

Community engagement and learning as ‘becoming’: findings from a study of British police recruit training

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(Received 1 March 2010; final version received 30 December 2010)

This article draws on empirical data from research into a British police recruit training programme to put forward a theory of how police recruits learn. Official accounts of learning in British police training are premised on the assumption that learning is an individualised process based on ‘common sense’ notions of acquisition and transfer. However, these accounts fail to acknowledge both the socially situated aspect to police learning, as well as the relationship between learning and identity. Drawing on recent theorising from the field of education, as well as the authors own study of police officers undertaking community placements, it is argued that learning is a process of ‘becoming’.

Keywords: community engagement; communities of practice; habitus; police learning; recruit training

1. Introduction

Although there is an extensive body of literature focussing on many aspects of police training and education, the *process* by which officers learn has rarely been explored by police scholars. With some notable exceptions (Chan *et al.* 2003, Paes-Machado and Albuquerque 2006), where this subject has featured within the academic and policy literature, notions about learning tend to be premised on the ‘common sense’ assumption that learning is an individualised process based on familiar metaphors of *acquisition* and *transfer*. This article draws on theoretical developments from the field of education to challenge these received views of learning and to suggest that there are other useful metaphors for theorising police officers’ learning, such as ‘participation’ and ‘becoming’. More empirically, the article also draws on data from the author’s research into a British police recruit training programme to help further our understanding of how police officers learn.

An exploratory qualitative case study was conducted in a British police force that sends its recruits on ‘community placements’ to organisations such as schools, hospitals and charities. Although placements are an established pedagogic method within other areas of professional education (e.g. nursing and teaching), this was the first time that they had been used in the context of British police recruit training. This raised empirical and theoretical questions relating to what and how the officers would learn, and the aim of this study was to examine the influence of the community engagement on the recruits’ learning and the implications for the

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development of their police *habitus* (Chan 1997, Chan *et al.* 2003). The research design was longitudinal and the empirical data were drawn from multiple interviews with 25 officers. The study enables three conclusions to be drawn about how police recruits learn, which are supported by the empirical data. The first is that learning is both an individual as well as a social participatory process. The second is that learning is linked to a process of the recruits 'becoming' police officers. Finally, that learning not only leads to changes in habitus, but that change in habitus subsequently influences learning.

2. Metaphors for learning

Thought or talk about learning inevitably uses metaphors and this is so whether the thought or talk is of the commonsense kind or whether it is the work of leading learning theorists. Focussing on the latter, there are, according to Sfard (1998), two broad metaphors for theorising learning that are at the root of many debates within educational research. These are: (1) the metaphor of *acquisition* (along with its associated metaphor of *transfer*) and (2) the metaphor of learning as *participation*.

2.1 Learning as acquisition

The first metaphor, which according to Sfard, 'is as old as civilisation' conceptualises learning as a process of acquisition of knowledge by the individual learner. Under this metaphor it might be said that the mind is a sort of a 'container' of knowledge (another metaphor), and learning is a process that fills the container, implanting knowledge there. Although the ideas are, of course, more physiologically and psychologically complex than this, the notion of acquisition is commensurate with 'in the head' views of learning, which take the mind to be a processor of knowledge and the world outside to be its source.

Closely related to the acquisition metaphor is the associated metaphor of *transfer*. From this perspective, learning is the application of knowledge and skills learned in one context, being applied (transferred) to another setting. For example, police officer 'A' learns 'X' at police academy 'Z', then moves to operational policing situation 'Y' where they use 'X' (i.e. transfer it to the new location). Transfer of learning should not be confused with *transfer of knowledge*, which is another related metaphor used to describe the process whereby learning is supposedly transferred inter-individually. For example, experienced police trainer 'B', teaching at police academy 'Z', transfers her knowledge of 'Y' to 'A'. Here, the metaphor is somewhat misleading since the trainer also retains what was transferred to 'A'. However, so fixed are acquisition and transfer in popular thinking that this perspective can be termed the 'common sense account' (Hager and Hodkinson 2009) or 'standard paradigm' (Beckett and Hager 2002) of learning.

