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# Understanding the Quiet Times: The Role of Periods of “Nothing Much Happening” in Police Work

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## Abstract

Much media and academic representations of police work focuses on action, and moments of excitement, drama, and danger. In this article, we consider, instead, those long periods of relative inactivity that characterize routine operational policing, which we refer to as times of “nothing” (consciously using quote marks since we argue that these quiet periods are actually opportunities in which valuable work is done). We identify three types of “nothing”: nothing that is inevitable and necessary; nothing as a creative space; and nothing as the absence of demand. We argue that we need to understand these and their part in policing practice. Moreover, recognizing the importance of “nothing” in police work serves as a corrective to politicized representations of policing and can help derail aggressive, hypermasculinized policing tropes.

## Keywords

policing, observation, nothing, boredom

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## Introduction

As researchers observing police officers, we quickly learn that the images prevalent in drama and reality television of action and excitement misrepresent routine policing work. More common are the many hours spent in cars, driving, waiting, and watching, or at desks, reading and typing. For ethnographers, interested in discretion, the way officers engage with the public or handle public order situations, these long periods of inactivity may seem to be of little apparent interest. Indeed, it is hard to observe them—officers will sometimes try to suggest we leave or return another day to see the action. However, not to understand these periods of inactivity would be to fail to see the work of police officers in full. To focus only on action would be to misunderstand that these are moments in a long shift during which much time is spent (apparently) “doing nothing.” In her discussion of the ways in which police ethnographers curate and represent their experiences, Souhami (2020, 220) reflects on the nature of police work and cautions that: “an orientation towards action limits interest in the tedious, endless hanging around that is the primary substance of both fieldwork and police work. Yet these boring, mundane, routine activities are both what most police work is, and the site at which contested understandings of occupational culture, identity and belonging are manifested and negotiated.”

The discussion in this article takes on board Souhami’s (2020) call for greater focus on the significance of periods of relative quiet and inaction. We argue below that, perhaps despite appearances, these periods (also recently discussed by Fassin (2017) and Phillips (2016)) are not vacuums in police work or voids in the fieldnotes but are better understood as times during which police officers perform routine duties or engage in informal activities in which occupational cultural work is performed. While the discussion below is informed by these studies, our contribution is distinct in that we do not regard the periods of apparent nothing as moments that risk boredom and occupational alienation (both Fassin and Phillips reflect this perspective). Instead, we are focused on the implications of “hanging around” for police work, as well as for research practice (which is Souhami’s focus).

Understanding how the hours of inactivity heighten the importance, for officers and ethnographers, of those few moments of interaction is a part of understanding those interactions, the excitement of the blue light drive to a scene or the excuse to break away from a lengthy witness statement on a case that will go nowhere (Fassin 2017). Not to see those long periods of necessary waiting, whether at a crime scene or in custody, would be to miss something of the experiences of officers. At the same time, what is dull and pointless for some is, for others, necessary and welcome, meaning they will get home safe and on time at the end of the shift (Molstad 1986).

Research evidence, from many countries and over many years (for example, Bayley 1985; Fassin 2017; PA Consulting 2001), has established that the crime control and law enforcement functions of police agencies amount to only a proportion of the myriad, diverse and (sometimes) undefinable sets of roles and activities that police officers and staff fulfil (such as directing traffic, public reassurance, or ceremonial performance). Our purpose here is to bring ethnographic perspectives, developed across two research studies, to bear on another important element of policing that is underrecognized in mainstream presentations of policing: periods in which nothing at all *seems* to be happening. To be clear, our findings demonstrate that this is itself a misconception and that important work is actually done in these times. As many police researchers attest, observational and ethnographic work often entails long-periods in which little “action” occurs, when officers are not engaged in pursuits, and are not at immediate risk (e.g., Fassin 2013, 2017). Moreover, in these “nothing” spaces, neither are they performing the service functions as identified by Bayley (1985), PA Consulting (2001) and other studies. We are not suggesting that the quiet periods of policing indicate indolence, or any form of excess capacity not properly deployed. In fact, we argue that these “nothing spaces” are not actually devoid or meaningless. Below we offer some thoughts as to how these spaces can be better conceptualized, and what the implications of this are in terms of ethnographic practices.

In terms of the first part of the exercise, we review “nothing spaces” in three different forms. This loose categorization is intended as a heuristic device and we are not claiming they are wholly distinct from one another, nor that other features might be added by other researchers. Our fieldnotes, however, suggested these three forms summarized the periods we observed. First, we use the term “necessary nothing” to describe periods during which officers’ inactivity is an inevitable consequence of administrative practices created either by legal or procedural demands external to the officer. Second, we outline a “creative nothing,” those periods during which officers perform organizational cultural activity. These are among the times during which understanding of “the job,” local crime problems and the community are shared, stories and anecdotes about colleagues, and the perceptions of senior officers are exchanged. Professional solidarity is built and sustained in these periods, elements that are central to occupational culture, and to the performance of policing and the discharge of discretionary powers (van Hulst 2013; Waddington 1999). Third, we identify periods of “no demand nothing,” the times during which calls from the public are scarce and other requirements are also not forthcoming, perhaps during weekends or night shifts when other agencies are not staffed. As with much in policing, these “no demand nothing” times are shaped by the prospect that demand might suddenly occur, in which circumstances the officers and

resources deployed will be greatly needed. We argue that, where attention has been paid to inactivity and boredom in the past (e.g., Fassin 2017, Phillips 2016), it has largely concerned these periods of waiting for “something” to happen. This continues the implication that they are “nontimes,” voids in the continuum of police work. We argue they need to be treated differently, and offer our findings on the various activity carried out within them. In relation to all three forms of “nothing,” we consider the consequences for ethnographers (and other researchers) attempting to conduct fieldwork and to develop insight into the realities of police work.

