Original Article

Researching Protest Policing in South Africa: A Discourse Analysis of the Police–Researcher Encounter

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Abstract Researchers have played a significant role in influencing the public's critical engagement with the South African Police Service (SAPS). Resultantly, SAPS officers tend to be wary and/or untrusting of researchers. In the present study, we sought to understand how this climate of suspicion impacts policing research in South Africa. To do so, we employed a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis on emails leading up to a study with SAPS officers, and on the transcripts of three focus group discussions with SAPS officers. We identified three discursive strategies that SAPS employed: Security Stall (i.e. blocking research through bureaucratic procedure), Eliciting Sympathy (i.e. winning sympathy for the struggles of SAPS officers) and Undermining the Researcher Subjectivity (i.e. rendering legitimate knowledge on protest violence the sole product of police officers). These strategies destabilize police research while challenging the broader discursive terrain within which SAPS is located. We conclude by offering some insights for police research.

Introduction

In recent years, there have been several highly publicized incidents of violent protest policing in South Africa, such as the Marikana Massacre[1] and the killing of the protester Andries Tatane (see Roberts *et al.*, 2017; Brooks, 2019). Researchers have been especially critical of the role of the South African Police Service (SAPS) in the policing of protest (e.g. Tait and Marks, 2011; Alexander *et al.*, 2013, 2016; Hornberger, 2014; Marks and Bruce, 2015; Lodge and Mottiar, 2016; Bruce, 2019; Lamb, 2021). This critique, coupled with the South African public's low trust in the police (Wale, 2013; Gumede, 2015; Lamb, 2021), has prompted challenges from civilian oversight structures (Brooks, 2019). Resultantly, and as several studies have attested to (see Marks, 2003; SAPS, 2015; Runciman *et al.*, 2016), SAPS officers tend to be suspicious of researchers.

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[1] On 16 August 2012, SAPS officers killed 34 mine workers striking for wage increases at the Lonmin mine.

In this article, we seek to understand how police officers' suspicion of researchers influence protest policing research in South Africa. To do so, we employ a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) on our email exchange with SAPS and on transcripts of three focus group discussions with SAPS officers. In what follows, and to situate our analytic reflections, we provide a brief overview of the policing of protest in South Africa, and the challenges of navigating police officer suspicions of research. We then describe our research methodology, after which we offer our analysis. Finally, we conclude with insights into police research more generally.

Policing protest in South Africa

SAPS was preceded by the South African Police (SAP), which was established in the early 1900s during colonialism in South Africa. In the apartheid era, SAP was pivotal in sustaining oppressive White-minority rule in South Africa (Lamb, 2018; Kinnis, 2019). SAP brutally suppressed anti-apartheid protests, with protesters frequently murdered by SAP officers (Hornberger, 2014).

With the introduction of democracy in 1994, the right to protest became enshrined in the South African Constitution (Duncan, 2016; Kinnis, 2019), and the African National Congress (ANC) government established SAPS, the new national police organization (Lamb, 2018). The ANC attempted to drastically reform policing to counteract the violent and racist institutional culture inherited from the SAP (Marks *et al.,* 2009; Marks and Bruce, 2015; Lamb, 2018, 2021; Brooks, 2020). Approaches to public order policing were overhauled and transformative training for Public Order Police (POP)[2] was introduced (Marks and Bruce, 2015; Lamb, 2021). Uniform procedures were developed for the policing of protests which were intended to be community-orientated and reflect the aims of the new democratic Constitution (Lamb, 2021).

However, from the late 2000s, in response to increasing panic around escalating crime rates, politicians called for tougher responses to crime and the policing of protest (Bruce, 2019; Lamb, 2021). SAPS became re-militarized, embodying an ethos of maximum force (Marks *et al.*, 2009; Duncan, 2016; Lamb, 2018, 2021; Brooks, 2020). This led to the establishment of heavily armed paramilitary policing bodies deployed at protests which manifested in hard-line, strong-arm tactics, such as teargassing crowds, firing rubber bullets at protesters, using water cannons, stun grenades and armoured vehicles, and assaulting and sometimes killing protesters (von Holdt *et al.*, 2011; Tait and Marks, 2011; Marks and Bruce, 2015; Lamb, 2018, 2021). Some scholars have likened SAPS' protest policing to apartheid-era repression (von Holdt *et al.*, 2011).