Certainly, this is the standard paradigm of learning that provides the foundation for current police training policy in Britain (along with perhaps many other countries) and that emphasises the acquisition of technical skills and knowledge to foster behavioural competence in the workplace (HMIC 1999, NPIA 2007). British police training philosophy is underpinned by a set of 'competence' based National Occupational Standards (NOS).¹ As White (2006, p. 386) has already convincingly argued in this journal that these competence frameworks are based on 'intellectually

impoverished' and 'discredited technical rationality models', this line of critique will not be developed in this article. Rather, the relevant point to establish here is that the uncritical adoption of the acquisition and transfer metaphors underpins the naïve uses of these behaviouristic competence frameworks.

Behaviourism is, however, not the only philosophical antecedent to police training methodology. As I have argued elsewhere (Heslop 2006), police training pedagogy is influenced by a combination of behaviouristic and humanistic (i.e. 'andragogical'; see Birzer 2003) educational philosophies. Whilst behaviourism and humanism are two 'opposing' psychological traditions, they both share an individualised and de-contextualised account of the learning process (Tennant 1997).

However, police trainers and policy-makers are not alone in basing their assumptions about learning on the dominant metaphors of acquisition and transfer. Consider also the more scholarly debate around the relationship between higher education and policing (Roberg and Bonn 2004, Patterson 2011). Although most of this scholarship emanates from the more established North American (Polk and Armstrong 2001, Rydberg and Terrill 2010) or Australian (Mahony and Prenzler 2006, Wimshurst and Ransley 2007) experience, there is a growing debate in Britain around the benefits of university education for policing (Police Review 2009, Neyroud 2011). Although this debate is beyond the scope of the current article, it is largely implicitly predicated on the standard paradigm of learning. Practices and processes such as curriculum and assessment that take place within formal educational settings (including universities) have been strongly shaped by the metaphors of acquisition and transfer (Hager and Hodkinson 2009).

2.2 *Learning as participation*

However, in the last two decades educational researchers and writers about learning have sought to take account of its *social* and *situated* character and the dominant metaphor for understanding this learning is *participation*. This theorising has specifically aimed to also encompass learning that occurs in the workplace and outside of formal education settings, as well as offering a powerful critique of the supposed learning that takes place inside of them. Assessed from a radical situated learning perspective, the most probable thing that police officer 'A' will learn in police academy 'Z' is *how to be a student*. Under this metaphor, learning is theorised as a process of participating in various cultural practices and shared learning activities, rather than a simple process of individual knowledge formation (Brown *et al.* 1989, Lave and Wenger 1991). As Orey and Nelson (1994, p. 623) state, 'learning requires more than just thought and action, or a particular physical or social situation, or just receiving a body of factual knowledge; it also requires participation in the actual practices of the culture'. Accordingly, if counter-intuitively, this metaphor assumes that knowledge does not exist in the head of a person as intellectual concepts produced by reflection,² but as part of the very process of participation in the immediate situation.

The work of Lave and Wenger (1991) is an influential example of participatory learning theory. These researchers offer a complex understanding of how learning for specific occupations occurs in the workplace itself, and conceptualise the process as one of 'legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice'. Applied to the context of policing, recruits initially learn as 'novices' on the periphery. As they

become more competent, they move more towards the 'centre' as 'full members' of police communities (i.e. police teams, departments). From this perspective, immersion in the social, cultural and emotional aspects of work are not merely factors that influence learning, rather they are central to it.

The learning through participation metaphor with its prime focus on situated social activity thereby portrays learning as inherently contextual, thus directly challenging the value of the standard paradigm of learning. These debates, however, have seemingly bypassed British police training policy-makers who continue to rely heavily on the metaphors of acquisition and transfer. This is surprising, as the notion of transfer has increasingly been disregarded within educational scholarship (Hager and Hodkinson 2009), and even more so if one accepts that policing is an inherently practical activity whereby police officers almost certainly learn their 'craft' within the situated workplace (Chan *et al.* 2003).

However, participation theory has not avoided criticism. One significant limitation of this metaphor is that in integrating the individual learner into social participatory process the sense of the individual agency, history and dispositions is often 'lost' (Billett 2001, Hager and Hodkinson 2009). It might also be charged against participatory theory that it says little about the individuals learning as their personal identity changes from a 'novice' to a 'full participant' (Elkjaer 2003). Clearly then, there is scope to bridge the theoretical divide between participation and acquisition approaches. Indeed, Sfard (1998) argued that there is a complementary relation between the metaphors of acquisition and participation, each one focusing attention on different but important aspects of learning. In a similar vein, Duit and Treagust (1998, p. 26) also argue that different perspectives can complement each other and that 'further research should not focus on the differences but present an inclusive view of learning'.