Following on from a literature review and outline of findings, the final section considers implications for dominant narratives of policing. The extracts from fieldnotes that we use to illustrate the three “nothing spaces” will, we anticipate, be familiar to police officers and staff and to other researchers, but they do not feature heavily in much of the popular or the academic accounts of policing. Beginning to rectify this omission, we argue, provides a basis to reconceptualize policing in late modern societies (Souhami 2020). In particular we suggest it can shift action-oriented, crime fighting and gendered perspectives of policing.

In his masterful study of the occupational culture and routine activities of police work, Manning (1997) argued that the symbolic representation of policing evident on ceremonial occasions (he was referring in particular to police funerals) revealed something of the “semisacred character of policing” in contemporary U.S. society. Drawing on Durkheim’s and Goffman’s analysis of the role of religion and ceremony in modern society, Manning argued that police engagement in such occasions was a form of dramatic performance. In the context of the United States in the 1970s, Manning argued that the police were seeking to secure professional status through claims to be able to control crime, and needed to be given the resources to do this. In that light, police were “displaying and were the beneficiaries of an accepted ‘dramaturgical truth’” as ceremonial performance foregrounded a representation of policing based on risk, danger, and heroism. Forty years later, it might be argued that the politics of law and order in Britain is such that major political parties express unwavering commitment to maintain frontline police services, and in conjunction with media representations of various crime threats, effectively reinforce narratives that policing is fast-paced and action-oriented. UK Home Secretary Patel’s 2020 ambition to terrorize offenders (Guardian 2019), differed little from the earlier commitment by Theresa May, when she was Home Secretary, that the only priority for police was to fight crime (Loader 2014). Ironically, perhaps, police service opposition to recent austerity measures—based on defending the “thin blue line”—has shared much of this conceptual framework about core policing.

This is particularly problematic as the forms of crime and social harm that 21st century policing and society faces require approaches that move beyond a problem/response model (important though response is in emergency situations). In relation to coercive control, for example, research and policy literature (Wiener 2017) has increasingly focused attention on the need to understand domestic abuse as more than a series of incidents and so to recognize the impact of longer term and often hidden processes of control, manipulation, coercion and “gas lighting” that places victims in a subordinate, marginalized and vulnerable position. An action-oriented responsive policing model is poorly placed to address these complexities. At the same time, models of neighborhood or community policing, that emphasize the building of relationships, development of intelligence and the forestalling of disputes, are policing activities that are not characterized by a fast-pace or being action-packed.

Before embarking on further debate, we briefly discuss the two research projects from which this analysis emerges

## **Observing Police**

This article draws on distinct data from research projects separated by time and place. The first was completed in three different areas within one English police service over a period of six months. The focus of the study was to understand officer orientation to their work and the factors that shaped their operational decision-making. The second study was a six-year engagement in observations with three police forces in England (Pearson and Rowe, 2020). The focus was on the work of uniformed officers and their use of discretion in decisions to, for example, use force, to search or to arrest. Each project involved many hours (nearly 700 in the first and over 1,300 in the second) spent on “ride-alongs” with different officers (around 45 in the first and 70 in the second). Fieldnotes were openly taken in handheld notebooks, sometimes shared with those observed as a basis for discussion.

A strength of the article is that it derives from these two independent studies from different authors and perspectives, conducted almost a decade apart. Both were appreciative studies of the routine activities of police work, and both entailed considerable time spent in the field. The first study operated on the basis that the researcher attended three local policing units (LPU) and conducted “ride along” observation of full shifts, rotating over the full cycle of early, afternoon, and night shifts. It was random in terms of deployment, the researcher turned up to the briefing and was sent out with one or two officers as directed by the Sergeant. Over time, the researcher accompanied most, if not all, of the officers on the shift. Many other officers and staff were encountered in police stations, custody suites, in vehicles, and during random

meetings in public and private spaces. One of the three LPUs was urban and in a deprived, multicultural district. One was in a rural area containing two market towns; it was relatively prosperous and homogenous in terms of demography. The third was a mixed LPU, encompassing rural and outertown estates, and mixed demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

The second study was concerned with police constables conducting routine roles, including emergency response, neighborhood policing and traffic duties, across three police forces. The forces covered two major and diverse urban conurbations as well as wealthy suburbs and rural communities. Officers were voluntarily recruited to the study through adverts and word of mouth. Observations followed officers throughout their shift, from initial briefing through to the handover to the following shift and included many hours spent accompanying officers while they waited at hospitals, in custody and at the morgue. Some officers volunteered to be observed on numerous occasions, following them as they changed roles from neighborhood to emergency response. These officers, in particular, have become collaborators in the research project (Marcus 1998).

