

Policing Private Space – a three dimensional analysis

Mark Button looks at security officers and their contribution to policing and surveillance.

The importance of private security officers in policing has begun to be recognised by a burgeoning literature on this subject, although there have only been a handful of empirical case studies which explore their contribution (South, 1988; Rigatos, 2002; and Wakefield, 2003). To begin to fill this gap research was conducted which examined the involvement of private security in policing at two sites, typical of many places where they are employed: a retail leisure complex (Pleasure Southquay) and a large factory (Armed Industries) (Button, 2007). A wide range of issues were explored at the two sites, from security officers' knowledge of their legal powers, the extent of use of those powers and some of the occupational hazards faced, as well as their occupational culture. The main focus of this article will be how security officers fit into the broader systems of policing, with brief reference to their occupational culture.

Three dimensions as a tool for analysis

A useful framework to examine the contribution of security officers to policing is to use Luke's (1974) three dimensional concept of power. Power is ultimately about achieving outcomes, and a wide range of strategies, of which security officers are one, are applied to achieve those outcomes. The third dimension of power Lukes proposed rested on the ability of A to get B to pursue a particular course of action by shaping their very needs in such a way that they do not even realise A is exercising power. The second dimension relates to A exercising power over B without any observable conflict, where B knows what A wants and does it, but A does not have to do anything. Finally there is the first dimension where there is observable conflict and B does what A tells them to do.

Put simply in the context of a shopping centre and desire to exclude an undesirable group of young people, the first dimension would be a security officer telling them to leave when they do not want to. The second would be mere officer presence leading them to leave. While the third would be the group not even considering entering such a shopping centre.

The research at the two sites revealed that

the third dimension strategy was most common, using design, image, rules and sanctions, as well as reputation. There is not the time to focus on all of these elements in depth, but it is perhaps worth looking at 'image'.

At Pleasure Southquay marketing and image were very important and played a part in almost all decision-making, including security. Indeed there is considerable research that illustrates how the image of a place can create certain expectations of behaviour, so called 'domestication by cappuccino' (Atkinson, 2003). The promotional literature for Pleasure Southquay sought to create an image of an exclusive shopping location that would discourage many from the neighbouring council estate from even thinking of visiting. This promotional literature contained pictures of yachts and sailing – a very exclusive and expensive pastime. Fashionable 'designer' outlets such as 'Ralph Lauren', 'Tommy Hilfiger' and 'Paul Smith' were promoted. Literature also focused upon restaurants and cafes and dining al fresco as well as entertainment from 'contemporary artists' and comedians - a style of entertainment distinctly different from the traditional working class pubs across the road from Pleasure Southquay.

It is with the second dimension that the main roles of security officers can begin to be seen, where their mere presence achieves the desired outcome. This was the fundamental role of security officers at both of the case study sites. The presence of security officers – in effectively a scarecrow function – meant they did not have to actually do anything to achieve security specific outcomes. Hence at Armed Industries, where it was necessary to show an identity pass to gain entrance, workers in a trance-like state would show their passes to the security officers on the gates in the vast majority of cases, without officers having to say anything. At Pleasure Southquay guards stood on the entrance deterring certain groups from entering and would also stimulate compliance from the public on site by their mere presence. For example, teenagers got off their bikes on sight of an officer.

The last resort at the two sites was the first dimension strategy whereby security officers had to actively confront people.

The research illustrated a scale of strategies

employed. At the base a security officer might ensure consent to their request by asking a question. There was evidence of this at Pleasure Southquay when apprehending shoplifters, and at Armed Industries when carrying out searches. The next level was a verbal request to do something using any 'legal tools' available. Again there was evidence of this at both research sites, particularly at Pleasure Southquay when securing order in the night time economy (NTE). If these failed the next stage was to resort to threats. This might be to threaten to call management or even the police. Again there was evidence of both these types of strategies being used at both sites, particularly in relation to searching employees at Armed Industries. If all these failed, and there was a legal tool available – or the situation already rendered the previous strategies useless – then the next course of action was coercion. This was particularly common amongst some of the security staff at Pleasure Southquay in dealing with disorder in the NTE. Force was not something that officers would universally engage in, and some would move straight to the final strategy of calling a line manager and/or the police to resolve the situation.

Occupational culture

The importance of security officers rests largely on the first and second dimensions (though success at these is likely to contribute to image and reputation in the third dimension). The research also showed that the nature and quality of their contribution to the first dimension did vary and the findings on occupational culture shed more light on this.

The defining characteristic of the occupational culture of a security officer is to 'wannabe somewhere else or doing anything else'. The research found evidence of a low commitment to the job. The main reasons for their dissatisfaction were their challenging working conditions which included long working hours, lack of breaks, poor facilities, and the extremes of weather, as well as their poor pay.

Despite this, a strong degree of solidarity was also found, though for slightly different reasons in the two cases studies. At the retail facility, where there were dangers from arresting shoplifters and dealing with incidents in the NTE, feelings of danger encouraged solidarity. Only if they worked together strongly as a team could they confront these problems. At the factory their solidarity was based on isolation and a sense of inferiority, in that they united in the face of what they saw as 'them and us' – a much less positive reason.

There was also a degree of machismo amongst the security officers studied. At one level this manifested itself in views that women should not be doing certain types of security work, such as patrolling a factory at night alone. At another level this manifested itself in observing the opposite sex during working hours either through the job or in the literature viewed to pass the time. Indeed such were the delights for some officers in watching the 'eye candy' and 'totty', I was told by one officer the job gave him 'ball ache'.

Another characteristic observed amongst security officers was suspicious and risk-focused minds. Many of the officers would naturally look out for potential hazards and risks for the organisation they worked for. This ranged from identifying potential troublemakers who enter the leisure facility to switching off lights and electrical equipment that have been left on by staff. Most were good at this, but there was a minority who did not pursue this, because of their low commitment to

the job. Some, for instance, would pick vehicles to search at the factory because they were 'easy' rather than because there was a genuine suspicion about them.

The research identified different orientations of security officers based upon an 'old watchman parapolice' continuum. At one extreme of the continuum is the 'old watchman' orientation. These officers have little commitment to their role, see their job to observe and report, seek to avoid confrontations and also have little interest in the quality or importance of their work. At the other extreme is the 'parapolice' orientation where there is greater commitment, a preoccupation with 'real work', and a willingness to engage in dangerous situations. These are two extremes of orientation and although many of the officers at the factory could be seen as representing the 'old watchmen' and the retail/leisure facility as the 'parapolice', there were exceptions within these groups of officers.

The research highlights that the primary focus of the two sites was to minimise the need for security officers to resort to third dimension strategies. The security officers played a significant part in policing but the quality of that contribution was compromised by the occupational culture. A number of traits were identified that undermined their competence and commitment, perhaps further reinforcing the need to focus upon the third dimensional strategies.

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