The empirical research discussed in the remainder of this article supports the view that learning for police recruits is both individual and socially situated. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field are employed to help us understand this process, together with the use of becoming as an alternative metaphor to help us comprehend learning more holistically.

3. Study and background

The case study was conducted in a police force in England that sends its recruits on 'community placements' as part of their initial training. The background to this initiative was a damning Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary inspection report, *Training Matters* (HMIC 2002, p. 72), which concluded that the previous regime of police recruit training was 'not fit for purpose'. A key criticism centred on 'insufficient community engagement' throughout the training programme, and HMIC recommended that the training delivered to police recruits should be 'restructured to provide an in-depth understanding of the community to be policed' (p. 107). Consequently, in April 2005, the Initial Police Learning and Development Programme (IPLDP) was launched. The IPLDP was structured around the concept of community engagement and police recruits were required to undertake a minimum of 80 hours community engagement activities as part of their initial training (Home Office 2005). Although when examined nationally the current overall system of police recruit training in Britain is 'fragmented' (Heslop 2010), the

majority of police forces send their officers on placements similar to those described in this research.

3.1 Community engagement

At first sight, structuring the training programme around engagement with communities seems like a logical move to return British policing to its ideological roots. After all, the British police service provides a paradigm case of an institution that has always sought to associate itself alongside the idea of *community*. Despite the recent discursive shift to ‘neighbourhood policing’ (Home Office 2008) the concept of community has long played an important ‘rhetorical’ (Klockars 2005) and symbolic role within British policing. Sir Robert Peel’s historic assertion that ‘the police are the public and the public are the police’ continues to provide the central ideological tenet of policing in Britain (Police Federation 2008) and it is axiomatic that police recruits should have a sound understanding of the communities that they will serve. At the same time, however, the diagnosis that police recruits *need* something called community engagement suggested a deficit model of selection and training, which seemed to assume that the officers had somehow been recruited from a place where they had no previous experience of living in a community.

3.2 Community placements

If the meaning of community engagement was somewhat uncertain, then the idea to send recruits on community placements was certainly untested. As noted above, whilst placements are an established educational approach in other areas of professional development, this was the first time that this method had been formalised into the structure of British police recruit training. The IPLDP is structured over the traditional two year training period for British police recruits, and the programme combines classroom-based learning with workplace coaching, experience, reflective practice and assessment. Additionally, in the seventh week of their training the recruits attend a one week community placement. However, it is a peculiar tradition of British policing that recruits become sworn officers immediately they join the service.³ Therefore, although the recruits attend the placements as ‘students’ and wear civilian clothes, they possess all the powers of a police constable, even though they don’t know how to use them. Consequently, the first placements take place in what are regarded as ‘safe’ environments such as schools, community centres or hospitals.

The explicit educational aim of the placements is to provide the officers with ‘an understanding of other organisations, diverse communities and groups within their local policing areas’.⁴ However, as well as learning things about diverse communities, it is also envisaged that the placements provide the officers with an opportunity to reflect on their own attitudes and assumptions about some communities and perhaps, therefore, learn things about themselves. Indeed, the placements are also related to academic work, which the recruits undertake as part of a foundation degree in police studies run in collaboration with a local university (see Heslop 2011). As part of their studies, the recruits are encouraged to reflect on their own ‘values’, ‘beliefs’ and ‘professional role’.⁵

Following this first community placement the recruits then attend the police training school where they receive a traditional policing education based around legislation and procedures. Following their graduation from the training school, the officers then work operationally where they are coached by an experienced 'tutor constable'. Although in the last three decades British police recruit training has undergone a regular process of development (HMIC 2002), the tutor constable's role has not changed in any significant way. Indeed, when examined theoretically, the tutor/recruit relationship provides a classic example of participatory learning similar to that of an apprenticeship, as the novice learns from the experienced practitioner (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Following their time with a tutor, the recruits spend the remainder of the two years on independent patrol. Over this period, they also complete further academic work for the foundation degree, and in their second year of training they also undertake a further community placement. By this stage, however, the officers will have developed a range of policing skills (Fielding 1988, Chan *et al.* 2003) and, hence, 'more challenging' placements are organised with what are referred to as 'hard to reach' community groups (Home Office 2001).⁶

4. Methodology

Although strictly speaking a case study is neither a method nor a methodology, the intention is generally proposed to be to gain an in-depth understanding of concerned phenomena in a 'real-life' setting. A case study approach is particularly useful in exploratory research areas such as this one, where examination of the context and the dynamics of a situation are important (Darke *et al.* 1998).

