.

This incident was part of a field-study carried out over six months with the Amsterdam Police in 1974 and 1975. The original purpose of the research was to apply the methods of Reiss, in his observational study of police-citizen contacts in three high crime-rate areas of American cities, to the city-centre of Amsterdam.1) But, in a sense, that was merely a peg on which to hang a diffuse, long-standing interest of mine in the police. This interest had been stimulated by contact with policemen who came to study at my university in England; increasingly, I found more affinity with them than with some of my academic colleagues. They appeared practical, realistic, humorous, and industrious as opposed to the somewhat anti-academic, inarticulate students of a radical sociology department and the careerist pretensions of its staff. In addition, their stories of police work and life interested me at a number of levels, e.g.,the problem of dealing with violence, the difficulties associated with human suffering, the informal norms for regulating their work environment, and so on. Increasingly I was allowed glimpses of the submerged reality behind the stereotype, Twice I attempted to carry out projects with the local police, but on both occasions, despite approval from the local police chief, I encountered obstacles from the academic watchdogs of the central ministry who veto all research proposals on the police. Having invested considerable time and effort in these two attempts to gain access to the British police, I was disappointed by the lack of response and decided that the Netherlands might prove a more suitable climate for such research. In 1973 I had spent a half year in the Netherlands and had began to learn Dutch (assited by my wife who is Dutch). Through informal contacts, namely mutual acquaintances in an international police association for social and recreational exchange, I was able to spend a couple of weeks with two experienced beat officers who operated in the, for the Netherlands, experimental role of community-relations officers in a working-class area of Rotterdam. Because my interest focussed on the "social" role of the police, as opposed to the more publicized law-enforcement component, I posed little threat to the police organization. If my findings were favourable then the police could claim credit for this unrecognized aspect of their work while, if my findings were critical, they could say that social work was not really a task for them anyway. In any event, I received a warm welcome from the two policemen concerned - who were delighted with the opportunity to bolster their marginal role by having the legitimation of a researcher and who went to great lengths to provide me with material - and, at last, had got the ball rolling. Because once you have been "screened" by one police force then contacts within the system follow like a chain-reaction and it becomes less necessary to present your credentials to other forces or other institutions, such as training academies or legal adjuncts to the police. Furthermore, a number of publications based on my Rotterdam experience appeared in Dutch journals signalling my academic interest in the police, while at the same time displaying a far from hostile perspective on police work.

One influential contact which was made in this period was with the psychologist, Dr Tom Fris, who worked for the Amsterdam Police. The acceptance of social scientists within the police system was exceptional in the Netherlands and Fris enjoyed the acceptance and respect of a force which felt obliged to heed him largely because no one understood him (also the caste-like aura of academic qualifications in Dutch society rendered policemen of all ranks mute and deferential in his company). I planned to return to the Netherlands in the Summer of 1974 and asked if Fris could arrange for me to spend one month on patrol with the uniformed branch in the city-centre. I emphasized the city-centre because of its busyness as I had little inclination to spend my time in a sleepy suburb with traffic accidents and violations as the major diversions. Clearly, the influential middle-man role of a social scientist within the police apparatus greatly facilitated access.

The fact that I was a foreigner was also doubtless an advantage. I was a visiting academic, a bird of passage, whose intention was to publish in English. Most Dutch sociologists, for example, are associated with hostility to the police and are easily "placed" by the police according to their reputation, their appearance, their publications, and their sponsoring institution. Generally, Dutch social scientists epitomize counter-cultural styles of dress and behaviour and many institutes have experienced sit-ins and student demonstrations. The Sociology Institute of Amsterdam University, for instance, has a "red" reputation and would be immediately suspect to Amsterdam policemen, some of whom may have been involved in confronting demonstrations there. As an organization, the police are almost paranoid in their suspicioun of outsiders whom they cannot control - as opposed to crime reporters, who play by the rules of privileged leaks in turn for their selective silence,(2) and academics employed by the police who can be sanctioned for indiscretions - and whose access is severely limited. In a sense, the problem rather solves itself because Dutch sociologists and criminologists tend to work in a neo-positivist tradition and appear to have an antipathy to field-work. Relatively prolonged participant observation on the Dutch police is thus practically unknown. The researcher is perceived as a fleeting visitor who arrives with a bundle of questionnaires under his arm and who disappears as quickly as possible muttering about computer print-outs and the necessity of writing a report (which normally never arrives or, if it does, is considered to be of no practical value to the police). In any event, it was not necessary to establish my "bona fides" and my request was handled through the police hierarchy by Fris. When I arrived in the Netherlands he had arranged a station, a shift, and a "mentor" for me.

The station selected was Bureau Warmoesstraat, in the heart of the red-light district, which had been receiving adverse publicity about alleged mistreatment of black Surinamers from the former Dutch colony in the West-Indies. Fris had chosen a shift (of about fifteen men) who were not too "fanatical" or idle, thus he hoped middle-of-the-roaders in terms of their attitudes to police work, and a young, self-confident policeman to take me under his wing. I had asked to be assigned to one shift in order to avoid meeting a large number of people on different shifts with whom it would be difficult to build up a relationship. Earlier, in discussing the choice of a station, Fris had mentioned that Warmoesstraat was in the process of being rebuilt and that a newly built station on the outskirts might be more suitable. I was relieved therefore, that the rebuilding was not used as an excuse to shunt me off to a decorous, but dull, siding and that the busy and notorious Warmoesstraat was to be my area. There was a brief meeting with the station-chief, where acquaintance was made with key personnel, and I was ready to begin my research. I entered the Warmoesstraat as a foreigner, knowing little of its history or the reality of the city-centre which I had always seen, through the eyes of a tourist, as a quaint, cosy collection of doll-like houses, canals with hump-back-bridges, and risqué females disporting themselves behind red-lighted windows. My frame of mind was a certain disenchantment with academic life, and uncertainties about my position in it, and an expectation that patrol-work would provide me with an active involvement in society. I knew that I wanted to study the police but emotionally I reacted against intellectually clarifying precisely what interested me. I just wanted to get out there and soak it all up. The academic side of it could sort itself out if I survived to tell the tale! This was doubtless accentuated by the short-term, tentative nature of the project. In fact I had received a scholarship to study Dutch progressive education (an earlier interest of mine which I had suggested to the sponsoring body because I had written a good deal on the subject and at the time but little on the police, and at the time of application, had no certainty about gaining access to the Amsterdam Police), and intended to do some work in that area also in order to justify my grant. When it became certain that I could return to the Warmoesstraat in early 1975, I presented my sponsors with a "fait accompli" on my change of topic and rode out the stormy response. But on entering the Wermoesstraat initially, I was doing so as an individual, with no institutional backing, no research plan, practically no finances,no assistants, and with no guarantee that the month on patrol would lead to further research opportunities. There were, however, a number of things in my favour, Firstly, the local autonomy enjoyed by Dutch police forces - there are more than 120 separate autonomous towns of more than 25,000 inhabitants and a state police for smaller towns and country areas - means that a police chief can give permission for research without reference to any central body. It also implies that failure to gain access to one force need not inhibit one from applying to another force, and thus the chance of acceptance somewhere else is fairly high. Secondly, Dutch institutions in general do not exhibit the exclusiveness of their English counterparts and there is an ideology that portals should not be closed to research without good reason.