In their case studies of community protest and xenophobic violence, von Holdt *et al.* found that 'police actions escalated confrontation and tension which rapidly took the form of running street battles between protesters and police officers' (von Holdt *et al.*, 2011, p. 3). Bruce (2019) suggests that POP units' reliance on rubber bullets, stun grenades, and teargas as protest management tactics may be due to the inadequate number of POP personnel deployed at protests. Since protests mainly occur in low-income communities, adequate policing of protests is not prioritized, and public order policing personnel are often deployed for crime-fighting purposes instead. Resultantly, POP units are regularly under-resourced when they attend to protests and are thus unable to utilize the crowd management manoeuvres in which they have been trained (Bruce, 2019). Yet, the insistence that more POP officers would decrease POP's violent policing of protests should be questioned.

An example of the violent character of SAPS protest policing was the Marikana Massacre in 2012 (Kinnis, 2019). Marikana signified both the breakdown of public order policing and the changes that post-apartheid protest policing has undergone (Marks and Bruce, 2015). While much of the initial media reporting in the aftermath of the Marikana Massacre favoured police accounts, ignored the voices of the miners, and failed to expose the extent of police violence (Duncan, 2014; Chiumbu, 2016), select investigative journalists (e.g. Marinovich

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[2] POP is SAPS' dedicated crowd-management unit in charge of policing protests, demonstrations, sports events, and incidents of spontaneous crowd disorder (Kinnis, 2019).

2012), a documentary film, and several academics (e.g. Alexander *et al.*, 2013) published work highlighting SAPS' role in instigating the violence. This coverage shifted perceptions of protest policing in media spaces and among the general public (Duncan, 2014; Chiumbu, 2016). Resultantly, the policing of protest in South Africa has faced substantial scrutiny (Brooks, 2019). Although there is still some inconsistency with respect to how the South African media reports on protest policing, researchers tend to be more critical of the police, highlighting SAPS officers' role in provoking violence in protests (e.g. Tait and Marks, 2011; von Holdt *et al.*, 2011; Alexander *et al.*, 2013, 2016; Hornberger, 2014; Marks and Bruce, 2015; Lodge and Mottiar, 2016; Bruce, 2019), drawing attention to police brutality (e.g. Bruce, 2005, 2020).

Considering the increasingly critical discursive landscape that SAPS finds itself in, the South African public has expressed a growing mistrust of the police. An Institute of Justice and Reconciliation 2013 survey found that, of all public institutions in the country, South African citizens had the lowest confidence in the police and political parties (Wale, 2013). Gumede (2015, p. 334) suggests that 'there appears to be a feeling that protective institutions such as the police and judiciary remain as hostile as they were for blacks under apartheid'. SAPS has also been involved in several widely publicized corruption scandals, which have further eroded public trust in the police (Dolley, 2020; Gerber, 2020; Lamb, 2021). In relation to protest policing, the 2016 iteration of the Human Sciences Research Council's South African Social Attitudes Survey series found that most respondents (60%) felt that the police were 'fairing poorly' in their response to protests (Roberts *et al.*, 2016). It would seem, then, that due to the criticism that SAPS has received within many academic reports, SAPS officers have come to regard academics with increasing suspicion (see SAPS, 2015; Runciman *et al.*, 2016).

Faull (2017a, b) and Brooks (2019, 2020) have demonstrated how SAPS officers' discursive constructions of their identities and performances of their work are influenced by the contradictory socio-political dynamics that mark the contexts in which they work. Building on this work, we are interested in how police officers discursively engage with researchers in light of the critical academic discourses on policing that has become well known to both SAPS and the South African public. While we acknowledge that these academic discourses do not operate in isolation from other discourses and contextual influences within the researcher–police officer relationship (as outlined by Faull and Brooks), the influence of these academic discourses on this relationship remains under-explored in the literature. It is important that researchers take cognisance of how their status as researchers (in a context in which police–researcher relationships are fraught with suspicion) influences data generated with SAPS officers, especially those officers involved in policing protest. While we hypothesize that police officers will enter into a suspicious engagement with researchers (see also Marks, 2003; SAPS, 2015; Runciman *et al.*, 2016), this study contributes to a relative dearth of research in this area.