The methodological strategy employed in this study comprises qualitative data collection and analysis and is grounded in a philosophical position that is 'interpretivist'. An interpretive approach not only sees people as the primary sources of data but seeks their experiences or what Blaikie (2000) calls the 'insider' view, rather than imposing an 'outsider' view. Consequently, the main research method was qualitative semi-structured interviewing. All the interviewees were volunteers and the sampling strategy was designed to encompass a 'relevant range' (Mason 2004) in terms of gender, ethnicity, background etc. Because the research aim was to explore the implications of the training and more importantly possible *change* over time, a longitudinal research design was adopted (Menard 2002) and 25 recruits were interviewed on three occasions at key points of the officers' two year training period. The first interviews took place following the recruits' attendance at the first community placement. The second interviews were then held approximately seven months later; and the final interviews took place as the officers were approaching the completion of their two year training period. These interviews produced a large quantity of rich data and the computer aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) NVivo was utilised to assist with data management and analysis. This analysis was initially informed by a methodology drawing on the ethos of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in order to identify and code themes from the first and second interviews, though subsequently a more 'interpretive' and 'reflexive' approach was adopted influenced by the sociology of Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1977, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

5. Findings and theoretical framework

In examining the implications of the community engagement on the recruits learning Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus is employed in preference to the more general term identity. The habitus most succinctly defined as 'socialised subjectivity' (Swingewood 2000) expresses complexities that are not perhaps so well conveyed by the notion of identity. Habitus incorporates both the subjective, personal dispositions and the collective structural pre-dispositions shaped by class, race and gender that are combined in each individual. Although I am not the first police researcher to draw on Bourdieu's sociology, in some previous studies the concept of a police officer's habitus has been bound closely to the police organisational context (e.g. Chan 1997, Chan *et al.* 2003). However, in exploring a police recruit's habitus it is also important to consider the officer's life *outside* of the police (Paes-Machado and Albuquerque 2006) as well as their backgrounds *before* they joined. In this way habitus is understood in terms of a complex interplay between past and present (Reay 2004), as well as in relation to the structural features of the social world which in Bourdieu's schema are organised by 'fields' (Bourdieu 1993).

Fields are specialist domains of practice (e.g. the field of policing or the field of academia) with their own 'logic', constituted by a unique combination of species of capital, for example financial capital, symbolic capital (prestige) or social capital (networks). Fields are often theorised as sites of conflict and struggles between actors and an apt metaphor for a field is that of a 'game' (Bourdieu 1993). The notion of a game draws attention to the idea that people are in competition for capital as well as who may legitimately enter the field. Importantly, however, Bourdieu sees the relationship between field and habitus not as a rational calculation but rather as an unconscious following of the habitus or what he termed a 'feel for the game'. Bourdieu also used the evocative analogy of a 'fish in water' to help explain this dynamic. So that when a habitus encounters a field of which it is 'the product' or familiar, 'it is like a "fish in water": it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu 1992, p. 127). However, it follows that when a habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar the reverse will often be the case.

5.1 Backgrounds

Although the research sample fitted the traditional socio-economic profile of police officers,⁷ there are differences between them which in turn impacts on their experiences and police habitus. Seven had previously been to university and held degrees in disciplines including: computing, business, history and the social and natural sciences.

Alison⁸ was a 23-year-old recruit with a first class degree in biology. However, halfway through university she realised that she 'did not want to be a scientist'; so after graduating she worked in a hotel for a year, which she 'really enjoyed because she met so many different people'. Adam was a 26-year-old male recruit from a black minority ethnic (BME) background. Having graduated in computer studies, he worked as a manager for a large retail organisation. Adam explained how he joined the police because he was 'very much a people person'. 'You know, I've managed people for years and I get on with people. Yes that's what spurred me on to join'.

