Critical Ethnography: Investigating Practice in Police Firearms Training

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Discipline: D3 [please do not alter]

Sub-discipline

Sociology of Education [SD-Soc-12]

Academic Level

Postgraduate

Contributor Biography

Since his first teaching job in 1991, Christian Beighton's experience has been in a wide variety of Higher Education (HE), Further Education (FE) and private settings in the United Kingdom and abroad. His current role ranges from Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to doctoral supervision and his research interests include creativity, policy and practice in professional and lifelong learning settings. He publishes and reviews widely, and is an Honorary Firearms Instructor with Kent Police. His current projects include research into academic writing, the implementation of the Prevent Strategy, and a book on philosopher Gilles Deleuze.

Published Articles

Beighton, C. and Leonard, V. (2017) Quo Vadis: on the need for direction in Firearms Training. Top Cover, the Police Firearms Officers Association Magazine, spring 2017.

Beighton, C. (2016) Expansive learning in professional contexts: A materialist perspective, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Beighton, C. and Poma, S. (2015) Expanding professional learning: inside/outside police firearms training, Studies in Continuing Education, 37 (2) 187–201.

Abstract

This research case study examines how critical ethnography was used during a research project in the context of Police firearms training. I first set out the background to the project and how my colleagues and I became involved in a collaborative way. I then discuss the ways in which research questions developed in this context, before describing the process of

deciding how they would be answered. The issues which these decisions entailed are then discussed. I then turn to the practical implications of the project and how it was designed. My discussion of the methods used and how they worked out in practice raises some of the limitations of the study, and I also list the practical lessons learned from this project. In particular, I recognize some of the problems raised by critical ethnography in contexts such as policing, while suggesting that these weaknesses are also a source of rich data and useful insight.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case students should be able to

- List some of the issues involved in researching using critical ethnography in professional settings

- Assess the importance of collaboration when researching in professional settings and the usefulness of critical ethnography in such environments

- Identify the role of theory in making methodological choices in research

Case Study

Project Overview and Context

This project had at its heart the simple desire to better understand training practices that were being used on a daily basis. As a teacher trainer, I had been asked to fill in for a colleague on a programme delivered at the local Police College. The programme, I discovered, was in fact a specialist course for Police Firearms Trainers. The trainees, all of whom were serving officers chosen for their existing skills as firearms officers, would undertake a 7-week programme leading to accreditation as the trainers of Police firearms users. Their training would include areas such as weapon handling, tactical operations training, incident management and risk analysis. In addition, they would be expected to complete a 2-week programme of "academic input". Essentially, this meant that three colleagues for the university would deliver an accredited programme in training in the lifelong learning sector, enabling the officers to leave the programme with a nationally-recognized qualification in training.

My colleagues and I quickly realized that we would not be able to simply roll out a generic teacher training program. In fact, we were particularly interested in the views of the Chief Firearms Officer on what developments to the programme were needed. Research into

this area suggests that, while military-style behaviourist approaches to training in policing have dominated the area, they have been regularly criticized as inappropriate (Werth, 2011; Gorby,2013; Gundhus, 2013; Fyfe; 2013). In the Firearms context, the increasingly complexity of officers' roles demands a more reflective form of professionalism anchored in ethical decision-making. More sophisticated teaching methods were therefore needed by the programme and expected by the trainees themselves if they were to be accredited as Firearms Officer Trainers. After developing approaches which, we felt, met this aim, as academics we were keen to try to assess these successes. It was this desire to evaluate and learn from our practice which drove the research.

Critical ethnography

Our attempt to assess the value of such approaches involved undertaking a critical ethnographic study of the cohorts' professional development. Critical ethnography is a research approach which links traditional ethnography to a critical perspective on the subjects and indeed the research methods used. On one hand, it therefore sees research subjects ethnographically, which is to say as part of a body with an identifiable culture. On the other hand, it also takes a critical perspective on this culture and focuses on the wider social structures, systems and power relationships which are seen as defining components. Critical ethnography thus aims to critically identify these structural factors in practice and, at the same time, develop an understanding of what practices mean to those who use them. Critical ethnography is thus explicitly ethical in its approach, since it sets out to highlight and take action to undermine inequalities where they exist (Thomas,1993; Carspecken 1996; Madison, 2012).

