

One of the UK's top 30 universities (*The Times/Sunday Times Good University Guide 2019*)



School of Social Sciences
University of Dundee

Plural Policing and the Abstract Police

Dr Megan O'Neill, University of Dundee

@drmeganeoneill, m.oneill@dundee.ac.uk

CPS Conference, Ghent, Belgium, 17th September 2019



Outline

My task from Sofie:

‘Do you think that plural policing will strengthen the evolution towards abstract policing?’

1. Key points of ‘abstract police’ (Terpstra et al 2019)
2. Critique of the concept
3. Aspects of pluralisation in policing
4. Relationship between plural policing and abstract police



"Police Security" by JobsForFelonsHub is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)



Key points of 'abstract police'

- Case studies of police reform in Scotland and The Netherlands
- Forces of **modernisation and rationalisation** are evident, public police are:
 - more at a distance from their publics/communities/partners
 - more formal and impersonal, less direct contact, more decontextualized
 - These processes happening in other developed countries, but are accelerated in Scotland and The Netherlands due to centralisation.
- **Internally:**
 - Horizontal and vertical relationships are fragmented, distant
 - Contact by impersonal systems, e.g. email
- **Externally:**
 - Relationships with communities and partners also less direct, more distant, formalised
 - Loss of local knowledge, moral ownership of beat areas, informal working with partners



Critique of the concept

→ **Fragmentation of vertical relationships**

→ *Will harm police solidarity*

→ However, lower ranking officers did not include senior staff in 'solidarity' processes anyway

→ **Considers modernisation, rationalisation as the cause**

→ *These processes are happening elsewhere, police centralisation exacerbated it in Scotland and NL*

→ *Hyper-rationality becomes irrational in its consequences*

→ **What about the role of neo-liberalism?**

→ England and Wales: enhanced emphasis on *local* with Police and Crime Commissioners, not centralised

→ But also experiencing loss of community policing, distance from public, reduction in budgets

→ Neo-liberalism has been a factor here since 1980s, withdrawal of state-centred processes, local communities to take more role in policing themselves

→ Neo-liberalism not embraced in all countries, so 'abstract police' also not as evident in all countries?



"NYPD at the Times Square" by [Nikita Gavrilov](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC 2.0](#)



Aspects of pluralisation on policing

- **Policing to an extent has always been *pluralised***
 - Volunteer or reserve police officers
 - Privately paid police or security staff
- **Three main examples in present day:**
 - Police outsourcing aspects of their work to private companies
 - Private security industry
 - Pluralisation of the public police (police auxiliaries)

- Will consider each in turn and its relationship to abstract police
- Will not consider aspects of governance for pluralised policing



"Day 4 - PCSOs on Patrol in Birmingham - West Midlands Police" by [West Midlands Police](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).



1) Police outsourcing

- **Outsourcing: Police pay for external/private companies to do aspects of their work**
 - For example, catering, staff in detention centres, security at high risk facilities, prisoner transportation
 - Some police stations owned by private finance initiatives (PFI) and leased to police forces
- **Abstract policing environment:**
 - Efficiency and cost effectiveness are primary concerns
 - Therefore, there is more pressure to slice off aspects of police work or management which are not cost-effective for the police to do in-house
 - Horizontal and vertical communication problems made worse – a third party must be involved at times
- **Consequence:**
 - Pluralisation of policing could be increased in this 'abstract' environment, a *consequence* of the abstract police
 - Internal communications complicated further



Photograph: Andrew Milligan/PA

2) Private security

→ Private security industry has always existed

→ Has grown in the last 50 years in some countries

→ Abstract police are:

→ more distant from their local communities

→ relationships are formalized

→ In times of efficiency, 'softer' policing tends to be downgraded, such as visible patrols

→ This creates a market for private policing for those who can afford it

→ Promise a 'personal service' for those who pay a fee

→ Police distance from the public may lead to fear

→ Vigilante groups may grow in some communities

→ 'Police are too busy to help us, so we must be our police'



*"CULTWATC
H2" by john
mcvoit is
licensed
under CC
BY-SA 2.0*



"20121005_0288" by Daniel Arauz is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0



3) Police auxiliaries

- **The public sector (state) police are also pluralised**
 - Volunteer or reserve police officers
 - Police auxiliaries from within the organisation
 - Local authority paid staff
- **Limited powers and tasks**
 - Anti-social behavior, minor crimes
 - Issue fines, write tickets, very limited use of force, not armed (?)
 - Community-orientated work, collaborate with partner organisations
- **Abstract police are:**
 - At a distance from the public and public sector partners
 - Working towards efficiency, so minor issues not prioritised
- **Consequence:**
 - Police auxiliaries becoming more police-like to fill the gaps left by abstract police
 - Less time for community-facing work and work with partners, lose contact
 - Abstract police = image is that 'soft' policing is not valued, adopted by auxiliaries?





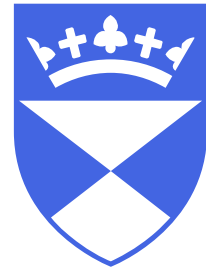
Conclusion

- 'Abstract police' is an ideal-type: used to highlight trends, will not exist in pure form
- Some shortcomings of the concept, in particular, role of neo-liberalism downplayed (and damage to vertical relationships over-played)
- **Neo-liberal approach, similar processes to abstract police:**
 - State to roll back, do less, communities do more
 - Less funding for the public police, more 'efficient': outsource
 - Police more distant, fragmented, systems-driven: more need for auxiliaries
 - Will create a market for the 'personal touch': private security to fill the gap
- **Not all nations adopt neo-liberalism or in the same way**
 - Thus, private security and other pluralisation features not the same in all countries, e.g. Nordic countries
 - The 'abstract' nature of the police also not universal, e.g. New Zealand (centralised police)



Conclusion

- **The link between abstract police and neo-liberalism revealed through an analysis of plural policing**
 - Similar processes seen in areas which are moving *away* from centralisation
 - These processes encourage outsourcing, private security market, and auxiliaries becoming police-like
- **Note of caution on neo-liberalism:**
 - Singh and Light (2017) trace the (lack of) development of private policing internationally
 - Argues that broad explanations such as 'neo-liberalism' do not work in all contexts
 - Sometimes the reason for lack of growth are institutional, cultural, historical. Detailed comparative analyses needed.
- Answer to the question: 'Do you think that plural policing will strengthen the evolution towards abstract policing?'
 - **No, abstract policing will strengthen processes of pluralisation.**



University of Dundee

dundee.ac.uk

@drmeganeoneill