As well as the seven recruits who held degrees, two had commenced degree programmes without finishing them. Ben was a 27-year-old officer, who had completed the first two years of an American history degree. For six months he was an exchange student at an American university, but he had to suspend his studies for 'personal reasons'. Chris had also partially completed a degree in the social sciences. Chris was 34 years old and had been both a Special Constable and Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) before being accepted into the regular police. Chris saw his age as providing him with some advantage. As he explained, 'at 34 I think it will make me a better cop than someone joining at 18. Well I'm sure it makes you a better cop'.

Chris was not the only recruit to have previously worked for the police, as five others had been employed in various roles in the organisation. Since the Police Reform Act of 2002, the concept of the 'extended police family' has formed an important part of the police 'Workforce Modernisation Programme' (HMIC 2004). Part of this programme entailed the creation of new police support roles, such as PCSOs and Detention Officers. After serving for five years as an engineer in the Royal Air Force (RAF), David worked in a variety of jobs before becoming one of the first civilian Detention Officers. David explained how he became good at this job because he was 'straight talking' and could 'speak to people'.

Several other recruits had previous experience of serving in the British Armed Forces. Edward was a 23-year-old former Air Cadet who had turned down a place at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS)⁹ to join the police. After graduating in environmental sciences, Edward worked in a variety of jobs before simultaneously applying to be a police or army officer.

The above are only an indication of the diversity of some of the recruits' backgrounds and experiences before joining the police. The research showed that far from being recruited from 'sheltered backgrounds', they were well-rounded and socially aware individuals. Looking at this more theoretically, in terms of the concept of 'police habitus', their habitus did not just begin when they joined the police, but their habitus, as it were, *is* them and is the sum of all the experiences in their lives so far. Their habitus had already been partly formed by living their lives in communities.

5.2 Community placements and transformational learning theory?

Whilst the research was therefore suggesting that the notion of community engagement was being used in a somewhat simplistic way, the data from the initial interviews did show that the majority of recruits regarded their time on the first placement as a 'positive learning experience'.

Peter was sent to a community centre that helps young adults with learning difficulties:

I was only there for four days, but they were extremely valuable. I've never had so much of an intense kind of experience with people with learning disabilities and it was really kind of educational. The week before I went on this community placement I may have had a certain idea of what a learning disability is and what effects it is going to have on people. After the placement, I had a completely different way of looking at it.

For her first placement, Helen attended a Drugs Dependency Unit and was very enthusiastic about the experience:

I thought that was fantastic, the community placement ... I got loads out of it. Just being able to sit and talk to people. Just see it from their point of view.

As noted above, from a developmental perspective the placements are regarded as a site where the officers might 'confront' and even change their own assumptions and attitudes. I therefore wanted to find out more about what Helen had learnt and, in particular, if she had learnt anything about herself. Helen explained that initially she did not think that she would obtain much learning out of the placement, as her sister had been a heroin addict and she thought she knew all about drug users:

I don't mind telling you that my sister used to be a heroin addict and I think she's still addicted to speed, so I thought I had a wide knowledge of drug users. I thought I knew quite a lot about it. I didn't. And I think it helped me because I was going thinking I know what drug users are like first hand and then I realised I knew nothing. Sometimes you think you know a lot, but when you are actually put in a situation you don't know anything. And that's what I found out.

On the placement she spoke to Steve who was a drug addict undergoing rehabilitation, and she was 'shocked' by how she had stereotyped and made assumptions about him. Steve had been talking about his relationship with his girlfriend and Helen asked him about the possibility of them having a child together:

I said, don't you and your girlfriend ever think of having a child and he said, 'what when I'm like this? No, not until I'm clean. I'm not bringing a child into the world like this'. And like for some reason, obviously like through my sister, and the way I've been brought up, I thought my God he's got values, he's got morals. And then I was shocked to think that well, because he's got values and morals he's a human being, but before I automatically thought that people like that didn't have values and morals.

Her experiences on the placement caused her to rethink her attitudes to drug users in general and her sister in particular. As Helen explained, 'I learnt that I'd maybe even judged my sister and I didn't have enough knowledge to be able to judge her. So I learnt lots out of that'.