And, thirdly, I could speak and understand Dutch. My command of the language was fairly elementary but I could pick up the meaning of most conversations (incidentally the immersion in field-work dramatically improved my Dutch). This proved vital on a number of levels. Communication with the policemen was much easier than if they had been forced to speak in English. It also avoided the cumbersome process that one American researcher has to undergo of interviewing Amsterdam policemen via an interpreter. More vitally, interaction with the public was comprehensible and, while it was often necessary to clarify situations afterwards, I could follow radio messages, conversations between policemen, and verbal exchanges during incidents. Additionally I could read the extensive documentary material in the station - telegrams, the station diary, reports, charge sheets, complaints, "wanted" notices, telex messages, etc.

The fact that I had a Dutch wife, Dutch relations, took part in certain Dutch rituals, and followed Dutch sport made social interaction with the policemen easier than if I had been a cultural stranger. Eventually I was invited to weddings, parties, and meals with policemen from my group, and when I had to move house, six of them came and did most of the work as well as providing a van free of charge (from a contact in the red-light district who used it for delivering one-arm bandits). To a certain extent I believe that acceptance was easier in a Dutch context than it might have been in an English or American police force. The qualifications and training of Dutch policemen compare favourably with other countries and I rarely encountered that blind reactionary ignorance, coupled with a contempt for academics, that was apparent among some British policemen with their relatively low standards of entry. At the same time the concept of officialdom tends to be more inflated in Continental Countries so that the image of the policeman exudes authority and demands respect and obedience. The Dutch policeman generally has a serious conception of his role and his informal behaviour is fairly restrained. A police station is a society of young men and fooling around and crude language are engrained in the culture. That was certainly present in the Warmoesstraat but among English policemen there is a pronounced and pervasive style that is vulgar, bawdy, anarchic and almost pathologically blasphemous. Universal "piss-taking" and tom-foolery are frequently raised, if not to a way of life, then at least to an art form. I suspect that the researcher would be the target of deflating humour that could subtly undermine his role and seduce him into the corrosive and inescapable underculture.

I come from a working-class background and am "bilingual" in the sense that I can easily revert to Cockney slang (which does, however, limit acceptance to South-East England) and, given my desire to be accepted

I would probably have become gruffer and cruder during a period with English policemen.

Dutch obscenities and slang are a good deal less colourful and universal than is the case in certain Anglo-American subcultures and many Dutch policemen (perhaps as a consequence of differential recruitment from Protestant backgrounds) are well-spoken with regard to clarity, grammar, and choice of words. Of course there was frequent swearing but without the pathological repetitiveness of Anglo-American male societies. My own lack of knowledge of Dutch crudities (now rectified) and my limited knowledge of the language meant that most conversations were reasonably polite in form and content and nobody ever tried to embarass me or score off me linguistically. Additionally, policemen in Holland have a number of specific police terms but not the extensive occupational argot encountered elsewhere.3) Finally, as mentioned above, there is considerable deference accorded to academics in Dutch society and the combination of looking reasonably young and yet having an academic title (academics in Holland are somewhat leisurely about doctorates and often obtain them in early middle-age, if at all) resulted in the assumption that I was super-bright. The early formality, it was later explained, came largely from the fact that I was a man of learning from a university and therefore polite forms of address were called for, The advantage was that the role of researcher was considered a legitimate one and the research was taken seriously. My acceptance, then, was relatively easy and I was accorded honorary status in the group, taking part in group rituals (such as sharing cream cake on a member's birthday or a drink-up on a member's departure) and informal activities. But work relationships in the Netherlands tend to be confined to the workplace and extensive off-duty contacts, in specifically police social and recreational clubs, are largely unknown. This meant that acceptance of me was warm but not unrestrained. In a sense, that made the research role comfortable without being either over-demanding or susceptible to covert manipulation.

The day that the research commenced I met Fris in Headquarters and we drove in a chauffeur-driven car to the station (the last time, happily, that I received V.I.P. Treatment). We entered the canteen where the shift were deeply involved in a card game. With obvious reluctance they turned their attention to me and, with one or two cracks at Fris' expense, listened respectfully to our introductory remarks about the purpose of the research. Then Fris left me to it. The atmosphere was formal and polite and most people returned to the card game. One or two policemen asked me questions about the English police, and if I was writing a thesis. It always seemed to cause confusion when I replied to the latter in the negative as if it was difficult to grasp the concept of research which was not aimed at a qualification and which was simply the personal and individual project of the researcher. Occasionally the conversation gave someone the opportunity to make anti-liberal jokes such as "we don't have any prisons here in Holland, just play-grounds". My mentor, Willem, showed me around the station and introduced me to people and then we went out on foot-patrol. This was mid-summer and I was casually dressed with an open-necked shirt and jacket. Feeling extremely self-conscious, I stepped out on to the streets for the first time flanked by two uniformed policemen. The Amsterdam police almost invariably patrol in pairs. This makes the observer feel rather conspicuous because he either walks in the middle, which is difficult on the narrow pavements and which makes him look as if he has been arrested, or he lags behind, or talks to one of the men which means breaking up the couple, forcing the other man to walk behind or ahead. Initially, however, Willem spend a good deal of time explaining the criminal ecology of the city-centre to me and I tended to stick by him.