Navigating suspicion in policing research

Global policing studies have revealed evidence of malpractice, racism, and sexism in policing institutions. This has led many police officers to reluctantly work with researchers, and to perceive such research as invasive, with little value (Cram, 2018; Lippert *et al.*, 2016). Police officers have evaded full disclosure when participating in research, providing elusive or pre-packaged answers that rehearse the 'official line' (e.g. Cram, 2018; Lippert *et al.*, 2016; Rowe, 2007). As Marks (2003) recounts in her study with SAPS officers: 'they made no bones about their distrust and disregard for outside researchers' (p. 48). Police officers' suspicions of researchers are, however, not inevitable. Researchers have employed numerous strategies to maintain trust—including establishing rapport and building working relationships (Marks, 2003)—which can circumvent police officers deploying stock answers (Lippert *et al.*, 2016). These strategies attempt to understand interactional nuances, how researchers are perceived by police officers, and how these perceptions impact acceptance more generally (Cram, 2018).

Methods

Data collection and participants

Data collection for this study comprised three focus group discussions held with SAPS officers on their experiences and views of policing protests. At the start of our study, we applied to the SAPS Research Division for permission to conduct research with SAPS officers. As we discuss in more detail below, our application was initially rejected. However, we queried this rejection and were subsequently granted permission to conduct the research. Once we had received this permission, we approached the station commanders—both telephonically and in person—to request permission to hold focus groups with any officers who were willing to participate. The first two focus groups, were attended by seven and nine officers, respectively, recruited from a police station in a peri-urban suburb in Johannesburg, a city located in South Africa's Gauteng province. This police station is located close to a community in which there have been many protests over the last two decades. Although police officers at this station are not POP officers, they are often the first to attend to protests in this community, sometimes doing so using violent police tactics. The third focus group was conducted with six POP officers from a Gauteng province platoon. These officers respond to protests across Gauteng, a province which sees especially high rates of protest (see Runciman *et al.*, 2016). All three focus groups were held at our institution. At the start of each focus group, all officers were reminded that their participation was voluntary. A total of 22 police officers—13 men and 9 women—participated in this study. These officers comprised the following ranks: 4 captains, 3 warrant officers, 4 sergeants, and 11 constables. We acknowledge that conducting focus groups with officers from a range of ranks may have meant that some lower ranking officers felt uncomfortable expressing certain opinions in the presence of higher ranking officers, or that they were coerced into attending the focus groups, despite our emphasis on its voluntary nature. However, we chose to conduct focus groups rather than individual interviews as we were interested in the officers' collective meaning-making on the policing of protest and the dominant collective discourses officers' construct when discussing violent protests. It was hoped that the group setting would also facilitate ease of expression for some officers. The focus groups were conducted by the first author and another colleague at our institution.

Analysis: Foucauldian discourse analysis

FDA is useful for reflecting on the movements of power between *in situ* subjects (see Potter, 1997; Willig, 2008). By examining how language relates to, engages, constitutes, and is formed by power, subjectivity, and social institutions (Parker, 1999), FDA affords insight into how discourse (i.e., representations that discursively construct objects, make available different subject positions, and legitimize different realities) shapes and is shaped by power and social institutions (see Willig, 2008). We argue that FDA can aid researchers in reflecting on how material and symbolic power is exercised within and throughout policing research, with sensitivity towards the mediating role that subjectivities and institutions play in this respect (see Potter, 1997).

Using the stages of FDA outlined by Willig (2008), we employed an FDA to grapple with our experience of the police-researcher encounter. Firstly, in identifying the discursive object of study, we focused on how we, as researchers, were engaged by police officers throughout their construction of various discursive objects (e.g. the policing of protest, police violence, and protest research). We examined email correspondence from the SAPS Research Division and the transcripts of three focus group discussions with SAPS officers to explore commonalities and contradictions in how our subjectivity as researchers influenced the police officers' discursive constructions. We identified three discursive strategies that SAPS employed in these emails and interviews. We then considered the subject positions (both the police officers' and the researchers') that were made available or limited by these three discursive strategies.

Consent and ethics

Informed consent was obtained from participants. This study received ethical clearance from the University of South Africa (number: 2016/CGS/35/R),

as a component of a larger research project on protest. Permission to conduct research was granted by the Research Division at SAPS (number: 3/34/2). In line with the requirements of the Research Division, we sent a copy of this manuscript to the Research Division to review before we submitted the manuscript. The Research Division then gave us permission to submit this manuscript.