We have removed any references that might reveal the identity of people or places. Indeed, we have not associated the fieldnotes with either of the distinct research projects. All names used in the fieldnotes included here are pseudonyms. Both projects were subject to institutional ethical approval. Officers and staff formally expressed their informed consent to participate, although in practice obtaining consent was often partial, informal, and piecemeal: not all of those encountered during the research would have known why researchers were present and to broach this would have risked disturbing the field in ways that would undermine the whole purpose of the studies. This is a much-observed challenge within police ethnographies (see Rowe 2007 for discussion). Both authors were “outside outsiders” in the sense that both were external to the police services studied and had not ever been police officers or staff (Westmarland 2015).

Our analysis was shaped through a workshop on policing ethnographies during which the hours of boredom was much remarked upon. Serving police officers were among the participants and contributed to these early discussions, collaborating in the development of our initial analysis (Marcus 1998). We did not merge the data from the two projects. Rather, we engaged in an iterative process of reading and rereading to clarify our understanding of the differences in periods of nothing, turning to the literature as much for contrast as for clarification. We identified those periods of time that were characterized by inactivity, by waiting or by apparently purposeless activity, driving around dark and empty streets. The fieldnotes for such periods are pretty sparse ones and, in itself, this is a point of interest. In analyzing these periods of inactivity,

we have identified the three broad categories outlined in the introduction and present examples in an effort to characterize the nature and dynamics of the quiet moments. To reiterate, these are porous categories intended to help organize discussion. We begin with the category we have termed “necessary nothing” to describe periods during which officers’ apparent inactivity is the consequence of administrative practices created by external legal and procedural demands, which starts with a lengthy extract from fieldnotes.

## Necessary Nothing

### Gathering Evidence

*A police car on a warm summer evening, parked outside a hostel waiting for people to escort to hospital.*

CONSTABLE ANGUS: Are you sure you want to stick with this? You might as well go home. Nothing is going to happen for the rest of the shift.

OBSERVER: Yes, I have to get a sense of the routine and the dull, not just the exciting.

18:03 *Two women walk out of the hostel and get into the back seats of the police car. One, the COMPLAINANT, has made an allegation of an attempted rape last night. She is being taken to hospital for a forensic examination. The other is a FRIEND coming for moral support. The journey is made largely in silence.*

18:30 RADIO: Is anyone available for a Grade One [emergency call]? Three car road traffic collision on the bypass. An ambulance is on its way.

RADIO: We have reports of a fight outside the King’s Head [public house]. Four or five males involved. The Football serial [a unit of officers tasked with handling disorder associated with football matches] are not responding. Not football related, they are saying.

RADIO: Are no cars available?

INSPECTOR OVER RADIO: I have requested aid from the neighboring division. Nothing coming.

18:37 RADIO: Cars no longer required for the King’s Head. The fight is over.

COMPLAINANT: How long is this journey? I’m not feeling well.

ANGUS: Not long now. I hate this journey. Every time I do it, I get lost.

*The car drives down a side street in an effort to get back on the right route. The street is cobbled. The car and passengers bounce around in their seats.*

COMPLAINANT: I am feeling sick.



ANGUS: Don't throw up back there. Hold on.

RADIO: I am receiving reports of a male with a child wandering in the middle of the High Street. Apparently triple X [drunk]. Any cars for a Grade One?

RADIO: Another job. Child found alone walking down London Road. People are with her. Can anyone attend on a Grade One?

18:45 *The car pulls up outside a hospital building, but not a main reception. This is a separate wing and the four of us are admitted by a nurse who has been expecting our arrival. We walk up two flights and along a typical National Health Service corridor—pale grey Lino, pale green walls, notices, and signs for wards—to a small waiting room. A window looks out over a road to the side of an old redbrick factory. Comfortable chairs are placed around the edge. A fish tank stands in the corner, ten fish swimming around. There is a coffee table with out-of-date women's magazines on it. A rack of leaflets is almost empty. Posters advertise services and offer advice. A bright and inoffensive picture of flowers occupies space on one wall.*

NURSE: Wait here. The doctor will be with you in a minute.

RADIO: The High Street job is now a Grade Two [lower priority call]. Can anyone respond to London Road? Further reports indicate the child has run from home and is reporting abuse.

*Angus and the Complainant are waived through to another room. The Observer and Friend sit in silence. Waiting. Angus returns, after perhaps ten minutes, having provided necessary details to the doctor. He has a handheld device for completing reports etc., but he gets out his personal phone.*

20:00 *The Complainant comes out of the examining room.*

COMPLAINANT: Have you got a light? I need a ciggie.

FRIEND: No. I can go over the road and get you some matches?

*Angus is on eBay. He has a gardening project at home and is assessing the options for some hedging. His research is very thorough.*

20:10 SERGEANT (over the radio): Are you free to speak?

ANGUS: Go ahead.

SERGEANT: Are you still dealing?

ANGUS: Yes.

SERGEANT: Do you have the suspect's details?

ANGUS: They're all on the log [the electronic record created by the radio control room].

SERGEANT: Ok.

20:15 RADIO: Football serial are standing down.

20:35 *The Friend struggles to get back into the hospital having bought a lighter. The Nurse eventually remembers to let her back in.*

RADIO: Are there any officers able to stay on tonight to cover the Night shift until 04:00?

Angus looks at the Observer and shakes his head.