The first few patrols took place in day-time and much of the activity was routine - stopping and checking the papers of cars, dealing with harmless drunks, and giving information to the public. In the day-time it was pleasant to stroll - although adjusting to the patrolman's measured tread took some time - around Amsterdam in the sun shine, although I still felt strange on the streets. Policemen always attract interest and I began to feel that everyone was looking at me too. Gradually, instead of avoiding eye-contact, I began to return stares forcing people to look away. It was noticeable that, when the policemen interacted with the public, the people concerned seemed naturally to accept my presence as if assuming that I was a policeman in plain clothes. In fact my presence with the police scarcely ever raised comment in six months of field work.

It is not the intention here to describe what took place during the research period except insofar as it relates to analyzing the observer's relationship to the police. Briefly, however, I should mention that

Amsterdam has belatedly begun to attract criminality all too familiar in American city-centres, namely pick-pocketing, robbery on the street, shoplifting, and drug-trafficking. The scale of offences is low compared to many American situations and yet the escalation in number of offences has changed the cosy image of Amsterdam. The men of the Warmoesstraat respond to citizen calls for help on an infinite variety of "social" problems yet much of their law-enforcement activity is focussed on criminality associated with drugs, weapons, tourists (usually as victims), prostitutes (largely disputes over payment and/or performance together with assaults on prostitutes or their clients), muggings, theft from and of cars, drunkenness, brawls, and the occasional shooting. A conspicuous role is played in this criminality by foreigners, coloured (mostly from the former Dutch West-Indies), and Chinese. Violence against police officers, however, is rare. Just before I arrived a young policeman had been shot dead and his colleague had been seriously wounded in attempting to arrest two armed foreigners; but the previous fatality of this sort in Amsterdam had occurred some twenty-five years ago. Nevertheless, increasing criminality, coupled with progressive penal policies (the latter advocated strongly by left-wing pressure groups centred in the law and criminology faculties of Dutch universities), had helped to accentuate a "front-line" mentality among the policemen in the Warmoesstraat which coincidentally assisted my research.

The front-line mentality savours of the infantry's ideology in wartime, that they are the indispensable but neglected foot-slogging heroes who clear up the mess left by other services while never getting the credit. In a liberal democracy such as Holland the policeman feels unsupported by influential groups in society, feels attacked both by left and right wing forces, and considers himself to be part of a thin blue line which stands between order and anarchy. An outsider who comes to observe the police is considered either a "snooper", someone who intends to unmask defects and propose alternatives that are impracticable, or a "sensation-seeker" (like the occasional journalist who is allowed to spend a few evenings riding in the patrolcars). I differed in two ways from these negative stereotypes. Firstly, I was prepared to spend a considerable amount of time with the policemen, and, secondly, I learned to remove myself, with disparaging remarks, from the bohemian, anti-authoritarian image of radical intellectuals. The former tactic was deliberate, whereas the latter genuinely expressed my feelings. Or, to be more accurate, it was not difficult to give vent to my love-hate relationship with academia but, perceiving the warm response of policemen to a tirade about the idle, shiftless, ideologically blinkered, sexually promiscuous world of sociologists, I began to use this litany to puncture the initial defences of new acquaintances within the police.

In deciding to work with one group, I also decided to assume exactly the same duties as they did. There are shifts, such as the late evening shift at week-ends, where action is practically guaranteed, and it would have been easy to select attractive shifts and avoid dreary shifts (like 7 a.m. until 3 p.m. on Sundays). But my introductory yarn was that I wanted to observe general police work, without the frills and without selection or particular problems of offences. To share their experience, I went on night duty, weekend duty, day duty, and so on. I went on foot-patrol, in weather from drenching rain to humid heat, and in cars. During my second period of research, January to March 1975, there were some bitterly cold nights and I went out on patrol wearing two pairs of socks, wool pyjamas inside my trousers, two pullovers, scarf, gloves, and a woolen cap pulled over my ears. I prayed that we would not have to rescue someone from a canal! When the chance arose I showed willingness to help. Sometimes this meant clearing up in the canteen, making coffee, helping with English-speaking suspects or "customers" asking about something at the counter, giving a hand to load a stolen motorbike into a van, sweeping glass off the road after an accident, searching a house, helping to lift a drunk off the street and fetching take-away meals. I began with the notion that my role should be passive, but, for a number of reasons, this became more and more difficult. However, my willingness to adopt precisely the same work hours as the policemen paid dividends in terms of acceptance. In the first place, almost all officers and specialized police services work office hours and the patrolmen are left to themselves in the evenings and at night. This accentuates their idea that they bear the brunt of the work, on a twenty-four hour basis, while the bosses are at home watching television or sleeping with their wives. In the second place, the social scientists who work within the police organization have adopted an office-bound, bureaucratic conception of their role which ties them to a desk in headquarters. They had virtually never been to the station nor had they been out on patrol. The appearance of someone who was prepared to share their life of constantly changing shifts, which causes a number of domestic problems, and of sometimes dreary routine, in all sorts of weather, elicited a positive response. I was seen as willing to experience police life "where it's at", on the streets, at times when the patrolman was abandoned by his own superiors. After my initial month I returned to England, wrote a report analyzing the contacts which I had observed on the street between the police and the public (and sent copies to strategically placed people within the Amsterdam Police) and requested a further three months in the following year which was promptly granted.

