Documenting and framing police public interaction with citizens: a study in visual criminology

Cecil Greek describes his visual ethnographic research of police-civilian encounters.

Incidents such as the recent police encounter with Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates at his own home, bring media attention to the racially charged issue of police-citizen interaction. Police, of course, are armed in the United States and since gun ownership is widespread and police-community relations are often tense, law enforcement interactions with civilians are frequently regarded as 'risky' by everyone involved unless and until verbal and non-verbal cues define the situation as safe and non-threatening. Visual clues, both personal (such as dress, demeanor, and style of expression) and environmental (such as the presence of other citizens, location, and lighting), are significant.

While research such as Manning's (1977), investigation of the visual dramaturgical significance of police dress, demeanour, and lethal equipment, and Kelling's (1998) 'broken windows' hypothesis have been applied to how police interpret environmental factors in high crime neighbourhoods, a more complete analysis of the visually related aspects of police-civilian encounters has never been completed. Significant focus has been given to racial profiling, but issues such as officer and departmental bias, inadequate training, etc. dominate the literature rather than situation specific reading of visual data. My research focuses on a number of visually documentable aspects of police-civilian encounters including

dress, law enforcement modes of transportation (car, foot, horse, bike, rollerblades), weapons and environmental issues (neighbourhood, displays of public order or disorder, etc.). This essay will discuss methodology, comparing officially sponsored and escorted research to more independent methods. This article is based upon ethnographic research conducted both as officially approved still photography of public law enforcement activities in the United States, as well as 'street photography' of police-citizen interactions in a number of countries (USA, Canada, various EU countries).

Photographing during escorted ride-alongs

The major advantages to having officers escort the researcher is that they become ethnographic informants and assist in locating suitable persons and situations for photographic recording. Once rapport is established with the officers they become field guides. The day was spent as an extended interview session, while photographs were continually being taken.

I initiated discussions during the day about issues widely known based upon the history and innovative practices of each agency. For example, NYPD officers discussed the COMPSTATS management system, their use of the 'broken windows' model of community problem solving, the history of graft and corruption inside NYPD, their responses to 9/11, and whether a new public attitude toward the police had emerged following this catastrophic event. As the day progressed, incidents would occur that naturally led to additional discussions. As each photograph was taken, questions were asked about how much time or how important that activity was on a daily basis.

When paired with officers from diverse backgrounds, the discussion focused on how they perceive their experiences within the criminal

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

victims, questioning of persons in a crime event area, etc.; documenting everything from friendly conversations to enforcement of quality of life offenses to police responses to more serious crime (Figures 2, 3 and 4).

Street photography

After a year of photographing with agency permissions, I shifted the research focus from officially approved tours and ride-alongs to street photography. I collected images of police-citizen encounters, homeless persons, alleged criminal activity (e.g. drug use), etc., wherever I had my camera handy, and sometimes when using 200mm or longer distance lenses. At such distances the subjects in the images may or may not have noticed they were being photographed. The method might be considered as surveillance photography [as practiced by Kamau (2009)], but I made no effort to hide what I was doing. When recognized, I would often smile and give a thumbs-up signal to those in the shot, and almost always got a positive facial response.

The shift was made for several reasons. First, many of the photos were taken in foreign countries (UK, France, Italy, Poland, Canada, Czech Republic, etc.) during teaching and/ or vacation trips and often while attending large scale public events that had considerable police presence. Instead of focusing exclusively on the ironic aspects of street life gatherings, attention always turned to criminal justice presence.

justice system. For example, in New York City, I was partnered for part of the day with officers of Italian and Chinese descent. The Chicago Police Department escort was a female sergeant who had finished a law degree as well. This facilitated discussion in a number of directions about women in policing, officers with law degrees, promotion structures, etc.

Efforts were not made to formally record any of these conversations as this might have inhibited the subjects. Notes were made at the end of the day and linked to specific photographs. It was my observation that subject responses to being photographed and interviewed conversationally likely were more

positive than they would have been had a tape recorder or video camera been introduced. This in all likelihood reflected the overall positive feeling that most people have photographic 'snapshots' as souvenirs and historical memories of work and family. On the other hand, tape or video recordings can be negatively associated for criminal justice personnel with criminal confessions, undercover investigations, and wire tapping.

Photos taken during the day were both candids and posed. In a candid shot, the photograph was taken first to capture more natural interactions. Candids were taken of such activities as police waking citizens sleeping on park benches, interviews with crime
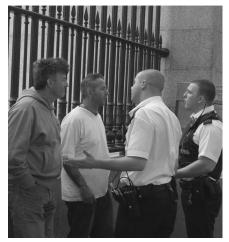

Figure 4

For example, while teaching in London, major events such as a Trafalgar Square protest rally during a visit by President Bush, a massive Trafalgar Square fan rally after the English team won the Rugby World Cup, crowds outside major soccer matches, and the annual Carnival festival in London's Caribbean neighbourhoods were attended. Police were out in force at all of these public events, as were citizens and the press. While photographing, the ethnographer can have conversations with both police and civilians in order to gain background information or explanations of what has taken place. For example, discussions with police officers who were in effect performing crowd control indicated that the majority did not want to be there, as many of these assignments constituted mandatory overtime shifts.

The second factor involved in the decision to shift to street photography methods was the limitations placed upon photography by the law enforcement agencies. Agency permission for what could and could not be photographed varied. None of the police agencies permitted photography of an arrest in progress.

Third, officer behaviour in the presence of an observer with a camera might be quite different from actual 'street justice' administered when agents believe no credible witnesses are present.

Findings

While there are differences in what can be photographed, with street photography permitting greater freedom to record police/citizen encounters that might not always reflect upon law enforcement in the most positive ways, together both types of visual research support similar findings. The additional freedom to photograph any situation must be weighed against the loss of ethnographic background information the researcher would have gained from the law enforcement escort officers.

The perception that police are 'in control' of situations and, in effect maintaining public order, is fostered by visual clues such as dress
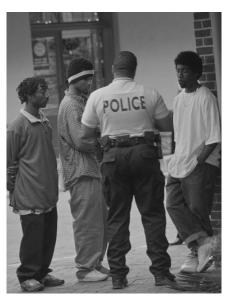

Figure 5

Figure 6

uniforms, external display of weapons, manpower numbers, and certain types of vehicles. The overwhelming majority of citizens will simply accept as taken for granted that police control the situation and determine the nature of the interaction which will take place. Once the initial superordinate-subordinate relationship is established the interaction can proceed with much less concern that the situation will turn unexpectedly

into an assault by either officer or citizen.

Second, the perception that police are present at particular locations to assist citizens rather than control their behaviour per se is fostered by less official dress and an open, 'friendly' demeanor, less emphasis on the demonstration of physical force, particularly weapons, lower manpower numbers, and the replacement of heavy machine vehicles with other forms of transportation such as walking, rollerblading, bicycling, on a Segway, or on horseback. Use of these more citizen-friendly methods has been advocated by the community policing movement over the last 20 years (Skogan and Harnett, 1997). See the two examples (Figures 5 and 6).

In summary, research regarding the visual aspects of law enforcement-citizen encounters offers insight into how public order and civility is maintained as an ongoing, interactive process. Future research could focus on the 'flipside' implication. Could the breakdown of ordinary interaction sometimes be attributed to misreading of crucial visual clues? How important are such visual readings, given the pre-existing values and attitudes which both citizens and police often bring to their encounters? ∎

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