Analysis

In what follows, we analyse three discursive strategies that were employed by the SAPS officers throughout our interactions with them, namely: Security Stall, Eliciting Empathy, and Undermining the Researcher Subjectivity. Where the Security Stall strategy was enacted to block our research from proceeding, the Eliciting Empathy and Undermining the Researcher Subjectivity strategies work to draw attention to the discursive and material realities faced by police officers, de-politicize police violence, and establish legitimate knowledge of protest as the sole domain of SAPS. Together, these discursive strategies destabilize policing research and challenge the broader discursive terrain within which SAPS is located.

Security stall

'Outsider researchers' with no connections to the police, like ourselves, often struggle to obtain permission to conduct police research (Cram, 2018). Our first attempts to gain permission to conduct research with SAPS officers were met with a 'security stall', a bureaucratic barrier used to obstruct research (Lippert *et al.*, 2016). We understand this security stall as the first discursive strategy employed by SAPS to negate critical scholarly inquiry into the policing of protest. In the case of South Africa, security stalls are structurally enabled as any research with SAPS must be approved by the SAPS Research Division. Two months after submitting our application to the SAPS Research Division, we followed up on the application's status, only to be informed that 'the issue of research on policing of protest is currently being discussed internally. This office has referred the issue to Legal Services for guidance. Feedback will be provided'. Shortly after

this response, we were informed that our application was rejected:

> Substantial research is being conducted on public order policing and management of crowds. A panel of experts was appointed to determine how crowd management and policing thereof must be improved. Members should not be overburden by the same or similar topic/issue by different researchers. The methodology and techniques used in the training of members in respect of crowd management is regarded as confidential. The matter will be reconsidered once the panel of experts which was appointed by the President, has made a finding.

In the above excerpt, we can identify two discourses on which the Research Division drew to justify their rejection of our research. In the first discourse, the policing of protests is constructed as an oversaturated research area. As such, the 'new' protest research that we sought to undertake is, as the discursive object, constructed as redundant and, consequently, burdensome. The Research Division's refusal to grant permission for our study is, however, not positioned as an outright prohibition. It is, instead, a temporary delay to be 'reconsidered once the panel of experts which was appointed by the President, has made a finding'. This delay, it is noted, will ostensibly improve their crowd management practices. In this way, the discourse establishes SAPS' responsive and engaged subject position. Such a subject position, although not antithetical to censorship (one can censor information while remaining responsive) evokes connotations of care and responsibility, which are not associated with security stalls. Consequentially, the relevance, originality, and usefulness of our proposed study are undermined, while the Research Division is, by contrast, established as receptive to protest research. The Research Division attempts to legitimize its review and overall 'alignment' of crowd policing research (i.e., the stated reason for its rejection of our research applications) by framing its process as guided by a 'panel of experts' appointed

by the President. Both 'experts' and 'the President' work, discursively, to furnish the discourse with the legitimacy and authority from which researchers are barred, functioning as a form of systematic vagueness which is harder to rebut than statements that hold accountable specific individuals or processes (Edwards and Potter, 1992). Indeed, no further details are provided as to who constitutes an 'expert', what specifics the panel has been mandated to examine, how long this process might take, or where one might access the findings.

While the first discourse constructed protest policing research as useful and beneficial to SAPS (with the rejection of our proposed study legitimized on these grounds), the second discourse that we identified in the above excerpt posits that research into crowd management training (an essential area of investigation in protest policing research, see Kinnis, 2019) is prohibited. By proclaiming that 'the methodology and techniques used in the training of members in respect of crowd management are regarded as confidential' establishes the secrecy surrounding such training as legitimate merely because the status of secrecy has been conferred by a nondescript authority. Considered together, these two discourses draw on incompatible reasoning: SAPS' accommodating nature has resulted in the Research Division being inundated with research proposals, yet a central area of study—namely, crowd management—is not (yet) permitted by the Research Division. It is with this contradiction that the above excerpt legitimizes the SAPS subject position as marked by openness, engagement, and scientific rigour, while delegitimizing ours as irrelevant and inexpert.