During that month I was always accompanied by Willem. Willem was twenty-six, had been a sailor, was unmarried, and was active in sports - namely parachute-jumping, boxing, judo, and karate (in which he was an instructor, having received advanced training in Japan). The son of a policeman, he was a "hardliner" interested in catching criminals and disparaging about traffic duties, the truncheon (a short, flexible piece of rubber which he described contemptuously as a "liquoricestick" and which he had replaced with a harder, longer, and illegal model) and the pistol (a F.N. 22 automatic designed in the twenties). He believed in tough enforcement and hard work. The appearance of a large American-style car in the red-light district would invariably arouse his attention and he would step in its path, hold up an authoritative hand, and politely but firmly ask for the car's papers. His major interests were finding weapons or drugs. He was always considerate towards me but somewhat distant, always using the police form of address (this distinction does not exist in English) and calling me "Mr. Punch" although I always called him "Willem".

When I returned in January 1975, Willem had left for detective training. I was paired with a grumpy patrolman who wanted to get away from Amsterdam and who saw me as the last of innumerable unasked for burdens. The fact that I was prepared to return to the same group for a further three months greatly accelerated my general acceptance. Recognizing that my new mentor was hardly enamoured of me, I began to circulate with other members of the group.

Fixed pairs are not used in the Warmoesstraat (I suspect as a form of control over pairs getting too involved in the entrails of the underworld) and so I had patrolled with most of the group the previous year when they had partnered Willem. Most soon began to use my Christian name. Also they began to tell me that Willem was a "fanatic", that he went out of his way to look for work, and that most of them were more easy-going. For example, on a wind-swept dreary night, two patrolmen asked me if I wanted a coffee. We then entered the tiny cubicle of the projectionist (who also acted as ticket seller) in a pornographic cinema and gratefully drank scalding coffee while a man on a crowded bus, speeding down a German motorway, ejaculated over his girl-friends' face

Willem would never have wasted time drinking coffee. Indeed I became worried about the low number of police-public contacts which I was recording until I realized that those of the previous period had been inflated by Willem's "control everything" philosophy. My analysis of these contacts was really an analysis of the work of a rate-buster rather than an indicator of a general picture of police-public relations. It is also fair to add, however, that police work in Amsterdam has a seasonal element responding to the ebb and flow of tourism, and the winter months are the off-season whereas in the full season the days are long and the streets crowded.

However, my acceptance seemed to be complete when Jan ostentatiously lifted his buttocks from the seat of the patrol-car and broke wind with aplomb. It was the turning-point of the research and I felt like Mayo and his colleagues stumbling on the informal system in the Hawthorne studies. But familiarity can seduce the unwary observer and, in retrospect, my original intentions can be seen going astray. For example, some policemen were more sympathetic to me than others, some were fun to be with, and some always seemed to be getting interesting cases. Having more or less shaken off my mentor, who left for another force at the end of the first month, I had a floating role where I could more or less choose with whom I patrolled. I could go to the roster and select a car or a foot patrol and ask the sergeant if it was alright. More and more I went out in cars, not simply because I was lazy or to get out of the cold, but because they were linked by radio with headquarters and tended to get the most interesting calls, The foot patrols were in radio contact with the station but were limited by their beat and their mobility. More and more I went out with a select half of the group and tried to avoid the dull or uncommunicative other half.

The constant shift-work put a number of strains on my domestic life. I had an English salary plus a fellowship which, when converted into guilders, was just sufficient to hire a couple of rooms. Compared to our house in England this was real deprivation because there was no central heating, no bathroom, no phone, no fridge, no garden, and so on. Like most furnished rooms it was decorated in appalling taste and had odd pieces of crockery and cutlery (some with the names of hotels on them). My wife was far from enthusiastic about the accomodation and had to bear the brunt of looking after the children. My son went to school but returned for lunch. My daughter was too small to be left alone, so everyday they made the journey to the school and back twice with both children on a bicycle. Also living on the third floor meant dragging children and shopping up several flights of stairs. This is doubtless normal for most Amsterdam housewives but my wife felt keenly the absence of our house and settled routine in England. Now she had to share the tribulations and anxieties of a "policeman's' wife. Some women sleep easily in their husband's absence and are unconcerned with an hour's lateness. Not my wife. She cannot sleep properly unless

I am at home (or so she claims) and frets if I am overdue. Sometimes I was unavoidably delayed and she was convinced that I had met an untimely end (and presumably already envisaged obituaries in the academic journals!) Night duty was particularly irritating for her. I left the house when she was going to bed and got back just as she was getting up. Then I slept in the day-time while she tried to keep the children quiet. When I woke up I had to write up my field-notes and often I sat around listlessly or dozed on the couch waiting to go out again. Finding it difficult to sleep, my wife became tired and irritable. Also she had to go into hospital for an operation and the children were farmed out to relatives. Ir was really a grey period for her. The Amsterdam police work seven different shifts and so the shifts are constantly changing; for example, three night, two day, and one morning shift or one late evening, three early evening, and one day shift. It made routine difficult to establish and proved tiring, as you never really got used to night duty, for instance. In addition, I went on a number of extra duties when something special was happening and had field material to write up between shifts.

None of this dampened my enthusiasm for the research. Rushing around in a police car in the middle of the night with flashing lights and wailing siren seemed to be the ultimate reality. Indeed, I had reached the stage of almost total identification with the patrolmen in the group. By now we had shared many incidents together and my regular appearance had led to me being as familiar as a piece of furniture. Piet, for example, would come and get me if something interesting was happening, such as plain-clothes duties. Working on tips or with a specific goal, these occasions usually produced results and were much sought after by the men who welcomed the break from uniform and the chance to do some "real" policework. Once Piet rushed into the canteen and backoned to me. Three men in plainclothes were to move in on a suspected drugs deal in a hotel. On arrival at the hotel the suspects had already left for the train to Switzerland. We arrived at the station with minutes to spare and held up the train. I noticed a young man and woman in a compartment but Tom said we were looking for three people not two. I insisted on asking for their passports because I felt intuitively that they might be the suspects. They were, and, handcuffed, they were hauled off to the station. The thrill of being right was an indicator that by now I had a strong identification with the work of the patrolmen. I considered them my colleagues, felt a unity with the group, and was prepared to defend them in case of physical (or intellectual) attack. On the way to the station in the tram I would look out for pick-pockets, would run my eye along rows of parked cars for shady figures with jimmies, and would write down the registration numbers of "suspicious" cars heading for the town centre. At the same time some of the men began to treat me almost as a colleague (I say "almost" because collegiality is highly priced among policeman), and would give me the portable radio to hold or ask me to hold a suspect's arm. Once I was handcuffed to a suspect to prevent him running away and on another occasion a policeman asked me to hold his pistol while he handcuffed a suspect. I felt somewhat foolish as I stood gingerly holding a pistol in the middle of the street while onlookers stared dumbly at the arrest. But more and more I became involved in a participant role. I chased people, searched people, searched cars, searched houses, held people and even shouted at people who abused my "colleagues". Fortunately, I was never placed in a situation where I had to decide whether or not to fight on behalf of the policemen. On the few violent occasions that occurred, I found that my reactions were so slow and my inability to decide what to do so chronic that the incident was over before I could weigh in. As if I believed in the cool voice of academic reason, I used to rush around the combatants futilely imploring them to calm down.