Like Helen, Ben went on his placement with preconceived ideas about the people he was going to meet. However, his time at a local 'drop-in-centre' for homeless people also caused him to see things from a different perspective:

Before I'd been there I did have images of them always drinking, always on drugs etc. and now I've seen a completely different side of things, that basically anybody, given a few circumstances, are maybe only three or four steps from being homeless.

Space precludes inclusion of other examples from the early interviews of the recruits seemingly altering their views and perspectives, following reflection of their experiences on the first placements. Therefore initially, the data seemed to be supporting Mezirow's (1990) influential theory of 'transformative learning'. Mezirow conceptualises transformative learning as development through challenging old assumptions and creating new meanings that are more integrative, discriminating

and open to alternative points of view. Accordingly, this is a theory of learning premised on the metaphor of acquisition as it focuses on individual learning processes and the construction of knowledge in an individual's mind (Sfard 1998). Nevertheless, Mezirow's transformation theory claims to be a comprehensive model of adult learning and development. As such, the model seemingly provides a theoretical basis for police officer learning and change. According to this theory, for learners to change their beliefs and attitudes they must engage in a process of 'critical reflection' on their experiences, which in turn leads to a 'perspective transformation' (Mezirow 1991, p. 167).

5.3 *Changes in views*

Indeed, only seven months later, when the recruits were interviewed for the second time, the data showed that there *was* a change in most of their views. Paradoxically, however, it was a change towards far more negativity about the purpose and usefulness of the placements. Denise, for example, had been sent for her first placement to a community family centre in an economically deprived area. When Denise was first interviewed she spoke about how her experiences had been a 'real eye-opener' and that she had 'learnt a lot'. However, when she was interviewed again some seven months later, it was evident that there had been a change in her views:

That particular placement I don't think has helped me in any way really. Like I say, only as far as having the drive round that estate and seeing the kind of houses that I'll be going to, but that was ten minutes out of the week. Other than that, not really, no it didn't. I mean obviously speaking to members of the community, but it's something I've done before you know, speaking and interacting with people, it's never been a problem for me anyway so it didn't sort of improve it.

Even Helen's views about the relevance and benefit of her placement had changed. When I interviewed Helen on the second occasion, I was still thinking about the things she had previously told me about her sister's drug addiction. However, it was clear that since then Helen had 'not really given [her placement] much thought', and that she had 'forgotten quite a lot about it'. Nevertheless, I encouraged Helen to think back to what she had told me about her sister and the other drug users; in particular, what she had previously said to me about being 'shocked' by her realisation of how she had stereotyped them. Having thought about this for a while, Helen; made the insightful point that whilst she still looked back on the placement as being 'useful', it took place in an environment which was completely alien to how she might interact with drug users in her 'real' working life. As Helen explained:

Yes I did speak about stereotyping before, but the problem is that when you speak to somebody in a nice atmosphere it's different. I mean all the drug addicts that we did speak to were recovering drug addicts. I was out of uniform. They see you as a person, you see them as a person. You can sit down and have a one-to-one chat. But when you are in your uniform and they are swearing and spitting at you, it's pretty hard to get that out of your head.

In accounting for these changes in the recruits' views theoretically, it is clear that there were processes at play in terms of the *context* for the learning that could not fully be explained by Mezirow's individualised theory. Whilst there were obviously cognitive aspects to the recruits learning, the social context, or to use Bourdieu's terminology, the social *field* for where and how the learning occurred was also important. As suggested above, there were perfectly sound logistical and pedagogical reasons for sending the officers on placements only seven weeks into their training programme. This was at a time when it was envisaged that they would be open to learning new things as well as seeing things from different perspectives. At the same time, however, this also meant that whilst their experiences on the community placement had some meaning, they were not situated in their own field of policing. To paraphrase Bourdieu, and at the risk of perhaps slightly overstating the case, they were like fish *out of water*. Contrast this, however, with other professional development programmes where, for example, trainee teachers have placements in *schools*, student nurses have placements in *hospitals*, and junior lawyers have placements in *law firms* and so on. In these and most other cases, the trainee professionals are there to learn about the *work* itself, or put in the different theoretical language of Lave and Wenger (1991) to become a full member of a community of practice. However, what is fundamentally different about the police community placements is that the recruits were not there to become full members of a community of practice: rather, they were merely there to learn about *communities*. Any learning that occurred remained for them an experience, which was largely removed from their authentic workplaces. It is therefore plausible to suggest that this learning was not as powerful as that which takes place in an authentic situated working environment as theorised by scholars such as Lave and Wenger. It may be one thing to talk to a drug user as a 'student' on a community placement, but it may be another thing entirely to be spat at by a drug user whilst working a night shift in your police station.