To do this, critical ethnography often therefore involves using typical ethnographic data collection processes. Aiming to collect rich, contextualized data, various forms of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and/ or unstructured interviews or dialogues are often used.. It's important, therefore, to be "close" to the research to avoid, where possible, treating research subjects as objects to be observed and commented on. This is a risk imputed to ethnographic approaches (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), and both participant and non-participant observation are common ways of attempting to palliate it by understanding practices in context. Taking an explicitly critical approach to contexts such as Police firearms training involves probing the deeper reasons for practices and, where appropriate, seeking to highlight ways in which discriminatory ideologies or discourses are mediated, understood or challenged.

Research Practicalities

This seemingly simple desire invited a number of practical considerations. The first of these were the basic pragmatics of the project. Who would this research involve, when, and how? Should we run the project as a team or as separate individuals, and if so, how? We decided to work together by establishing the parameters of the project and how we would research it together. We would play to the strengths of the individuals in the team, for example collecting data separately according to the principles we had set out beforehand. Writing up would also be a collaborative activity, albeit led by the most experienced researcher, with each of us being allocated different aspects of the work to write up. These would then be collated and finally edited together for the final product.

A second set of practical questions quickly arose. We saw the project as a form of critical ethnography in which we would enter a context with the intention of researching it from the inside. But while it is common to reflect critically on one's work as an education professional, actually researching one's own practice is a different beast, requiring different levels of rigour if it is to be convincing. How would we go about assessing the impact of our own practice in a meaningful way? How can we avoid critical reflexion being trivial or complacent (see, e.g., Benade, 2012)? Assuming, as we did, that we would at some point have to obtain the views and analyses of our trainees, what value would these have? We are all aware of the danger of research subjects giving the answers that they think the researcher wants to hear: in this context, the danger seemed inevitable. Assuming that our trainees agreed to discuss training with us, how reliable would their actual evidence be? How close should we be to a "medical model" based on ideas of evidence-informed, "what works" teaching? While currently popular in Policing, it is controversial (see, e.g., Biesta, 2010; Goldacre, 2013).

The third set of practical questions concerned ethical issues. We needed ethical approval from the university to carry out this project, and the ethics panel unearthed a problem that we had not anticipated: what if our in-depth interviews provoked memories or feelings of violence and death that the participants might find hard to deal with? We had to make sure that a plan was in place if this were indeed a risk. Moreover, the whole issue of "insider" research had to be considered. What were the risks of our "going native" and losing our critical distance? Ethnographers can develop close ties to their research contexts and the people there, and in trying to get a deep understanding of their views and experiences, one runs the risk of losing one's critical distance. A failure to see beyond the point of view of

the research subjects can result in the omission of potentially important wider or less partial perspectives. Our research subjects turned out to be friendly, gregarious and seemed eager to engage with us as academics and work with us as colleagues. They appeared keen to initiate us in to a world where guns, physical violence and extreme stress are simply part of the deal. This provided numerous chances for us to "get under the skin" of the life of a firearms officer. But at what cost to the objectivity of the project and our analysis?

Another ethical issue which arose in the research concerned our response to issues around gender. Policing generally has suffered in the past from a tendency, in some quarters, to be perceived as a male activity. Our research continues to suggest that, while progress is being made, examples of gender stereotyping still exist. Policing, I want to stress, is not a sexist occupation and the organization is committed to ensuring that women play key roles. But the firearms environment can still be a rather macho place, and our critical analysis of language use suggested to us that there were still subtle but significant barriers to female participation. For example, ubiquitous references to "guys", "dealing with the angry man" or aggressive training techniques, while not necessary overtly sexist, contribute to the creation of a macho environment where women might, understandably, feel at best uncomfortable and at worst unwelcome. The fact that the vast majority of our participants have, from the start, been men, has meant that a significant group, with whom we would like to work, was simply not available in this context. Reaching out to women officers would entail a large, expensive study across the United Kingdom which the initial project simply could not encompass. Needless to say, this left us at something of an ethical dead-end: we knew that we should be interviewing more women, but found ourselves unable to do so and thus, very unwillingly, complicit with the silencing of precisely those voices we felt ethically bound to listen to.

Research Design

The basic design of the research was, initially at least, straightforward, and would involve semi-structured interviews of trainees, individually and in groups. Such qualitative or interpretivist approaches are common in education contexts (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Newby, 2010). As themselves a form of social practice with many variants (Brinkman and Kvale, 2014), they allow a flexible way of investigating participants' narratives in relation to their social setting. They are seen as a "naturalistic" way of developing depth of understanding (Rubin and Rubin, 2012) by identifying the perceptions and exploring the insights of all those participating in the research process (Stephens, 2009; Goodson et al, 2010: Yin, 2011).