Upon receiving this rejection, we engaged the Research Division further on our application. After prolonged discussions over email and telephone with various members of the Research Division, our application was accepted. At no point that we are aware of has a President-appointed panel released its findings. This was contrasted with the process delineated in the above excerpt. SAPS did not intend to prohibit research on protest policing. It was only on the advice of this article's third author, who had experience with SAPS research, that we persisted in querying SAPS' rejection. We suspect

that in other instances, such formal rejection from the Research Division would have put an end to the research altogether.

It should be noted that many SAPS officers with whom we spoke during the proposal application process were forthright and helpful. For example, the Research Division requires the vetting of research outputs prior to publication, this article included. In some cases, this has led to research censorship (Lumsden, 2017). However, in our experience, SAPS relied on this vetting process to check that potential publications abided by the ethical mandate that had been stipulated in the research proposal (e.g. protecting the identities of participants). As such, our adherence to predetermined ethics protocols, rather than discursive security stalls, framed this interaction.

Our intended research topic—the policing of violent protest—generated SAPS' suspicion, which resulted in security stalls. Nonetheless, not all of those working for SAPS adhered to this strategy, which meant that our research was ultimately able to proceed as planned. In what follows, we examine the discursive strategies used by rank-and-file officers within the focus group discussions that we facilitated.

Eliciting empathy

In our study, eliciting empathy served as a discursive strategy for legitimizing the police subject position by marking it with a kind of victimhood. Although such victimhood was grounded in material reality (i.e. the need for employment in South Africa's precarious economic climate, as well as the institutionalized subordinative practices exercised in SAPS itself), it was nonetheless drawn on by police officers as a rhetorical strategy. In other words, attempts to elicit empathy were grounded in evocations of an imperative to follow orders and keep one's job in South Africa's climate of high unemployment, allusions to the physical violence that police officers face, and an implied culture of compliance within SAPS. By foregrounding the humanity of police officers in this way, we—as researchers—were positioned as callous if we did not demonstrate empathy. However, these appeals

to empathy on the basis of very real human frailty, precarious socioeconomic status, and institutional power differentials obscure the antecedents and political consequences of violent policing.

During the formal introductions of one of the focus group discussions, a police officer requested that the names of the officers not be shared. When we probed further into this request, the officer, addressing the lead researcher, proclaimed 'I don't trust you'. After we confirmed that all police officers would remain anonymous in any publications or reports that resulted from this research, the officer elaborated on his initial statement:

> I don't trust you at all… when you look at me going into the strike, I'm duty-bound to say I will render a service and I will prevent and I will make sure that I secure [i.e., neutralise the strike]. My family is my community … my purpose is to secure and prevent. That is why, whether I like it or not, I've already signed it [an employment contract] to say I will do it.

Here, a lack of 'trust' is discursively predicated on an awareness that SAPS is portrayed negatively in broader discourses (which are perpetuated by the media, but also by the kinds of academics that the SAPS officer addresses here), and that such portrayals are inattentive to the trying economic climate and the subordinating institutional culture in which policing, as a job, is undertaken in South Africa. Although policing is a choice, it is a choice motivated by material circumstances. This is alluded to when the officer recounts that he has 'signed' an employment contract to which he is 'duty-bound'. Because dominant discourses surrounding SAPS at times ignore the human struggles faced by SAPS officers, we—as academics whose subject positions symbolize those who perpetuate such discourse—are denied access to the most basic of communicative building blocks on which common human connection is established (i.e. the names of police officers). Moreover, there is an implication that SAPS officers are compelled to 'tow the line' of a broader institutional policing culture predicated on violence. As such, there is an attempt here to evoke empathy for police work as a working-class profession. However, for such empathy to be elicited effectively, the political context of this profession must be muted. Thus, within this extract, no reference is made to the police brutality on which most academic research focuses.

The police officer's evocation of the family is congruent with the discursive rationality of neoliberal capitalism. Such rationality, Brown (2015) demonstrates focuses on the betterment of the individual within the nuclear family, rather than society. Such betterment is the kind that is encouraged and rewarded by capitalism. In this regard, the political economy becomes a product of nature rather than power (Brown 2015). When the officer says 'My family is my community', his speech discursively limits social responsibility to familial duty. With material survival so precarious for the majority of South Africans, the discourse plausibly limits responsibility to the boundaries of the family, meaning that police duty, and its implied violence, must be adhered to 'whether I like it or not'. If one's family is to be supported, one must do whatever one's job demands, no matter its ethical quandaries. Again, police violence is muted in this discourse. However, in this case, although violence is never spoken about explicitly, it emerges as an (invisible) necessity—an aspect of policing that cannot be avoided if officers are to support their families and tow the institutional line. Thus, when the officer notes that he must work 'whether I like it or not', the implication is that he does not enjoy the unstated violence that police officers engage in (furnishing the policing subject position with implied ethics), but must nonetheless act violently if he is to support his 'community' (which he limits to the family) and avoid facing the institutional backlash that follows when one does not adhere to the violent policing norm