6. Learning as becoming

Importantly, however, the research showed that learning for the recruits was not only influenced by the social context where the interaction took place, but it was also related to a process of change in their vocational police officer habitus; a more recent and alternative metaphor for understanding this process is 'becoming' (Colley *et al.* 2003, Hodkinson *et al.* 2008, Hager and Hodkinson 2009). As Hodkinson *et al.* (2008) explain:

Within any situation, an individual may learn through the integrated process of participation and their ongoing (re)construction of their own habitus. ... Learning can change and/or reinforce that which is learned, and can change and/or reinforce the habitus of the learner. In these ways a person is constantly learning through becoming and becoming through learning. (p. 41)

However, this is not just to make the theoretical point that learning is a process that leads to changes in a recruit's habitus (Chan *et al.* 2003), but importantly, the data showed that the changes in the recruits' habitus as they 'became' police officers also influenced their learning. It will be remembered that the original aim of this study

was to examine the implications of the learning from the community placements on the recruits' habitus. However, the data suggested that this was in some ways the 'wrong question'; and that a more relevant question would have been posed in the reverse, asking: *what are the implications of their changing habitus for their learning?* The data showed that there were implications, particularly in relation to the learning that occurred around the community placements. To explore this empirically, let us return to the data from the initial interviews held shortly after the recruits had attended their first placements. In these interviews all the recruits were asked if they 'felt like police officers yet' and Helen's response was typical: 'no I still feel like we are playing at dressing-up [laugh]. I don't think I will feel like a police officer for a while'.

In subsequent interviews, however, as they gained operational experience in their own field of policing and had 'become' police officers, they looked back on the learning from the community placements differently. In particular, learning things about themselves became far less meaningful for the recruits and they started to evaluate and describe aspects of learning in far more *functional* terms, relating it to how they thought they could, or could not, use it in their operational work. This was even more evident when the recruits were interviewed about their experiences on the second community placement.

Following his first placement at a local Jewish community centre, Edward was sent for his second placement to the Drugs Intervention Programme¹⁰:

We went to the Drugs Intervention Programme this time. It was a lot more relevant to my job than the first time. As I said with the first placement, it was good for the essay but not a lot else. I still haven't attended an incident where the Jewish faith has been relevant. This second placement is a lot more relevant, especially to policing the area that I do. A lot of criminals that I arrest and bring in do have some involvement in drugs. (interview with Edward)

The below quote from Sean was also typical of other responses:

I think on this placement I just got the feeling that it was less about community and more about policing. I suppose you think the two go hand in hand, but with the first community placement obviously I was not looking at it from a police point of view but on my second community placement I was thinking about policing. (interview with Sean)

6.1 Becoming police officers

The data suggested that there were two main aspects to the change that they felt had occurred as they became police officers. The first aspect might be termed as a form of professional competence in identifying themselves as police officers. This is a realisation that they had the 'technical skills' such as the legal and procedural knowledge (Fielding 1988), as well as the social skills needed to perform the role. The second aspect is more amorphous and equates to a feeling that there had been a broader change in their habitus (Chan *et al.* 2003). Like all the other research participants, when I first interviewed Jenny she told me that she 'did not feel like a police officer', and like Helen, she explained that she thought that she was still 'playing at it'. However, seven months later Jenny spoke about how she felt differently:

I went to America on holiday and the Immigration Officer asked me what my job was, and I said I'm a police officer. And then I started to laugh. And my husband looked at me and said 'you're not supposed to laugh, because you are one'. And I thought I am. And I feel like one now, definitely.