ANGUS: No chance.

21:05 SERGEANT: You still there?

ANGUS: Yes, Sarge. Still at the hospital.

SERGEANT: Pop in and see us when you get back.

RADIO: Grade One for reports of a car crashing into the Queen's Head. Some injuries and an ambulance is on the way.

22:00 *Angus is called by the Nurse. They want a word. The examination of the Complainant is finished. She is getting cleaned up and dressed. Angus returns with the forensic evidence in a sealed bag to take away.*

22:20 *Angus, Complainant, Friend and Observer get into the police car.*

RADIO: All available cars to Church Street. Reports of a fight. Man with a knife. Any Taser officers [officers equipped with an electric shock firearm] available?

RADIO: High risk missing. A male in a black Audi is reported to have driven off with a vulnerable female. Potential Child Sexual Exploitation. Any cars?

22:57 *The Complainant and Friend are dropped off back at the hostel*

ANGUS: Wasn't that boring for you?

OBSERVER: No. It was fascinating. Wasn't it frustrating for you? It was a busy night.

ANGUS: No, not really. I don't pay much attention to the radio. A job like this will take hours, so you might as well settle down to it. And, at the end of the day, my main priority is to get home on time and in one piece.

During the course of this five-hour period of observation, there was almost total silence except for the radio. The inactivity was starkly reinforced by the increasing sense that the officers outside were under pressure. Indeed, jobs were being downgraded as a way of managing the demand, and yet this

officer was sat in limbo. For Angus, while his task might be boring in most people's eyes, it was necessary. If it has to be done, then it might just as well be him who does it (Molstad 1986).

This period of inactivity, what we have called "necessary nothing," is a routine and required part of the work of a police officer: standing or, more often, sitting in a car at a crime scene; or sitting on a chair staring through the open custody cell door of someone detained and placed under constant observation. What we miss in focusing upon action and activity is the simple point that Angus makes at the end of this shift. For all officers, there is also the overriding priority of getting home safe and on time. Angus was also pleased to have time to search for items for his upcoming gardening plans. In the days before smart phones, a book or other reading material was a part of most police officers' kit. Without observing such a shift, how would we understand these attitudes?

However, as our second fieldnote illuminates, few officers accept these lengthy periods of "necessary nothing" with quite such passivity. Most will seek to avoid them and will look for opportunities to escape from such duties (Phillips 2016).

## *We Wait*

It is around 16:30 on a warm afternoon in the middle of summer. PCs Kate and Pete are called by the radio for a Grade 1 response to a house alarm reported on Fowler Road. This is a fast, exciting, and adrenalin-filled car trip, lasting only a few minutes as the house is not far from the police station. We arrive at the house; no-one is home. The officers know the woman who lives there and we spend some time looking around for her . . . a neighbor reports that she's at the shops. We wait half an hour until she returns. The woman is embarrassed to tell the officers that she had left the dogs out while she was shopping and that they'll have set the alarm off. Kate and Pete tell her not to worry, these things happen. All is in order so we leave.

Before we get back to the police station, another shout from the radio of a possible burglary on Raven's Drive. A neighbor has phoned it in, and the householder is away on holiday. On the way Kate explains that it won't be recorded as a crime if the householder is not there to report that her property had been taken. We soon arrive at the address; the rear window is open ("insecure" as Pete describes it). It looks to me as though there's been a break-in, the kitchen looks in quite a mess. The officers are not sure what to do; after some discussion they decide to phone the council and get them to board up the property and wait to see what the tenant wants to do. It is now around 17:20 and Kate and Pete moan that they might need to wait for the council staff to appear. While we wait Pete deals with a couple of routine administrative jobs on his "queue" [the to-do list of tasks, such as making appointments or updating

records]. While he's doing this, Kate phones the Sergeant and is told that we can't leave the house until the council arrives: we can't leave the premises insecure when there's no resident present. "Oh well," says Kate, "it's better than doing some other crap job."

We spend time chatting about jobs, work, academic research, and nothing much of any significance. Occasionally one or the other officers will comment on something coming over the radio, or on the few people who pass by. They spot a "dodgy" red Vauxhall Astra going past, Kate sighs "that's worth a stop," frustrated in the knowledge that she is unable to do so. They are told that the boarding up won't be until 20:30. They don't want to sit here for another couple of hours and so they ask the neighbor who reported it if she can keep watch, but she can't and so we have to. Pete moans, "I can't understand why last week we didn't have to sit and wait, and the whole back door was missing, but this time we do have to wait." He rings the householder again to see if she has any family local who could look after the house. She hasn't. We wait.

For Angus, with only a couple of years to go to retirement, the hours of calm were as much a part of the job as any high-speed chase. For Kate and Pete, those same hours are painful ones when one might be doing something more exciting. Pete takes this time as an opportunity to clear up some other cases, but Kate appears to have no such fruitful activities to pursue. However, it is also one of many examples of periods during which officers share experiences, interpret their working environment, and swap stories of previous incidents. Where these periods of time are deliberately carved out, we have called them "creative nothing," those periods during which officers perform organizational cultural activity.

