Researcher reflexivity and the ethical dimensions of observing the response to vulnerability by frontline policing

Ethnography is increasingly valued as a method to enhance our understanding of policing, specifically when research seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of police culture, social meanings constructed by individuals, and the significance and nature of the practices they engage in. To date learning from ethnographic research with the police has focussed on the ethical dilemmas of conducting such work, specifically in the context of participation, corruption and malpractice. This presentation seeks to enhance this literature by exploring the processes researchers must undertake to ensure that research with the police is collaborative, ethical, rigorous and safe.

In 2016, research was undertaken with a police force in Wales to understand the police response to vulnerability and risk, and police decision-making in this context. Observations of frontline policing was one of a range of methodologies used to explore the research question.

This presentation will draw on over 370 hours of observations of frontline policing to explore experiences of negotiating access to the field, ethical approval, and the realities of conducting research in this context. It will highlight the ethical issues researchers must consider when undertaking fieldwork in unpredictable and volatile environments including the requirement for researcher reflexivity in the face of ethical dilemmas in the field. The risk considerations for both police and researchers when working in this environment, and the development of safety protocols to mitigate risk in the field will be discussed. A consideration will also be given to the unique implications that conducting this type of research has for researcher well-being. Finally, it will also deliberate how when working with the police, researchers negotiate a sliding scale of complete observer to participant so that we are able to continue to gain an insight into the world as the police see and experience it.

Author: Dr Kat Ford, Research Officer, The Public Health Research, Evaluation and Development Hot House, Bangor Institute for Health and Medical Research, School of Healthcare Sciences, Bangor University. K.ford@bangor.ac.uk