For the eliciting empathy discursive strategy to function, it must be made clear that police officers—despite engaging in violent activity—are operating on the same moral plain as those who condemn such violence; the only difference being that officers are unable to challenge such violence because they are duty-bound to support themselves and their families and to avoid facing ostracization within SAPS for transgressing the institutional expectation to enact violence.

Police officers also sought to elicit empathy by referencing the kinds of physical violence that they experience. Such physical violence was discussed in terms of the immediate discursive context in which violence takes place as well as the structural discursive context in which violence occurs.

SAPS officers represented their structural discursive context as unfairly diverting empathy away from police officers. As one police captain recounted:

> It's easier on the news if you hear, "The police used rubber bullets and teargas and people were throwing stones", and people are like, "Oh, they were throwing stones? Hmmm" … when people sit on the couch and they listen to the news and they hear about stones being thrown, they are not thinking about half bricks. They are thinking about small pebbles maybe.

By referring to news media, the police officer positions the police subjectivity within the structural discursive context as unfairly accruing blame for violence within the protest. The structural discursive context is harnessed to reduce the severity of violence faced by police officers ('half bricks' become 'pebbles'). As such, because media audiences are removed from the protest, they are ill-equipped to assess protest violence. The position of removed, sedentary media consumers is emphasized with reference to their sitting and listening on 'the couch'. At the same time, police subjectivity is made invisible in the discourse. The discourse accentuates how police officers are unfairly represented in the media and the kinds of violence they endure and obscures the actions of police officers. The agency of police subjectivity is, therefore, muted. Although police officers fire rubber bullets, the discourse renders this a product of unfair media portrayals rather than police agency. Police are acted upon rather than, themselves, act.

The Eliciting Empathy discursive strategy sought to provoke empathy for police officers who engage in violent protest policing. Principally, this strategy evokes the material difficulties, institutional expectations, and discursive struggles that SAPS officers face. It is through the Eliciting Empathy discursive

strategy, we argue, that police officers de-politicized police violence through a humanizing discursive frame that stressed real, material struggles faced by police officers, while muting their agency in enacting violence in protest settings.

Undermining the researcher subjectivity

A final discursive strategy utilized by the participants involved undermining the ability of us, as researchers, to speak legitimately on protest policing, thereby questioning the relevance of our research. Before the focus group had begun, one officer questioned what novel contribution our research could offer. He inquired whether we had read the existing research on protest policing, mentioning *the Smoke that Calls,* a well-known research report (see von Holdt *et al.*, 2011). This report is critical of protest policing in South Africa and explicitly positions police officers as instigators of violence. Within the focus group discussion, it was implied that an authentic understanding of protest policing can be gained only through personal experience. In two of the three focus groups, some police officers refused to answer our questions by asking us questions. In the first focus group, for example, several officers sought to uncover the interviewer's (first author) perspective on protest policing, forcing the interviewer to abandon attempts to embody a 'neutral interviewer' subject position:

> Sergeant: What are *your* thoughts on protests?
> Interviewer 1: Our thoughts?
> Sergeant: Mmmh
> Interviewer 1: It's really interesting to do this research because whenever you speak to different groups they often deflect and say, "Oh you know protests are violent because of the police", right? Then you speak to the police and they'll say something else. So that's why I think it's important to speak to a lot of different people because I think if you just speak to one stakeholder you get a very one-sided perspective on what's happening. I understand the community's frustrations, you know? From what

they tell us, they are living in these conditions which are really difficult and so violence is the only option. But at the same time, me as a person, I don't want to approve of violence.
Sergeant: Have you ever come across a strike?
Interviewer 1 and Interviewer 2: Yeah.
Sergeant: And how did that affect you? Would you go to a protest?