## **Creative Nothing**

These periods are where the narratives of policing, seen as central to the (re) production of police culture (Cockroft 2013, 2020; van Hulst 2013; Waddington 1999) develop. Those cultural attributes are created mutually among officers, and it is those attributes that inform the exercise of discretion, which is at the core of police work. Officers make space for these times, coordinating their tea breaks to share time with fellow officers. Where officers are dispersed, this can require ingenuity, as our third fieldnote indicates:

### *Motorway Services*

18:30 Three hours into the shift on the motorways, James pulls into the motorway services. We go to the cafeteria to find five other Traffic Officers from the same shift. James explains that they always do this. They are scattered

across the different Divisions of the police force and could otherwise spend the entire shift alone. So they come together here or at another location. Never back to their base. The Sergeants wouldn't understand.

The group spend the next hour talking and joking. James' choice of food (spicy sausage) causes much laughter. Nobody envies me having to share the car with him for the next five hours.

In many studies of police culture these are the backstage spaces in which negative aspects of police culture—the isolation, prejudice and cynicism—grow and perpetuate (Cockroft 2013; van Hulst 2013). More recent debates about police professionalization and education have noted that these creative narrative spaces can also foster more positive understanding of police practice and their mandate (Fleming and Rhodes 2018; Rowe and Macauley 2019). The increase of “single crewing” (officers deployed alone in a car rather than in pairs) reduces the opportunities for this creative work and limits opportunities for the development of professional identity and solidarity. In some circumstances, the reduction in this “culture-work” would be welcome—if opportunities that lead to exclusionary practices, or the perpetuation of bullying or corruption are curtailed then this would be a positive factor. Many officers themselves, however, have also reported that the reduction of these opportunities has a significant detrimental impact in terms of welfare, mental health, and the support of the “police family,” some of which is enabled by these spaces of “creative nothing.” These Traffic Officers, a group notoriously unpopular amongst other police officers, certainly felt the loneliness of their tour of duty and put effort into convening together. Other officers found space to pause and to catch up, individually or in groups, by small ruses. The fourth fieldnote extract illustrates the following:

### *Queue Management*

PC Gary keeps the Midland Road job on this queue, even though all that is needed is to talk to the woman [the complainant] and tell her that the case is pretty much over. He could get rid of it from his queue, but then another job would only be added and he might forget to contact her and she could complain that he had not kept her up-to-date. After a welfare check [on a vulnerable/at risk person], Gary drove us into a quiet dead-end street, where he parked up. He explained that he often pulled-over in this spot before he closed-off the previous job that had been allocated to him. He ought not to, since control might want to send him on to another incident, but this way he could get some of his “paperwork” done. We sit for 10–15 minutes. He completes admin tasks while over the radio control shouts for cars to take other jobs.

Clearing all the administration associated with any case is important for most officers who want to get home on time rather than find themselves working past the end of a busy shift (Pearson and Rowe 2020).

## **No Demand Nothing**

However, we do need to recognize that these two categories, of necessary and of creative nothing, are distinct from our third category where there is no demand, those times during which calls from the public are scarce. The hours might be the same, but the experience is very different (Phillips 2016).

### *Mooching*

00:55 On a late turn with a team of officers assigned to proactive policing of organized crime groups, officers finish their dinner of kebabs. As they idle at their desks, the Inspector reminds officers that they are meant to be out on patrol. He is polite in the presence of the Observer, but the message is very clear. We are deployed in an unmarked car to Roll's Castle to "mooch" [that is drive aimlessly] around, looking for trouble.

01:10 A car passes and Percy has a good look at the officers as he goes by. He spins the police car around. The suspect car seems to hesitate before stopping. Neville gets the driver out. He is a young lad in sweat pants. There is a smell of dope and his pupils are dilated. He has not had a drink. They check the number plates. A drug test would take eight minutes and is slow and unclear. They do it anyway, but it is not working properly. It shows him clear for coke, so they return his keys.

01:28 As they finish this job, other officers in a van pass by and check out the car Percy and Neville have just stopped.

The Radio reports that there is a lad on a bike heading this way. He has bitten his girlfriend in the face, it seems. Ahead, a car is turning off the main road into a lane that runs along the side of the airport. Percy and Neville follow.

01:38 There is a car parked up at the end of the runway. A woman is in the driving seat and is a little flustered at the sight of lights. The officers decide to leave her alone.

01:40 We pass the police van in the lane. They must be bored as well.

01:50 There is a taxi also in the lane. It pulls in near the woman. Is something up? Something is not right. Percy and Neville go to the woman in the car. She is upset about something and has come here to get away, perhaps to sleep. They suggest it is not a great idea and so she gets ready to head off. They check out the taxi driver. He is waiting for a fare and has a kebab in his lap.

Percy and Neville drive to the end of the lane to see where it comes out. They then head to the other end of the airport. An Armed Response Vehicle is there.

02:15 Pull over a car that turns off the main road into a Retail Park. Nothing.

02:20 Head off towards Suddery.

02:25 Follow a car to see who is driving and half scare a woman to death. That will be entered for an award for the worst ever stop.

02:45 They spot two lads on a side street, one with a bike, one a dog. One is going home, the other to the shops. All good humored.

03:00 Head back to the station. The police van is to be heard on the Radio. They have left the patrol area, allegedly in pursuit of a car that pinged their Automatic Number Plate Recognition camera, but Percy and Neville are suspicious. They are already nearly back at the station. Basically, everyone is itching to get back and end the shift.