However, while interviews offer many opportunities to examine important issues in depth, they can be problematic. This was an important component of our critical ethnography, since we were wary of the precise value of spoken interviews: put bluntly, how do we know we are getting the truth in an interview, and that we are recording and understanding it as such? For example, interviews take place in a context where the power can lie with the questioner, not the participant, who may be feel bound to respond is a particular way in an interview setting, hiding, underplaying or exaggerating information accordingly (Arthur et al, 2012). As they provide participants with an arena for simply telling the researcher what they think they want to hear, participants' responses may do little more than repeat institutionalized discourse or relay what is already evident from other sources.

These criticisms raise the question of how one would articulate something as physical and complex as practice in words. Critical ethnography which aimed to investigate such practices would, by definition, be critical of an overemphasis on interviews or any form of spoken discourse for reasons such as these. Despite the popularity of practice-based approaches to organizational research (see, for example, Schatzki et al, 2001), the alternatives are far from self-evident. To complement our semi-structured interviewing, therefore, we looked to more diverse and complex sources of data. Ethnographers typically use such a "patchwork" of different perspectives results, described as a form of "bricolage" whose role is to examine a wide range of interactions and thus produce a bigger, richer picture (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The etymology of bricolage as a military metaphor is significant here, since it implies the physicality of practice. Derived from 14th century French une bricole was originally used to describe a type of military catapult and, by extension, the zigzag action of its belts and levers. Although still linked in French to hasty repair and amateurish, careless work, ethnographic research uses the term in English to refer to work which is improvised and adapted to the materials and circumstances to hand. The challenge is therefore to fulfill the promise of bricolage as a genuinely effective tool while avoiding the implication that it is an amateurish, second best option.

Our answer to this challenge lay in the fact that we were with the trainees 5 days a week for 2 weeks and regularly throughout the programme. We would thus have access to many other sources of data which would corroborate or productively challenge the interview data. We were thus tempted by approaches which take into account the "non-representative" nature of practice rather than the way it is relayed in language (Thrift, 2008). The term non-representative here refers to ways of expressing practice which do not necessarily rely on their representation in speech, or even thought. Essentially, the goal of non-representative

research is to look directly at practices and their effects in situ rather than rely on indirect accounts or representations of them.

Thus while our interviews were semi-structured to encourage dialogue and participant input, we also tried to capture date in other ways which reflected the physical nature and practices of the training environment. With an interest in identifying the various forms transition which are so important to professional practice (see, for example, Fenwick, 2013; Fyfe, 2013), we wrote a set of questions which focused on the participants' perceptions of their own development. By asking further questions about aspects of the training which impacted on their practice, we would be able to infer the perceived success or otherwise of various parts of our training. These included, for example, various forms of observation and reflection: we were able to observe our participants on training exercises, noting and recording practices and their impact over time. We were also able to examine training resources, developed and used by trainers and trainees alike, as a revealing source of the ideas and beliefs which underpinned various was of doing things and building a particular training culture. We also used written and less formal spoken reflection as ways of deepening our picture of practice. Observation reports from other trainers, written evidence of impact in various forms were all used to provide a multidimensional account of the environment which could be critically analyzed in depth.

For similar reasons, we were also keen to make sure that the research design was not undermined by basic theoretic flaws. We wanted the research design to be theoretically, as well as practically, coherent. Fundamentally, our research interest as educators lies in change, but this raises a serious theoretical problem. How does one actually observe a changing phenomenon such as an improvement in practice? If one simply observes the before and after, all one has done is fix a set of states, rather like taking photos of a cantering horse. One has static images of the animal, but one has failed to capture the actual movement that one wants to see. Any movement we think we see in static images is, in one sense, purely fictional insofar as we fill in the gaps between the static images with how we deduce, imagine or remember movement to be. The issue has been of course well debated philosophically (see Linstead and Mullarkey, 2003; Coole and Frost, 2010; Mulcahy, 2011; Engeström and Sannino, 2012 for an introduction to some of these ideas and their current relevance) and we felt that it was important to recognize this and at least try to capture change rather than snapshots of fixed states. This was why, ultimately, our questions all evolved around ways in which development might be inferred rather than actually proved from particular instances of practice which, in fact, prove nothing of the sort. For example, we asked for accounts of how the organization supported the development of

skills beyond the training classroom in concrete ways; how far trainers' existing skills and knowledge were actually recognized and developed in practice; and how far the current culture was open to change from the outside, given that the organization in question (Policing) has been accused of insularity and, at times, opacity.

