Ethnography and Evidence: the power of narrative in policing

Professor Michael Rowe, Northumbria University

For much of the period since social science research into policing emerged in the 1960s, academics have argued that ethnographic perspectives offer valuable insight into practices otherwise invisible to researchers. This paper reflects upon the value of ethnography within policing but also identifies ethical and practical limitations. More worryingly, it is argued, is the current tension about the status of ethnography as a form of scientific practice in a period when ‘evidence-based’ policing (EBP) is paramount. Even if ethnography does not appear to match the ‘gold standard’ of methodological rigour it is argued that narrative accounts are pre-eminent in police culture and so ethnographic perspectives can offer more powerful insights and have greater impact than research findings based on other methods. More significantly still, ethnographic perspectives remind us that policing is usefully considered as a lens through which society understands itself and reflects on wider questions of social justice, belonging, identity and so forth. In that context, the apparent scientific objectivity offered by EBP is misplaced since policing is inherently bound up with subjective debates, political considerations, issues of power and economic disparities: dimensions better understood through ethnographic perspectives.