This 10-hour shift dragged. Officers delayed leaving the station at the start of the shift and then extended their meal break. They were tasked with proactive duties, with looking for trouble, which only emphasized the contrast with the reality of a dull, quiet shift with a number of police vehicles patrolling the same empty streets (Barbalet 1999; Conrad 1997). On such shifts, officers might park their patrol car to await developments or, as in this case, mooch around looking for something of interest (Phillips 2016). Sharing stories of action and adventure, more often associated with canteen talk (van Hulst 2013; Waddington 1999), occupy much of this time as if to remind officers that what they do is important and that, at any moment, something interesting might happen. On such shifts, officers will often welcome an Observer as company, as our sixth fieldwork note demonstrates:

### *A Quiet Night*

I started the late shift at 22:00 and after a short briefing I was sent out with Dean. We drove to Crosswell following reports from a gamekeeper of poachers in nearby fields. We spend an hour or so circling around the country lanes looking for lamps or a 4x4 vehicle, but there's no real sign of anything. We stop the car, unwind the windows and listen for sounds of gunshots. If they were spotted then there is obviously a firearms risk. We give up after a while. Dean uses the quiet period to cover his rural patch and check all seems to be in order. There's nobody and no vehicles about but it is important to be seen around the main roads which are used by travelling criminals and close to the border with the neighboring force. Dean says that most officers have their own local knowledge of where to look, local problems and so on, that direct where they

want to patrol. We pass by a house where a woman has been persistently harassed by her ex-partner. He has dealt with her before and so it sticks in his memory and we'll go past to make sure she's alright. We visit a number of "nooks and crannies" known to Dean. The only job all night from the radio is an intruder alarm at an art gallery, which comes in at 02:00. It turns out to be a false activation. A very quiet night, driving around narrow country roads. The only light is the reflected white lines down the middle of the road and I get slightly hypnotized, combined with extreme tiredness in the small hours of the morning. We drive around most of the night, finishing at 06:30.

These two examples of apparently purposeless and ineffective patrolling highlight some key problems with the idea of "no demand nothing." First, it is not really "nothing." There is a purpose to the deployment but it does not find an expression in arrests, tickets, or other measureable indicators. Given the hours, few members of the community would have spotted us on patrol, and we spoke directly to nobody. We cannot know whether the activities have achieved their aims, of deterring and disrupting criminal activities. We will return later to the question of whether a focus on the measurable activities of "fast" work distorts our understanding of policing.

The second problem is that "no demand nothing" reinforces assumptions about efficiency that are unhelpful. We have noted that officers seek to make space for "creative nothing" in their shifts, introducing slack time for what Cain refers to as "easing" (Cain 1973). But there also needs to be spare capacity, just in case. The next fieldnote includes observation of one night shift where there were few periods of "no demand nothing," which caused some anxious moments where periods of the shift were shaped by potentially serious incidents, which were never realized but nonetheless defined that period of work.

## *No Slack*

02:45 In to the station to write up the night's activity so far.

03:05 Radio asks for an officer for constant observation in Custody. Marcus says he can't. He has an Observer and a trainee with him. He is recording his cases as criminal cases. One, a Public Order offence, another Drunk & Disorderly. He will need witness statements to go with that.

03:45 Radio asks for another officer for constant observations, this time at the hospital.

04:05 The split shift means that a number of officers clocked off at 03:00. Now, there are six officers in on the shift. Two are on constant observation. Two are



engaged on a mental health case. That leaves two officers with a trainee and a Sergeant. They are covering the whole of the city and two large rural beats.

04:20 Grade One. There is a report of a woman screaming in bushes by a riverbank. It seems strange, unlikely, but they have to take it seriously. As we are driving towards it under blue lights, a couple in a car try to flag the police car down. It looked like the woman was being sick. Marcus is not stopping for that.

At the entrance to the riverside path, a young man is waiting. He was out jogging and heard something. He wasn't sure what to do. He rang home to his mum to check. She said call the police. He didn't want to waste their time. And he has a history of mental health problems, so he was concerned that they wouldn't believe him. Marcus and the trainee walk up the river to scout the banks, listening and looking for anything that might indicate a woman in trouble. Nothing.

04:55 Marcus calls off the search. The other officer has now also appeared at the scene. They agree to leave the report to the end of the shift and head off to mooch, ready in case of need.

06:50 At the end, the four sigh with a sense that they have got away with it. The city is quiet. But what could have happened? A murder scene would have meant they would all have been deployed with no spare capacity. "We got away with it" they declare.

Splitting shifts to ensure officer numbers reflect patterns of demand, left these officers very exposed. They ignored at least one job they would otherwise have attended. But there was so much "necessary nothing" (officers on constant observations) going on that there was almost no resource left should "something" occur. Without "no demand nothing," numbers quickly become stretched.