Fortunately, nobody aimed a fist or a gun at me. Sometimes I would stand between two squabbling drunks to show the patrolman that I was not frightened. But, in fact, I always felt fortified by the presence of two policemen (normally I am a physical and moral coward). There was frequently an element of danger and yet it never seemed very real. On numerous occasions we went into buildings with drawn pistols or arrested people who were armed. But I never had to lead the charge and could simply stay to one side or stand behind a pillar. Probably there was more danger in a high-speed chase through the narrow, cobbled streets. But some element of danger attends all observation with the police. There were frequent raids, for example, on clubs frequented by Surinamers, and their hostility to the police, based on claims of racial prejudice and mistreatment, made these always potentially explosive. Normally, raids would consist of at least six or eight men and yet if a real fight had developed then we would have been in trouble. Normally I stayed by the door because to walk unarmed in plain-clothes through a densely crowded club is asking for a knife in your back. Such situations were probably the most stressful that I encountered - as opposed to confronting victims of assaults or accidents - because of the intense hostility directed at me on the assumption that I was a policeman.

Generally, I was much 'softer' in my attitudes than the police. At times, I noticed that victims were treated almost as abruptly as suspects. A young woman, for example, who had been assaulted and threatened with a gas-pistol by her ex-boyfriend, was treated as if she was a collaborator in the incident despite the fact that she was practically hysterical. When I got into the back of the police car and put my arm around her it caused great amusement among the patrolmen. On another occasion, a suspect, falsely accused of murder, began to cry, and, having no handkerchief, started to wipe tears and snot with the the back of his hand. The detectives were disgusted with this abject display whereas I found myself patting the man on his back and reassuring him. But, in a way, I could afford to be solicitous because I did not have to protect my role in the affair. Normally, however, my interaction with suspects, victims, and public was perfunctory. I let the policemen do the talking because they had to handle the case and because I was reluctant to betray my foreign accent. Also many contacts were of short duration and the chance to talk to the people involved was often limited. However, in retrospect, I believe that I could have spent much more time talking to suspects about their side of their situation. To a certain extent patrolwork is concerned with locking someone up, whereupon detectives take over the case, and a patrol would bring a suspect in and then return to duty. I would accompany them and thus lose contact with the suspect. It would have been possible though, to interview suspects in between patrols and now I regret not having done that.

As with observation on some deviant and criminal groups, there arose the ethical question as to the observer's reaction to witnessing misbehaviour on the part of the policemen. The literature on the police alerts one to widespread and deeply ingrained malpractices such as corruption, mistreatment of suspects, racial prejudice, and denial of legal rights to suspects.4) It can be that I have been totally misled on these issues, but I came to the conclusion that these abuses, amply documented in English and American material, were largely absent in Amsterdam policing. Possibly, there exists a subterreanean police world which escaped me, but I doubt it. In six months, graft and corruption were scarcely mentioned, not even jokingly or on informal occasions off duty, and revelations of such practices in the papers are almost non-existent. Certainly, the men received marginally cheaper food from nearby restaurants and some of them knew where to drink without having to pay. But widespread use of their police identity to obtain financial favours did not seem common. In effect, I never heard of policemen taking money to overlook offences, or of pay-offs in protection rackets, or of intimate contacts with underworld figures where favours were mutually rewarded. There are many opportunities for policemen to use their position to advantage - arriving at a break-in where goods can easily 'disappear' and be recorded as stolen, being given lost wallets containing money, and handling the money of suspects (I remember seeing one suspect with over 50,000 dollars on him) — but the Dutch policeman appears to be scrupulously correct on such occasions. I am speaking here of the uniformed branch and not of the detectives, who clearly have much more opportunity for bending rules and accepting favours. However, organized criminality with the power and resources to infiltrate police departments and subvert officers scarcely exists in the Netherlands to my knowledge. The Warmoesstraat has on occasion attracted accusations of brutality and racial prejudice. I had read about numerous complaints of mishandling made by surinamers against patrolmen in the station and was on the lookout for such incidents. Without doubt, a sizeable minority of suspects comprised blacks, but I did not find that they were treated any worse, or any better, than other suspects. Indeed, throughout my research period I witnessed remarkably little violence (though frequently the consequences of violence). In six months there were precisely three occasions where unnecessary force was used by patrolmen and on only two occasions where policemen were assaulted. It should be added that there were countless encounters replete with the threat of violence, but normally the policemen were able to control these situations. One evening, for example, Piet was nervous and wound-up having just returned to duty after a long illness. I was patrolling with him in plain-clothes when about twenty-five yards from the station a black asked me if I wanted to buy hash. Piet handled him brusquely, pushing him up against a wall, and searching him at pistol-point. When the black protested, he received a smack across the face with the hand holding the pistol, although I could not see if the pistol had been used to strike the man or just the hand. The suspect was taken to the bureau but did not have enough hash – it was in any case false – to justify detention and was released. Inside the station the suspect was handled routinely.

