Abstract
Ethnography has been used in the study of the public police since the 1950s, although with different purposes and different outcomes since that early period. Ethnography has also been used to study policing in the private sector, again with insightful outcomes. However, the world of policing, and in particular public policing, is more pluralised than a simple split between public and private. Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) are a relatively recent addition to public policing, having come into existence in 2002. They are paid members of police staff who, while not warranted officers, have a degree of low-level powers and are intended to spend the majority of their time in high-visibility patrol and community engagement. While experiencing a difficult entrance into English and Welsh public policing, PCSOs have, over time, found a role for themselves in communities and within police forces. However, their very existence is now under threat with shrinking police budgets and resources. In fact, Norfolk Constabulary recently announced that all 150 of its PCSOs will be made redundant. This paper will present findings from a six-month ethnographic study of PCSOs in two northern English police forces. It will argue for a deeper understanding of the pluralised nature of public policing (not just policing generally) and the vital role for ethnography in illuminating the nuances of the occupational relationships within pluralised public policing fields. The work of Goffman (1959) provides a theoretical framework for this analysis which demonstrates how observations of the policing backstage reveals complex interactional arrangements between PCSOs and their police officer colleagues. These interaction structures reflect the kind of relationships which have developed over time to account for the pluralisation of the public policing sector.