When the interviewer provides a perspective on protests which is somewhat empathetic to protesters' use of violence, police officers respond by questioning the interviewer's personal experience of strike action. The sergeant's initial assumption that the interviewers were unlikely to have participated in a protest is reflected in his question 'Have you ever *come across* a strike?', which implies that any encounter that the interviewer may have had with the protest was likely accidental. The officer's focus on experiential interaction with protest wrests the discursive accent from the political implications and context of violent protest policing by focusing on the psychological implications of protest as a spectacle. Such questioning acts to remind interviewers of their detachment from the everyday reality of protests in South Africa, and thus their inability to legitimately enter discussions on protest.

In the third focus group, there were similar attempts to undermine the researchers' ability to 'know' protest in the ways that police officers can:

Captain: Have you guys ever been on the police side of a riot?
Interviewer 1: No
Interviewer 2: No
Captain: I think maybe as a practical experience you should come and see what it is like on the ground because to sit here in this room discussing it is a totally different thing, from actual, from actually getting on the ground and seeing what it is happening on the ground. That is first-hand experience and that first-hand experience is going to be totally different from sitting and discussing, an experience like that.

In the above extract, police officers establish a dichotomy between researching protest 'in the room' versus experiencing protest 'on the ground'. Through this binary, authentic knowledge of protest can only be generated through 'seeing' protest. Within this relatively short extract, the captain employs repetition (the phrase 'on the ground' is used thrice in a single sentence, 'firsthand' is employed twice, and 'experience' is repeated four times) to emphasize the practicality, materiality, and authenticity of the officers' experience in comparison to the artificiality of the interviewers' talk. The captain also employs extreme case formulations ('*totally* different thing'; '*totally* different from') to stress the inability of talk to accurately 'capture' the experience of protest (see Edwards 2000).

To address how police officers constructed the researcher subjectivity, some of the researchers indicated their willingness to attend a protest with the officers. Agreeing to this, the officers stressed the inevitability of protester violence within any given protest:

Interviewer 1: I mean I think it's something we would both be quite keen to do [attend a protest with the police]
Interviewer 2: Ja [yes], is that an invitation? Because I'll come tomorrow [laughter]
Captain: I think we can start working on such an invitation…I think it will be a very good experience for you guys to get actually be with us and see what it is like to be on the receiving end of the stones [thrown by protesters].

Emphasizing that the interviewers will see protester violence if they accompany the officers (while staying silent on the likelihood of observing police violence) is not to dissuade the interviewers from accepting the invitation. The captain even suggests—perhaps facetiously—that being 'on the receiving end of the stones' thrown by the protesters will be 'be a very good experience' for the interviewers. Rather, the reference to protester violence implies that a 'true' understanding of protest can only be achieved if the interviewers are willing to put themselves in harm's way in the same way that

police officers do. As such, legitimate knowing is once again permitted only when the interviewers step out of their subjectivity and its reliance on talk and begin to approximate one that more closely resembles that of the police who face the material realities of protest. In this regard, the police officers' discourse allows the interviewers to enter into a protest—and thus assume a position of legitimate knowing—from a position that is empathetic to police—rather than a protester—subjectivity. It is assumed that the interviewers will support police actions if they experience protester violence.

Throughout the focus group discussions, much of the police officers' discourse relies on the assumption that researchers could not witness violence firsthand and remain empathetic to protesters, or consider direct violence not only as violence *per se*, but a form of resistance enacted by protesters in structurally violent contexts. In the below extract, the officers probe into the interviewers' attitudes towards violence by introducing visual prompts into the interview:

> Warrant officer: I wanted to show them this Nyala[3] here [pulls out cell phone to show us video of Nyala being set on fire at a protest]
> Captain: That was a week ago, from last week Monday, that was in Davidson.
> Warrant officer: They [officers inside the Nyala] had to run out, they had to run out!
> Sergeant: I was there
> Captain: When that Nyala came out I was manning the water cannon. They came out and there was still a fire on top of the Nyala. They stopped next to me, and I had to extinguish the fire with the water cannon.

In this clip, it was impossible to ascertain the police actions—not caught on film—which may have provoked the attack on the Nyala which is, itself, symbolic of the enormous power differentials between police and protesters. The Nyala—a potent symbol

of violent policing associated with the apartheid regime (see Malherbe *et al.*, 2020)—could, itself, be considered a form of police provocation, as could the use of the water cannon[4] mentioned in passing by the captain ('I was manning the water cannon'). As such, the kinds of police violence captured in the video are not commented on or even named by officers. By emphasizing their lived experience of protest in this way, the officers attempt to solidify the authority of the police subjectivity in matters of 'knowing' protest.