On returning outside, there was another black standing on the same corner, where the first suspect had been detained, and he was talking to a white man who rapidly walked away when we approached. Brusquely the black was pushed into the doorway and searched. He protested and demanded that the policemen identify themselves. Piet pressed the barrel of his pistol against the man's temple and said 'is this enough identification?' Inside the station Piet was continually aggressive and threatening to the suspect who lost his temper. Piet threatened to take him downstairs to the cellar so that they could fight it out but the sergeant, who was watching, told him to take it easy. The suspect was shaken up and had blood on his lip but had not really received any hard blows; it was an unedifying scene of pushing and squabbling. Again there was not sufficient evidence to hold the man and he was released. Frightened that he might complain about Piet's behaviour, I chatted with the suspect before he left the bureau in an apologetic manner. I had not interfered with the situation when it occurred, although I felt that it was getting out of hand, because I was unsure what to do or say and waited for someone else to make a move. Afterwards there was mild disapproval about Piet's behaviour, though evidently a reluctance to interfere while the incident was in progress as it was witnessed by three or four other policemen, and he later asked me my opinion. I explained that he seemed worked up and that the aggression in the two incidents had been, in my opinion, unnecessary. He agreed with me, reported sick, and was put on light duties.

On no occasion did I witness collective violence against a suspect in the station. Even the above incidents were relatively mild compared to notorious cases in Britain and America. The accusations against the Warmoesstraat were either greatly exaggerated or else mistreatment of prisoners had been virtually eliminated since the wave of complaints a couple of years ago.5) In that sense, a serious ethical dilemma did not present itself as cases of gross transgressions on the part of policemen did not arise. On one occasion I witnessed an assault on a young policeman. A tip had come in that a man had been seen in a flat with a sten-gun. Four patrolmen entered the building but the suspect had flown. The access door to the flat, however, also served a number of flats on the floor and from one of these a black woman emerged and began to give information about the suspect. Her husband became enraged with this and started fighting with her. A policeman tried to separate them and received a punch in the mouth from the man. My first reaction was one of anger and I made for the man but in the narrow passage it was difficult to get past his more than ample wife. The policemen grabbled him by the hair and hit and kicked him. I found myself trying to calm the policemen and also, when the husband refused to cooperate, trying to get the suspect to cool down (the voice of pure academic reason had but little affect, I should add). The man was arrested but once he had cooled down in the station he was allowed to go home. That was the only time that I attempted to strike a suspect. However, I was certainly prepared to do so if the situation demanded it and by that I meant if the patrolmen were in difficulties or if I had to defend myself. Fortunately, I never had to make such a decision. When the research period was completed - there followed two more months in July and August 1975 when I carried out a number of interviews - I returned to the university (in the meantime I had taken up a teaching appointment in the Netherlands). Initially I suffered withdrawal symptoms and hankered after the atmosphere of the station and the friends I had made among the policemen. As Polsky says, field work is fun.5) To a certain extent it is a holiday from academic rituals and it provides an opportunity to get away from books, papers, essays, seminars, and sedentary pontificating on the ills of the world. Working with the police takes you out of the university and into the entrails of society where you witness incidents from sudden birth to sudden death. And basically all you have to do is watch and listen.

The patrolmen, for instance, cannot escape the paper work surrounding modern policing but all such onerous tasks I could avoid. I could enter extreme situations yet without being responsible for settling them. In the car, I could lean back and watch pretty girls on the streets while the men kept their eyes open for incidents (as well as the girls). Amsterdam is a beautiful city, marred in day-time by teeming streets, clogged with traffic. We could drive through empty streets at night and cruise effortlessly alongside the canals watching the first rays of sunrise break over the artistic gables of the housetops. In effect we saw Amsterdam at its best – and also at its worst. Furthermore, a Dutch university is a dry, bureaucratic, impersonal establishment compared to most Anglo-American academic communities. The policemen had come to represent my most satisfying social contacts in Holland because my colleagues made no attempt to have a social relationship with me (and precious little of an academic relationship). The university seemed a pedantic and unreal world and I had considerable difficulty in readjusting. Fortunately, I more or less had "carte blanche" to return to the station. This proved less and less satisfying. In the first place my wife's tolerance with my absences diminished rapidly when she herself took up studying and demanded that I play a larger role in the domestic scene. Once the research had formally ended she accorded little legitimation to my attempts to remain in contact with the station. In the second place, the group gradually split up as people applied to other towns or were selected for the detectives. My face became less familiar and new sergeants regarded me suspiciously and asked me where I was going when I walked towards the patrolmen's quarters. It was impossible to build up a relationship with the new recruits on such an erratic acquaintance. For seemingly the millionth time I had to explain the purpose of the research and divulge a potted biography. But the good old days had gone.

This feeling was accentuated when I decided to publish a selection of the interviews in Dutch. These had not been made with publication in mind, but the response had been so open-hearted that I believed they were worth publishing. I also saw this as an opportunity to produce something which the subjects of the research could easily read and appreciate. The patrolmen thought it was a great idea to be part of a book and were uniformly enthusiastic about the venture. Not so those policemen with a position in the hierarchy. When presented with transcripts of their interviews, they began to make substantial changes in the content of the interview. This had to be permitted because the interviews had been given on the understanding that they would not be published. Several officers preferred not to take part in the book, several made revisions, and the Chief Constable was far from enthusiastic about the prospect of publication and described it as "hanging our dirty washing out in public". Nevertheless, the book was completed. Generally my conclusions were favourable to the Amsterdam Police, who have received much public criticism over the last few years, and this probably saved the book. But it was interesting that once I turned to evaluation and once I began to publish in Dutch then my relationship with senior officers definitely cooled.

In general, however, my relationships with the Police hierarchy were excellent and with the uniformed personnel they were warm and personal. I had the impression that, while policemen are suspicious of outsiders (an outsider is generally seen as a control figure who is only concerned with negative aspects of conduct and, therefore, can never be of value to a policeman) -, once accepted, the reception is warm. Hence numerous small services were arranged for me, e.g., I was provided with a police bicycle because I had no way of getting home once the public transport stopped, I did not have to queue for a stamp in my passport at the Aliens Office because the sergeant knew a friend there, I received lifts home and help with domestic odd jobs, and I could use the sports facilities in headquarters. The widespread use of negative stereotypes about policemen in the wider society, and especially in social science faculties, inhibits insight into these human and cooperative features of the police culture, and colleagues tended to be amazed at the ease with which my field work was conducted.

