Understanding the unreasonable: Ethnographic research on protest policing.

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This paper seeks to consider the challenges of doing ethnographic research on contemporary policing in the UK. Specifically, the paper explores some of the difficulties faced when using ethnographic methods to explore the experiences of those groups who are the target of protest policing. Drawing upon a longitudinal study of the policing of protests against ‘fracking’, the paper considers the challenges of conducting research with groups who are being policed in extended protest situations. Starting from the idea that ethnography provides us with a way to understand behaviour that seems unintelligible, we suggest that this approach to research is vital in expanding our collective understanding of protest and protest policing. In a context in which police voices regularly present certain groups of protesters as unreasonable, we suggest that ethnographic research methods are crucial in helping us make sense of why protesters do what they do and how they experience policing. Ethnographic research plays a vital role in exploring the experiences of those groups marginalised in current debates and we argue that to do this we require research that maintains a critical distance from police forces to gain access to those groups who, due to their negative experiences of policing, are reluctant to engage. Reflecting on the development of ethnographic research on, but not with, police, we suggest that this critical distance brings both benefits and challenges to academic research.