Method in Action

While we felt that a coherent theoretical perspective underpinned our work, other questions of a more practical nature also arose. One issue that we did not predict was the problem of time. Actually finding the time and even suitable places in which to conduct our interviews was much harder than we originally thought: our participants were on an intensive programme which left them little time to sit down with us to discuss practice. This led us to place even more emphasis on a more ethnographic perspective which meant looking for sources of data outside the traditional semi-structured interview. Notes taken by observing training exercises in the field; on-the-spot reflexions recorded as trainees carried out "reflexion in action"; and analytical written accounts from trainees' professional writings were all used to develop a more holistic picture of the impact of training.

At the same time, we found that our participants were surprisingly forthcoming. We were surprised because features of this professional environment had led us to assume that they would be unwilling to discuss many aspects of their role We had expected some trainees to be cagey about their practice, because it involved situations in which their professional judgment is constantly called into question, often publicly by the national media following high-profile shooting incidents. Moreover, as higher education practitioners, we were entering a culture of policing which was wary of outsiders, and especially of "academics" with little knowledge of policing, still less of firearms operations. Despite their busy schedule, however, our participants actually seemed keen to take part in the research process and appeared curious about how it worked and where it would lead. Their views were frank and open and the level of self-analysis was extremely helpful. For example, trainees were quick to recognize that elements of the firearms culture and language could be working against greater gender diversity in the force, or that particular training practices and resources, while common, might encourage superficial learning and a "tick-box" approach to professional development.

We were therefore pleasantly surprised by our participants' depth of reflection and the critical relevance of their perceptions. This made our job much easier, insofar as we did not need to scrutinize or try to stretch our data to find interesting themes and thought-

provoking answers to our questions—and indeed new questions. Subsequent projects of this type have proved similar in this regard.

Practical Lessons Learned

It must be stressed that while as trainers we were physically inside the programme, as academics were definitely "outside" the organization. These barriers had to be broken down if we were to even begin to understand the impact of our practice. This is because perhaps the most important element of any research project is trust. This is especially true in insider research such as this. Gaining and maintaining trust can take time, but is absolutely vital. To reflect this, as a three-person research team we worked in what might be described as a distributed way. An initial plan was first developed in which we allocated roles, such as the development of basic research questions, specific interview questions or particular ways of analyzing or interpreting the data which we expected to get. Only one of our team had a background in policing, and so he undertook much of the initial work to gain trust, also helping decide what might be feasible in the context. We also decided upstream who would actually do the interviewing and who would attend training days and simulations as observer. The transcription was allocated to the main writers, whose role was to also disseminate the research. Most decisions were made collaboratively, but as the project developed, we increasingly had to take decisions independently. It wasn't possible, for example, for the whole team to attend a large scale simulation training event when the chance arose, and so just two of us went to the outdoor training site with the trainees. We had not planned for this event to play such a big role in the research, but seeing training decisions made in such circumstances inflected how we understood and eventually interpreted our spoken data as complementary to other, more physical ways of expressing learning in action.

We found that time spent developing good relationships was be paid back in the quality of data. For example, clearly explaining the purpose of the research was vital in gaining trust, as was leaving the interviewing to later into the project. We spent two weeks getting to know our trainees, working all day, every day with them. We deliberately foregrounded their experience, for example by starting with activities which highlighted what they could bring to the training programme. We also arranged to take part in firearms training where they were in charge, effectively reversing the trainer/trainer relationship. This did more than simply give us some of the skills and knowledge that our trainees had, making us more credible as trainers; it conveyed the message that we were happy to be novices, ready to learn and that we trusted them as trainers. Such decisions played a big part in establishing a feeling of mutual trust.

A second lesson is that of time. We had hoped to quickly interview our subjects in an unobtrusive way, allowing them and us to go back to our day jobs. This proved to be impossible for the reasons mentioned earlier. I now think that, in this situation, trying to "cut and run" is actually undesirable if one wants a rich picture of a complex environment. The point is that forward planning is essential in establishing a "plan B" for when such events occur. Setting aside times for interviews can be difficult, especially when they are designed to allow deeper discussion of points which can take a long time to actually get to. Forward thinking can set aside fallback strategies for when "plan A" has to be set aside, avoiding the need for ad hoc or purely reactive strategies imposed by a pack of planning or foresight.