Third, and finally, "no demand nothing" illuminates a particular problem we face as ethnographers. We can note the stories told and the conversations that take place between officers. We might draw inspiration from the work of Charlton and Hertz (1989) who studied the ways in which guards at a USAAF base coped with the boredom of long hours of apparently pointless guard duty (see also Jacobs and Retsky 1975 on prison guards). Or we might look to Ehn and Löfgren (2010), who have written about the experience of waiting and the ways people fill time (see also Ayaß 2020). We can try to understand how officers experience these hours in contrast to other jobs. We can note the transition from boredom to activity when, at last, something does happen. Fassin (2017) has written about boredom in the routine activity of policing. But research, when written up, tends to describe activity, the coping mechanisms and strategies adopted, or contrasts the boredom with activity. Fassin

(2013), for example, highlights the lengthy periods of inactivity by describing the small moments of activity in a long shift. We are left to assume what happened (or did not) in the intervening periods. Conveying the officers' experience of utter pointlessness, of frustration, of cold and tired limbs is not something we are well equipped to do. Equally it is difficult to capture, in research terms, positive outcomes that might occur, whereby, for example, "mooching" amounts to visible patrol that helps secure public confidence. While we would argue that ethnographic methods provide greater insight into this than other approaches, it seems likely that these various types of "nothing" periods elude the researcher's understanding to some extent.

Watching nothing happening, as an ethnographer, is very hard to do. We normally look to make notes about things we observe, be that physical objects, locations, people, or events. Barley (2011, 85) refers to the anthropologist's "fieldwork gear, a state almost of suspended animation." However, this misunderstands the importance of noting these periods of "necessary," "creative," and "no demand" nothing because, in fact, they are not empty periods devoid of meaning. As Angus noted, the job has got to be done. And it is a job. We need to attend to these parts of the job as much as to those involving blue lights and sirens. How does an officer spend that time? What is the experience of such periods of silence and stillness? In among the scribbled field notes, the Observer includes some asides:

I begin to reflect on the absence of activity. Angus didn't want me here. As far as he is concerned, I should have left. He said it would be dull. I am a mystery to him, to the medical staff. To everyone. Why watch this? I am finding it hard work. There is no way out now. Angus knows this as he begins this job. There is no control over the time, but it will end.

For those officers volunteering to be observed, our presence as ethnographers may mean that they will not be tasked to such dull work. As many ethnographers working in policing might recognize, our introduction to officers and explanation of our interest is often followed by a discussion of the action and excitement that we will be shown and accounts of the high profile jobs the officer has experienced. On a shift short of vehicles, the officer assigned to a researcher will be sure to get one. Most officers are keen to avoid those tasks that represent "necessary nothing." And most ethnographers will look for action, for something to write about.

Are we then, as researchers, complicit in the impression management of the police (Manning 1997)? Our methodologies focus on stories of actions taken, incidents recalled, anecdotes exchanged, tickets issued. Data do not readily gather the undone, the things that could have happened, but did not

(Scott 2018, 2019). Even ethnographers, exposed to the long hours of “nothing,” write about the interludes of excitement, the choices and the decisions taken and of the exchanges between police officers and between police and citizens. We tend to select the dramatic, the interesting over the routine and the unexciting. How many articles on the practices of stop and search, for example, discuss those many encounters that resulted in no search (Hough 2013; cf. Pearson and Rowe 2020; Quinton 2011; Quinton et al. 2017)? They make no appearance in the statistics but, surely, we might find more space for them in our ethnographic accounts? Their absence from our accounts, we will now go on to argue, reinforces assumptions about policing that are misleading and have profoundly political implications.

### **Challenging the Politics and Organizational Practice of “Fast Policing”**

The discussion so far has focused upon the conceptual and methodological challenges associated with representing and accounting for the importance of “nothing” within police work. It has been argued that the slow, quiet and passive spaces of police work can be understood as a typology that includes “necessary nothing” (the periods when police are required by the inherent nature of the roles they perform to be relatively inactive), “creative nothing” (periods when officers seek time to engage in activities that they regard as important but which they otherwise would not have time to attend to) and “no demand nothing” (when officers have no calls to attend to and when the streets are empty). In the final part of this article, our attention turns to the impact that representations of policing that fail to incorporate the slow, quiet, and passive spaces have in ideological, political, and cultural terms. We argue that research-based accounts of policing that do not address the nature of “nothing” risk reproducing problematic dominant narratives that represent policing in terms of crime-fighting and incident-driven roles. We argue that the action-oriented representation of police work reflects a partial construction of the nature of policing that is not only factually inaccurate—as we have shown—but also distorts debate about the police mandate. Essentially what Loader (2014) referred to as a the “myth of crime fighting” is sustained by accounts that reify one important element of the police role into the central organizing principle, and in so doing threatens to deprioritize service roles, aspects of neighborhood policing, protecting vulnerable people, crime prevention and the myriad other functions that characterize police work.

Such external misrepresentations of working routines apply to many professions and workplaces. Many professionals—including academic researchers—might reasonably complain that the outside world misunderstands and

undervalues their role. In the context of the police, however, we contend that the symbolic cultural power of the police and their embodiment of state sovereignty mean that this is of particular significance. Debate about the proper nature of the mandate and function of the police continues in a context in which responsive crime-fighting is seen as paramount. Moreover, this takes a particular form involving fast-paced response, physicality, and action that precludes, or at least subordinates, consideration of other priorities and strategies. This is not just about the misshaping of external demands on the police, it is also internally generated and sustained (Manning 1997). A frequent finding, sustained over many decades, of research into police occupational culture is that officers tend to (re)produce accounts of police work that valorize and celebrate the high-risk, fast-paced jobs that sustain close bonds of occupational solidarity among officers. Perhaps the earliest sociologist of police culture, Skolnick (1966) noted that, while much of routine police activity did not entail dangerous or risky work, the ever-present possibility that such circumstances might arise unexpectedly at almost any moment shaped a strong sense of group solidarity. Among other things, this potential served to isolate police officers from members of the public and created a strong sense of suspicion and cynicism. In response to the death of George Floyd and global Black Lives Matter protests, we have seen considerable critique of paramilitary styles of highly aggressive policing and calls, particularly in the United States, to “defund” the police. We argue that the findings presented here are important in terms of developing alternative ways of imagining policing.

