‘What Works’ in Policing Research: Ethnography

In the field of policing, ethnographic research is not new. Early seminal studies of policing organisations captured insights of the police in action that revealed the value of ethnography to learning about the day-to-day reality of policing, namely what the police do and how they do it (Manning, 2014; Reiner, 2015). In his overview of policing ethnography, Manning (2014, p.532-535) describes how the nature of policing dictates the engagement of the researcher with the practice context as it is only in these circumstances they will have full access to the nuances and complexities that shape the ways officers make sense of, manage and perform their role within the occupational setting. In support of Manning’s (2014) position, and using the points he identifies about why ethnography suits policing research, I will draw on examples from my recent experience of interviewing and observing Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) to emphasise the advantages of using ethnography to understand this specific policing function. In particular, the planned illustrations will serve to highlight the importance of the researcher being present in the ‘here and now’ of the practice encounter, taking part in officers’ work routines and having access to the public and private spaces of police work. By “being there” I have learnt first-hand that the opportunity to ‘see’ and ‘hear’ officers in the practice context is crucial to gaining well-informed insights that can be difficult to achieve by interviewing alone.

Bibliography
