'A warrant is a blunt instrument': An ethnographic insight into the practical and symbolic impact of drug raid

Drug warrants are a key component of the police operational toolkit that empowers officers to enter and search premises and any persons found therein for controlled drugs and evidence of drug offences. Being a hypervisible manifestation of drug law enforcement, raids also perform a symbolic function in terms of deterrence and reassuring the public that the police are tackling local drug problems. Drawing on the findings of an ethnographic study of specialist detective units operating in two English police services areas, this paper examines how drug warrants were planned, authorised and executed in the context of proactive investigations. It focuses on the occupational perspectives and practices of detectives, how they interpreted, made sense of, and manipulated the rules of the drug game, and the ways in which they used intelligence, gathered evidence, exercised power and defined success. The paper considers the value of ethnography for enhancing our understanding of police raids and the work of detectives more generally. It also reflects on ethical dilemmas that occurred whilst observing drug warrants and discusses the realities of dealing with ethics in the field.