In the above extracts, the police officers preemptively undermine not only blame for the violence that the interviewers might ascribe to officers, but also the epistemic grounds on which most published research on protest rests (including any publications that may emerge from this research in which they are participating). Indeed, SAPS has on occasion publicly questioned police researchers' findings (see Runciman *et al.*, 2016; SAPS, 2015). In the focus groups, we discuss here, the discursive strategies utilized by rank-and-file officers are clearly attuned to broader institutional framings of protest research, both within and beyond SAPS.

By undermining the ability of protest researchers to legitimately 'know' protest in the same way that police are able to 'know' protest, epistemic legitimacy is afforded only to those who align with a very particular kind of police subjectivity. Protester experience, including the violence that protesters experience at the hands of SAPS officers, is muted in this respect. As such, within the interviews, police officers attempt to speak back to dominant discourses that are critical of SAPS by undermining the very ability of these discourses to 'know' in a credible manner.

Conclusion

Contemporary police researchers in South Africa, but also in other contexts, should seek to develop an understanding of the impact that they have, as subjects, on the research process, and indeed the significance of this impact on the field of police research

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[3] A multipurpose armoured vehicle manufactured in South Africa and used by SAPS. It is an upgrade of the armoured Casspir vehicle employed by the apartheid government to violently repress anti-apartheid protests.

[4] Water cannons are frequently used by police to disperse crowds at protests. Like Nyalas, they are associated with apartheid-style repression of protests. Water cannons often result in injuries (IoL 2020).

more generally. We cannot separate policing research from the society in which such research is conducted, but we also cannot separate researchers from such research. In this study, we identified three discursive strategies drawn on by SAPS personnel: Security Stall, Eliciting Empathy and Undermining the Researcher Subjectivity. Together, these strategies worked to destabilise and delegitimize our research, all while drawing on the police and the researcher subjectivity to challenge the discursive terrain that has shaped perceptions of SAPS within South Africa. It seemed clear that SAPS personnel conducted themselves, discursively, within this research encounter in relation to criticisms levelled against SAPS. As such, these three strategies indicate that protest policing research in South Africa must employ a critically reflexive approach precisely because such research has, in many respects, constructed the very object it seeks to describe.

Our interpretations of the data must be placed within the context in which they occur. For example, our analysis of how SAPS officers sought to elicit empathy for police violence should be contextually located. Far from an ideological vocation, SAPS—for most police officers—is a means of attaining an income (Faull, 2017a, b). As such, although police researchers should oppose and remain critical of police violence and how police culture breeds and encourages such violence, we should also remain cognisant of how some police officers, as individuals, might disagree with the militarized culture of SAPS, an institution with which they are affiliated and for which they carry out its violent mandate out of need rather than ideological allegiance. Similarly, context should also inform how we read the SAPS officers' attempts to delegitimize policing knowledge generated by non-SAPS actors. As researchers, we are not staking a claim to a superior knowledge of policing than SAPS officers. Rather, we are emphasizing that knowledge is never foreclosed and that a single view is not sufficient here.

There is perhaps an argument to be made that ethnographic research (e.g. Faull, 2017a, b) allows for embeddedness, and thus a deeper sort of rapport, between researchers and police officers. While this is certainly true on one level, with embedded research undoubtedly producing work that more

removed or distanced researchers cannot, we need not disregard non-ethnographic research. Indeed, rapport can be built in many ways, and empathy can be elicited via several channels. Indeed, studies—such as this one—are able to produce insights based on the very fact that researchers are at an institutional and even ideological remove from police officers. The ethnographic method, therefore, does not guarantee 'better' data. It is perhaps more useful to think of different research paradigms for producing different data.

No matter where one works, the manner by which police, within the research context, engage in the discursive context in which they are located must be interrogated if, indeed, we are to understand these engagements in a socially situated manner. This can also afford to researchers a better understanding of research procedures. Using discourse analysis, we hope to have highlighted that researching police in a contextually sensitive manner requires engaging with discourses, public perceptions, shifting subjectivities, materiality, struggle, and questions of knowledge-making.

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