Finally, the project was a great incentive to "research the day job". I still worry about the validity of findings that were clearly open to criticism and, up to a point, subjective. Interpretive studies such as this need to do more than just speak the language of the organizations to which they hope to contribute. Just as many would criticize the way in which they rely on individual, subjective interpretations, pointing to the falsehood of many claims made by qualitative approaches. For example, Yin (2011) argues that qualitative research such as this can achieve several goals: studying meanings in real world conditions; representing the views and perspectives of the participants; covering the contextual conditions of the participants; contributing insights which attempt to explain phenomena; and using multiple sources of evidence. But these claims invite many criticisms: how can we claim to know the "real world"? What right does the researcher have to represent the views and perspectives of the participants, and does this not necessarily entail reducing them to objects of the researcher's lens? If phenomena – the term itself implies a particular philosophical perspective which has often been criticized – are to be explained, how exactly do we achieve this in these complex, shifting environments where we never see more than a very small part of the picture and where valid findings so quickly go out of date? Multiple sources of evidence, finally, may well result from bricolage, but how can we be sure that this bricolage is a powerful set of tools and not a disingenuously ad hoc, amateurish product of academic expediency? Ultimately, while many would agree that research can and should reflect education situations which are dynamic rather than stable (Cohen et al, 2007; Stephens, 2009), others point to a lack rigour and a proliferation of bias which represents "an assault on the scientific method" (Morgan et al, 2003, p.2). Interpretivist approaches can, in other words, get things "horribly wrong" (Newby, 2010, p.54).

Answers to these criticisms lie in such studies' findings: the critical ethnographer can accept these criticisms a priori, whilst refuting them a posteriori with findings which provide genuine

insights. Thus, regardless of the usefulness of this project's findings, the collaboration which was facilitated by this kind of ethnographic approach had a number of concrete benefits: it gave us a chance to get to know our trainees better; we were able to work more closely with programme managers in the police to enhance the training; and we were able to recognize the successes of the programme, of the university, and most importantly of the trainees in our conference presentations and international publications. For all these reasons, I think the project was a real success.

Conclusions

Critical ethnography is a loose concept and is almost certainly done differently each time it is carried out. Our research into Police firearms training clearly shows that this looseness is its weakness and its strength. Our research highlighted a number of areas where training in firearms, and by inference in policing more generally could develop. These included the forms of pedagogy and types of resource that were espoused in training; the types of assessment which would be useful measures of performance. In particular, our findings put a spotlight on the dynamic nature of professional knowledge and the organization's need to recognize the valuable contribution that officers in transition could bring to the increasingly diverse professional roles.

From a methodological perspective, critical ethnography is undeniably time consuming, controversial and ethically problematic. But our findings suggest that, for all its flaws and surprises, critical ethnography can be a successful and above all enriching research approach for anyone interested in investigating the workings of an organization or professional group. It has led to concrete changes in the way we work as trainers, shifting the emphasis of the curriculum onto more problem-based learning, peer observation and critical reflection in an organizational context which has hitherto favoured more top-down approaches. The research has also led to several conference papers, collaborative articles and a book. Just as importantly from the researcher's point of view, it has sparked new directions for similar—but different—projects in other professional areas, for example investigating simulated training techniques or even studying attitudes to academic writing as a set of situated, material practices with much in common with the kinds of organizational learning studied with our colleagues in Policing.

In summary, then, a number of lessons can be learnt from this experience of using critical ethnography in a professional setting. The first is the need to develop trust. In our case, this was helped by having a member of our research team with close professional links to the

setting which we wanted to investigate – a gatekeeper of sorts. We also found a way of inverting the researcher/ researched relationship in ways which recognized the skills and contributions of our research participants and demonstrated our trust in them in an unequivocal way. In these situations, therefore, we would suggest that a collaborative approach, while perhaps not indispensable, is certainly beneficial. It is not just that collaboration with participants allowed us to focus our enquiry on areas which we did not predict, such as the way communication skills develop in simulated training situations. It also allowed the team to draw on a wide range of strengths which help make the project and the distribution of its findings successful.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. How is critical ethnography described in this account, and what methods were used in this instance?

2. In your view, why was critical ethnography chosen in this setting and what further decisions did this entail?

3. Discuss the importance of collaboration when researching in professional settings, setting out the advantages and drawbacks that it implies here.

4. What theoretical positions are referred to in this account, and how far do they justify the methodological choices made?

5. Of the practical difficulties encountered throughout this project, which were the most important in your view, and why?

6. Overall, what were the main strengths and weaknesses of the way in which this research was carried out?

Further Readings

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