There is a degree of mutual antipathy between the police and academia. The defensiveness of the police organization on the one hand is matched by the distaste of certain academics for "authoritarian" and "repressive" institutions on the other hand. This tends to sponsor an image of the police as difficult to research. I do not see why this need be so and certainly the problems encountered in fieldwork with the police are little different from the familiar dilemmas of participant observation studies more generally.6) Here I will try to generalize about my research experiences with the Amsterdam Police.

1. Access

In approaching the Amsterdam Police I had the advantage of previous contacts with, and publications on, the police. Someone contemplating research on the police presumably has existing relationships with policemen and it is worth exploiting these to the full by informal visits to stations, headquarters, training establishments, and conferences. The police receive many visits at this level - from magistrates, lawyers, press men, civil servants, and academics - and the visitor is often formally entertained. The old-boy network is an influential regulator of covert agreements in the police organization and a conversation at dinner with the head of a training school - who has usually had a highly placed rank in a force hierarchy - can lubricate access in contrast to a bald request for research facilities from an unknown. Furthermore, the more information one can glean on police practice, the better - not to mention names one can drop - as it reduces one's palpable ignorance on entry.

The aspirant researcher must have a plausible research goal. My aim was to study "police-public" relations which was sufficiently global to allow unrestricted access to the uniformed branch without being particularly threatening. The police are concerned with their relations with the public and even an unfavourable report, while being unpalatable, can be seen as useful. Abstruse, theoretical proposals mean little to policemen - "role congruency" or "informal occupational ideologies" will throw most of them - and will not generate much enthusiasm. More sensitive areas - such as racial prejudice and the use of violence - are likely to produce defensive obstacles. A Dutch anthropologist, for example, wanted to study policemen's prejudices towards Surinamers. She was not allowed in the Warmoesstraat (which has been the centre of complaints by Surinamers), was not allowed on patrol, was not allowed to read the station diary, and discovered that her subjects for interview were being selected and rehearsed by a senior officer. In fact, she was a student doing the equivalent of a master's thesis and thus had little rank to pull. To a certain extent, then, the higher up the academic status ladder the better (although this may be reversed after entry).

Incidentally, I see no reason why women should not go out on patrol. In Amsterdam, for example, women patrol on equal terms with men. The Warmoesstraat, however, is an exclusively male institution and potential violence plays an important role in its pattern of work. It is understandable not to place a woman there, but elsewhere in the city a woman walking with a patrol would probably not excite much comment.

II. Initial entry

As mentioned earlier, my presence with uniformed patrols rarely aroused interest on the part of the public. Only in one or two formal institutions - such as a bank or a business firm - did someone comment on my identity and they were perfectly satisfied with the explanation that I was involved in research. Sometimes the patrolmen just said "he is with us" and later for a joke they would tell people I was a trainee detective. I am supposed to look young for my age, which is 34, and thus I fitted in physically with the age range of the policemen who were normally in their twenties. The days when policemen were huge strapping fellows is over, and the lowering of height restrictions and the acceptance of spectacles means that a wider range of physical types is accepted than previously. In Amsterdam, furthermore, beards, moustaches, and long hair are almost "de rigueur" among policemen and their off-duty clothes are casual. A policeman in plain-clothes is indistinguishable from the mass of young men in Amsterdam. This means that a casually dressed young man with longish hair attracts no attention when on patrol with policemen. Nevertheless, I made a habit, from the outset, of always having short hair and neat clothes in order to impress senior officers and to avoid the stereotype of a bohemian intellectual. I was always polite to officers and sergeants, employing the polite form of address and introducing myself with a handshake where I was unknown (introducing oneself formally in Holland is essential in inserting oneself into a social situation). Initially, I followed Polsky's advice of keeping your mouth shut and your eyes and ears open.6) Some policemen, for example, prefer not to talk when on patrol - in order to concentrate on radio messages, on what is going on around them, or on preserving a reserved image - while others would talk shop. Especially in the patrol car, it was easy to sit in the back seat and listen and observe. Whenever possible

I was helpful but, in particular, I tried to interfere as little as possible, especially in the beginning. The patrolmen were handling the situation and I kept in the background.

A favourable aspect of working with the police is that it is a routinized, bureaucratic organization. With exceptions, you know when a shift begins and ends. And if you want to interview constable Van de Linden for two hours beginning at six o'clock then the sergeant arranges for him to be free. The bureaucracy will work for you and organize things for you and that can greatly facilitate fieldwork. It avoids some of the aimless, diffuse aspects of fieldwork with deviant groups where the researcher is dependent on the mood and behaviour of the group, and where prior planning of research activities proves almost impossible. In a formal organization there is often at your disposal a room for interviewing, a photo-copying machine for documentary material, a telephone for making appointments, and transport to bring you to incidents or to bring you home (once I was brought home in a patrol car when I was ill and once to collect a cheque book in order to get some money out of the bank). For much of the research I had no effective institutional base in the Netherlands so that these facilities greatly assisted the research.

III. The research role

Otherwise, the dilemmas of participant observation with the police are little different from those of studying other groups.7)

There is an element of danger but that is also true of certain deviant groups - Yablonsky was threatened during his communes research and Hunter Thompson was beaten up by Hells Angels 8) - and of high risk occupations (firemen, deep-sea fishermen, stuntmen, coal miners, etc.). It may be necessary to absolve the police from responsibility in case of accident and sign a document stating that the researcher patrols at his own risk. This was not necessary in my case but I did take out special insurance coverage. I know of at least two cases where researchers have patrolled in uniform - one in America and one in Holland 9) - and this does seem to have considerable advantages in sharing the policeman's predicament as a walking symbol of law and authority. A crucial factor in such a case would be the ordinary policeman's attitude to such a gambit; would he regard it as an honest attempt to simulate his work experience or would he view it with a mixture of suspicion, contempt, and derision?