This valorization of action and danger within police occupational culture has long been linked to gendered models of policing such that the risks officers faced are seen to require physical strength and prowess (Silvestri 2017). Police entry requirements relating to height and physical fitness are obvious manifestations of models of policing based on coercion and physical strength. While such attributes might be inherent to some elements of police work, it is clear that the corollary of these conceptions has been to marginalize the status of women within policing and to associate their work with the “soft” elements of police work that are removed from the frontline, away from the action, and often understood as peripheral to the “core” of “real” police work (Westmarland 2000). The spaces of community and neighborhood policing, for example, are often understood as the “soft” end of the spectrum and are often the areas characterized by slower-paced police work. These are the gendered spaces of policing, where “nothing” may seem to happen, as officers engage with the community and “drink tea with old ladies” (Fenn 2019). Even among senior leadership ranks, implicit and explicit understanding of the traits and characteristics of effective leadership are gendered in ways that venerate the action-oriented fast-paced work that, we are arguing, is at best

only a partial representation. Silvestri (2018, 309) argues that schemes that allow direct entry of staff and officers into superordinate positions challenge the normative status of the “heroic male” in policing that draw upon “. . . expressions of doing time and demonstrations of strength, stamina and endurance.” These symbols of mental and physical resilience reflect an understanding that police work is an action-oriented and fast-paced set of practices.

This is a model of “frontline” policing that has informed, in Britain at least, much of the political debate about policing, resources and austerity for much of the last decade or so. The virility of political parties in terms of law and order is demonstrated through commitments to increase resources and powers to police, or to “get tough” in terms of sentencing. All of these reflect not only the gendered language outlined briefly above, it also reflects an action-oriented perception that fails to account for the inherent presence of “nothing” in the various forms that we outlined earlier in this article. These problematic political understandings of policing have been widely evident during a period, since 2010, when resources, particularly personnel, have been reduced as part of a wider program of austerity. Millie and Bullock (2013) provide a useful overview of the impact of austerity on policing in England and Wales, which saw a reduction of some 20% in officer numbers between 2010 and 2019. The political debate surrounding this has largely focused on the extent to which this has led to a reduction in “frontline” numbers, contrasted with “backroom” staff, implicitly regarded as more expendable. Claims and counter-claims in political debate have focused on the importance of protecting frontline response officers, seen as crucial in terms of maintaining service delivery and meeting public expectations to see officers on patrol. We make no particular point here in terms of whether there has been a reduction in “frontline” policing presence, but instead argue that failing to properly account for the importance of slow-policing, recognizing “periods of nothing” in their various forms, means that the significant contribution that can be made by those away from the “frontline,” whether they be community officers, data analysts, training and recruitment staff, and so forth, is overlooked.

Celebrating and protecting such spaces, however, requires challenging dominant media, social and political narratives, but also organizational elites. As Dawson and Sykes (2016) indicate, the control of time is the central factor in the exercise of power within organizations. In public as well as private sector organizations, reducing workers’ time and the scope of their discretionary activity has been pursued through digitization, enhanced supervision, and manipulation—all central components of new practices of control (Pearson and Rowe 2020). In the context of policing, dominant cultural

narratives are action-oriented, described in the following terms by O'Neill (2019, 22):

The “heroic crime-fighter” imagery is sold to the public as one of the main purposes of policing, and this is reinforced internally through its centrality to police promotions and awards processes, as well as to praise from colleagues.

In 2019, the Police Federation of England and Wales argued that National Police Chiefs' Council were seeking the (re)introduction of performance-related pay for police officers. One concern was that targets and auditing would distort police priorities if officers became incentivized to meet inappropriate criteria that determine their remuneration and career progression. There are two broad sets of concerns here. First that if policing is defined in terms of action-oriented crime control then it is probable that it will be those activities that are reflected in performance criteria. Thus, the potential benefits arising from the periods of “nothing” are further marginalized. A related but distinct set of concerns is that—against whatever criteria—targets and performance related culture reduces policing to a series of discreet activities that allows no scope for doing “nothing.” Instead, the further McDonaldization of policing seems likely (Heslop 2011; Ritzer 1993). Challenging the “speed fetishization” (Adam 2004) that characterizes policing is a political process in macro and micro terms. Just as Maggie O'Neill and colleagues (2014) proposed in their arguments in favor of the development of a “slow university,” so too in the context of policing this would amount to a fundamental reworking of organizational practice, and an opportunity to reclaim occupational culture from the related pressures of marketisation, audit and performance cultures that have created an unhealthy demand for quick outputs, and created an individualized working environment with increasingly problematic demands on individual staff. Against this background, understanding the significance of the “quiet times” becomes ever more important.

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