Ethical and methodological difficulties for researchers doing ethnographic research within the police organisation

Although various studies have shown that doing research with vulnerable groups raises numerous ethical and methodological dilemmas, the same can be said of research with powerful groups. The police, and more specifically the street level officers, are a perfect example of such a mighty assembly. Not only the weapons, the uniform and the cars with blue flashing lights, but also the powers that the police officers hold, make them very influential.

In light of a doctoral study regarding the execution of identity controls and security searches by police officers in Belgium, I am currently observing the day-to-day operations of different teams of various police forces. Event though this period of fieldwork can be considered as an enriching experience, I have already been confronted with several methodological and ethical dilemmas which didn't always seem to be solved easily. In this presentation, I will look into some of these conflicts, more specifically those that came up during the stages of obtaining access to the field, the participating observations and the interviews. It will become clear that finding the right answers to all this different problems is as good as impossible.

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