Jenny's words resonate with the findings of Chan *et al.* (2003) that recruits become aware of changes in their own habitus. In the final interviews, all the recruits were asked to explain how they had learnt to become police officers and a clear pattern emerged. Without exception, the officers indicated that the significant learning took place across two distinct phases, both of which were in their own 'field of policing'. The first phase was the Police Training School, where they learnt legislation and procedures. The learning that took place in this phase was described by the participants in numerous different ways, such as gaining 'background' or 'theoretical' knowledge to help them begin to perform their roles. Again without exception, however, the recruits described the most important learning by far as taking place through *participation* in the *situated* workplace. The data showed that, initially, the recruits' key participatory relationship was with their tutor constables. However, following their time with a tutor, participation with other more experienced colleagues took on greater importance, as Mary explains:

I learnt the law when I was at the Police Training School, but when you work with your tutor you watch and learn from him and you learn by experience. . . . Every job is different, but it has similarities and you just learn as you go along you learn from all the different people that you work with because everyone works in a different way and you can pick up good things and also bad things from different people. And you just learn yourself by reflecting on what you have done and trying to improve it next time.

7. Conclusion

This article explores findings from a single site in-depth case study. Therefore, the perceived limitations of the scope of the empirical research are recognised. Despite the limited scope of the study, the findings support narratives about learning from the educational and police studies literature and suggest that some general conclusions can be drawn with regard to how police recruits learn.

The study has both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, if we are to think more about the process of how police recruits learn, we need to think about learning more broadly than the 'standard paradigm' of learning implies. As well as the individual cognitive dimension to learning, we need also to consider its socially situated and cultural aspects. In the case study, at least, the data supports the view that learning entails a process of becoming. The advantage to conceptualising learning under this metaphor is that learning is regarded as being a process that is at the same time participatory *and* cognitive. Thus when a police recruit constructs or reconstructs knowledge or skills through social interaction they are, in effect, reconstructing their own habitus as they become police officers. However, as argued earlier, this is not just to make the more obvious theoretical point that learning is a process that leads to changes in a recruit's habitus as other researchers have shown. Equally importantly, the data in this study showed that changes in the recruits' habitus, as they became police officers, also influenced their learning. As they became police officers, they looked back on previous learning from

the placements differently. Learning things about themselves became less meaningful for them and new learning was evaluated in more functional operational policing terms.

A further advantage to conceptualising learning in this way is that it should enable policy-makers to make better informed *practical* decisions about methods of learning used in police training and education. It can be argued that in British policing, training tends to be viewed as a 'panacea' (Heslop 2009) to make changes and right perceived wrongs. Training is usually meant as a *particular* type of training, which is classroom-based and premised on the metaphors of acquisition and transfer. A strong case can be made that the impact such training can have on police officers is limited. Yet this is not just to make the case that academy training will tend to 'decay' (Chan *et al.* 2003, p. 10), but that transfer is an inappropriate metaphor for thinking about most learning and especially vocational learning in the first place (Hager and Hodkinson 2009). Even in this case, where the training was taken out of the classroom and 'into to the community' the research showed that the placements had only a limited effect on the recruits' learning. Whilst the recruits' experiences on the placements were real and meaningful, those experiences did not take place within the authentic situated workplace. Policing is an inherently practical activity in which officers learn their craft, including how to 'engage' with communities, in the situated workplace environment. More research should focus on how police officers learn through participation and a process of becoming in the situated workplace.

Acknowledgements

Dr Richard Heslop is a Sergeant at West Yorkshire Police and the views expressed in this article are his own and not those of his force. However, the author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on previous drafts.

Notes

1. See Skills for Justice at <http://www.skillsforjustice.com/> (accessed May 2011).
2. In fact, even recent work in neuroscience challenges the 'common sense' understanding of learning as a 'thing' located in the head (see Bennett and Hacker 2003).
3. This may change following the Neyroud (2011) Review of Police Leadership and Training, which recommends a shift from the current post-employment training model to a pre-employment training model.
4. Internal police force documentation.
5. University programme guide.
6. Although there are difficulties with the term 'hard to reach', the Home Office (2001, p. 7) suggest that these groups may comprise of the following eight defining characteristics: (1) small population size/and or relatively widely dispersed, (2) suspicion of the police, (3) diffuse or poorly organised internal organisation, (4) acute socio-economic deprivation, (5) social invisibility, (6) cultural or ideological barriers, (7) distinctive service needs and (8) language barriers.
7. Working to lower middle class (see, for example, Emsley 1991).
8. Pseudonyms are assigned to all the research participants.
9. The RMAS is the British Army Officer Training Academy.
10. See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/alcohol-drugs/drugs/drug-strategy/drug-strategy-2010> (accessed May 2011).

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