From ethnography to Participant Action Research (PAR): the case of crowd psychology and reforms in public order policing.

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This paper explores the use of ethnography for both advancing theoretical understanding of the social psychological dynamics of crowd violence and for developing practical ways of managing those dynamics in ways that promote human rights and help minimise conflict. It will outline how a programme of research on the ‘poll tax riot’ utilised ethnography to gather a range of data from which to objectively understand its aetiology. The paper will then discuss how this research began to expose the central role police coercion and use of force can play in the production of riot. The paper will then explore how a subsequent programme of ethnographic research on football crowd violence was then able to influence policy at a national and international level. The paper will revolve around discussion of the central function played by ethnography in achieving these academic and external impacts. In so doing it will explore how the originally crowd focused approach has transformed into an ethnography of policing as a key conduit to achieving change but also how such reform was ultimately embedded in and enabled by political crisis, notably that which grew from the death of Ian Tomlinson in 2009. The paper will conclude by discussing some of the implications of this programme of ethnography for conceptualising barriers, within the police and academic contexts, to conducting reform focused ‘public order’ research and how the approach is evolving toward a framework of Participant Action Research as the best means to harness the capacity of social science to invoke progressive police reform in this area.