There is always, too, the questionmark surrounding the extent to which individuals modify their behaviour in the presence of the observer. My feeling echoes that of Becker in believing that people do not keep up such an act for long and that what they are engaged in is more important to them than the fact that an outsider is present. 10) A policeman may speak more politely to a citizen because a researcher is at his elbow but in many situations he does not have time to think but must react instantly. In any event, my appearances were so commonplace that after a while I do not believe people noticed me. However, the more I was accepted the more they expected me to act as a colleague and might ask me to carry the radio, because I had a large inside pocket in my jacket, or expect me to chase after suspects. In my willingness to be accepted by the policemen, I over-identified perhaps too readily and this doubtless endangered my research role. However, outside of their presence I could appreciate the futility of a thirty-four year old British academic identifying with a twenty year old Dutch policeman. But the shift is a cohesive social group and the policeman's world is full of seductive interest so that it is all too easy to go "native".

There also exists a potential dilemma of witnessing crimes either on the part of suspects, or, indeed, on the part of the policemen. Would it infringe the research role to appear as a witness against a suspect? Would one feel obliged to testify against a policeman who had been observed in violation of the law?

The sociologist has no right to privileged information and may have to be prepared to suffer for protecting his respondents. Fortunately, this problem did not arise in my study. There is, however, a more general ethical issue as raised by Becker's query, "whose side are we on?".11) Frequently, research studies have emphasized the exposure of pernicious practices within control institutions and have tended to identify with those groups who suffer from such practices. In researching the police I was conscious that many academic colleagues have a critical, if not hostile, perspective on the police and this made me somewhat defensive about my research. Some radical criminologists, for example, had advised me to infiltrate the police organization (they emphasized the advantage I enjoyed in being trusted by the police), to collect damaging material and to photocopy documents, and then to expose the police in the most embarassing light possible. I rejected this espionage model of research, but there remained one's personal feelings about people who come into contact with the police. During my study, I have often shared the back seat of the patrol-car with a handcuffed suspect who had just been deprived of his freedom. Every suspect has to strip naked in the station and hand over all his or her personal belongings - rings, earrings , necklaces, money, socks, laces, belt, etc. - in a sort of mini-debasement ceremony. Naturally this first-hand observation of suspects raises a number of moral questions about the nature and effects of law and crime and about the law-enforcement process. My own feelings were to have little sympathy for individuals concerned in crimes of violence and in dealing in hard-drugs. As a non-drinker, I had a special dislike for drunken drivers, whom I considered deadly dangerous, and I was also less than sympathetic to drivers who had failed to stop after injuring someone. It was difficult to get worked up about many of the minor offences, such as shop-lifting, and the suspects were often either stupid, in drawing attention to themselves, or else just unlucky at being caught. But to a large extent I accepted police work as an enterprise and "morally" approved of most of its activities. This feeling was accentuated by two factors. In the first place, the policeman frequently sees the victim as well as the suspect. In cold print, crimes of property do not have the emotional impact of other types of criminality, such as violence, fraud, and drugs. But, while it is true that carelessness often contributes to crime, we witnessed many victims of "property" crime or "petty" crime who were extremely upset by their losses. For example, I remember an elderly American lady who was most distressed because she had "lost" on the tram a handbag containing money, a passport and her return ticket. Someone for whom his car is an important possession does not take kindly to having a side window broken and his stereo cassette recorder torn out. These people were affected by their losses and besieged the station demanding action. In brief, the policeman daily encounters the victims of all sorts of crime, the victims demand priority for their case, however hopeless and insignificant, detection and recovery of stolen properties, and the victims are seen as client pressure.

In the second place, the underworld holds little romantic appeal for me. Quite frankly, the procession of pick-pockets, ponces, prostitutes, dealers, muggers, car thieves, drunken drivers, burglars, bouncers, army deserters, shoplifters, delinquents, and suspects accused of violence with knife or gun, were simply not the sort of people that, face-to-face, have a Damon Runyan appeal. They were often ugly, uncouth, inconsiderate, loud-mouthed, smelly, unhealthy looking people whom would one not dream of taking home to meet mother. And if the eye and ear are important for collecting data then why not the nose? Some of these people literally stink. Perhaps that tells the reader more about me than about criminals, but I have seen, and smelt, enough suspects to raise severe doubts as to my ability to identify with them.

The role of drugs in criminality in Amsterdam can mean that suspects are in a very poor physical and hygienic state, while the city-centre world of bars and vice attracts a species of over-weight, over-dressed, loud-mouthed cafédwellers who seem willing to beat someone up at the slightest excuse. For a number of reasons, then, reservedly I accepted the side I was on.

IV. Departure

There is often no definite end point to a field-study. I was restricted by teaching obligations and half of the research was carried out in time that was technically vacation. My six months compares unfavourably with Whyle's prolonged immersion in the field12). Leaving was painful. The university seemed deadly dull after the police, and academics appeared to be small-minded, anally retentive ritualists compared to the open-hearted culture of policemen. I did remain in informal contact, however, and was careful to keep people within the organization informed of forthcoming publications. For important pieces, I distributed the manuscript to key figures in the hierarchy with a request for comments, and I sent complimentary copies when anything was published. This I felt was a sort of repayment for the excellent cooperation I had received and also an attempt to preserve the good name of research on behalf of future academics. Someone who disappears and either produces nothing or fails to inform his respondents of publications appears to have merely exploited the organizations for his own end and is not a good advertisement for research. Finally, I would like to re-endorse Polsky's premise that field-work is well worth attempting even on groups deemed "unresearchable [13]. Personally, I felt that I came alive as a sociologist when I began researching the police. The police are an institution concerned minutely with regulating everyday behaviour and with applying societal norms. Their work is intrinsically interesting on a human level and their performance socially important in terms of providing data about a largely closed social world; but in essence, the appeal of field-work is that it is concerned with real people and that confrontation with people, in all their baffling complexity, is a fruitful antidote to the often fraudulent preoccupations of academics and the theoretical pretensions of sociology. And the ultimate consolation, when you have to balance time-consuming fieldwork with family and academic commitments, and when you begin to have doubts about the purpose, the progress, and the validity of your study, is contained in the penetrating remark of a criminal to Polsky:

"You mean they pay you to run with guys like me? That's a pretty good racket". 14)

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