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WHAT PEOPLE THINK THE POLICE ARE FOR ?

by

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In this study my colleague Richard Rosellen and I were concerned with a very basic question: in which of life's situations it is relevant to call the police and perhaps trigger off the series of reactions that leads to somebody becoming criminalized, and for which situations it is not. At a more extreme level, the question shades into why criminalization of another person is ever seen as an appropriate response to a situation.

This sort of "why" question can be answered at many levels, in terms of sociological function, individual psychology, theory of institutions, and so on. Our enquiry was into the meaning that calling the police had for the private citizen, either in his own experience or in his beliefs about the world around him. Naturally this also brought us a great deal of information that had nothing or very little to do with crime, but which nevertheless shed light on the role and image of the policeman.

We interviewed 98 adult German inhabitants of Freiburg, out of an initial random sample of 128. Foreign workers were not included. Our sample showed a shortage of unmarried people and people under 30. This may be because about 11% of the population of Freiburg are students, and our interviews were in September and October 1974, when many of these were away. In all other respects that we could test, our sample was representative.

The first part of the tape-recorded interviews consisted of very general questions using as "empty" or "neutral" a vocabulary as possible (avoiding words like "crime", "property" , etc.) To these questions we obtained conversational answers, structured by the respondent himself. For example:

Q. In what circumstances, would you say, do people in general call the police?

A. Accidents... God, I mean, if you don't know to help yourself, accidents, beatings-up, thefts, but otherwise I really don't know. There are people who inform the police, for instance, if someone throws earth in their garden, there are such people too, haha.

Other questions related to cases where the respondent himself had called the police; where he would call them; and cases he knew of where someone else had called them. We also asked, when appropriate, what the caller had expected from the police, what the police did, whether they were successful in what they did, what would have happened if they had not been called, what would happen if they were never called to cases of this sort, whether the respondent would call them again in a similar situation, and who one could call instead of the police. We also recorded sociological and demographic information on each respondent. The answers were not pre-coded. Transcripts were made of each interview, and a contents analysis carried out.

We also carried out a taxonomic analysis, that is to say, one that sorted our respondents into groups so that the general trend of the interviews in any one group is similar, but contrasts with that in the other groups. To get as near as possible to the respondent's own

perceptions, and away from any distorting criminological theoretical preconceptions, we used a numerical, objective method of taxonomic analysis, and as data for this we used the vocabulary of the respondents, that is, the presence or absence in each interview of the words most commonly used by all the respondents. Perhaps this one-sentence description isn't very clear: if I had more time I could make it even more obscure. The underlying assumption, which was borne out in practice, was that the content and meaning of what a respondent said would be closely related to the words he used to say it.

So for each interview we had a transcript, a contents analysis and a list of "key-words" representing the respondent's vocabulary. What did all this tell us?

To-day I want to discuss not so much the answers to individual questions as the overall pattern that these answers appear to make. Of course, much of what I have to say is speculative rather than proved, since there is a basic principle of scientific method that data that have been examined to see whether they suggest their own explanation cannot then be used to test or prove that same explanation.

The first striking feature of our data is the very high level of apparent self-contradiction, far higher than the disagreements between different respondents. In fact, the differences between respondents are much more a question of emphasis than of contradiction. Thus the groups

formed by the taxonomic analysis included a majority group of 61 out of our 98 respondents whose replies tended to be unspecific, to use conventional "newspaper" language, and to put more emphasis on the concrete event than on its consequences. Over against this stood four minority groups ranging in size from 2 to 17 members, offering more specific views and regarding the consequences of the event as being just as important as the event itself, but not basically contradicting the views of the majority group or of each other.

But most respondents appeared to contradict themselves very thoroughly indeed. Now it will not do to try and explain this simply by saying that people do not think deeply on these matters, which are not important enough to them to provoke them into resolving dissonances in their vague and diffuse consciousness of these phenomena. For those of our respondents with the most specific awareness appeared to contradict themselves just as much as the others. Furthermore, for some of our respondents the topic was important, but this did not make them more consistent.

I shall try to show that these apparent self-contradictions are reconciled, or at least explained, if we drop certain assumptions about social behaviour that, without being explicit, have tended to limit our explanatory abilities, and if we adopt a model of police-calling behaviour that accepts these apparent self-contradictions instead of trying to explain them away.

One apparent contradiction is that people are very content with what the police do in a particular case, even when, as is usual,

they cannot say that they received any concrete benefit from the police intervention. Biderman commented on this. But he was so immersed in the conscious or unconscious idea that the determinants of human choice can be modelled as a pay-off maximization process, that this apparent inconsistency puzzled him. But very many features in our data suggest that calling the police is fairly rarely best seen in terms of maximizing a pay-off.

We asked those respondents who reported having called the police to some non-traffic incidents, "If neither you nor anyone else had got in touch with the police on this occasion, what do you think would have happened?"

Of 44 people so questioned, only 8 (19,5%) said that some negative consequence would have followed. We asked "And if nobody ever called the police in this sort of case, what do you think would happen?" 28 of our 44 cases (67,7%) foresaw negative consequences. Combining the two answers, only 3 respondents mentioned any idea of a need for self-help, or of "being your own policeman". We asked "Was there anything special that made you call the police in this case, or would you always call them in a similar case?" 39 out of 44 (88,6%) said there was no special feature, they would always call them. Thus, very many respondents specifically say that they would call the police again although no benefit to themselves was experienced or could be expected.

The idea that people who call the police but are not maximizing a pay-off are observing a norm also breaks down. Among the possible

consequences of not calling the police, not one person mentioned any sanction. Furthermore, since police-calling can often be done by a passer-by, and there is usually no way of knowing which passer-by incurs such an obligation, the so-called norm often refers to no-one in particular. Further, people contradict themselves as to when one should call the police, saying that other people call the police about trivial things, which is silly, but later saying that they would, or one should, call them every single time without exception. What we have is something looking like a norm but not being one.

When calling the police is neither maximizing a pay-off nor following a genuine norm, what is it? Now let us be careful here. Given that the police exist, some people will sometimes call them in pursuit of a rational goal; at least, it will sometimes be inconvenient not to call them. Similarly, one will sometimes be expected to call them, and blamed or otherwise sanctioned for not doing so. Both pay-offs and norms exist. If I had time, I would argue that these situations are accretions to the concept of a policeman; frequent but not central. But the most appropriate model for the central type of police-calling arises from Huizinga's extended concept of play.

Let us again be careful. I do not mean that at the everyday phenomenal level, either the police or those who call them are

playing. I mean that for purposes of analysis, the concept of police-calling as a free activity, divorced both from obligation and material profit, played by rules which are relevant to this activity only, and substituting a temporary reality for that which prevails at other times, may have a great deal of explanatory power.

If so, what can we say about this particular game? It is certainly not "cops and robbers" . One of the most striking features of our interviews is the way the offender is ignored. He is a grey, invisible, unimportant man, not an adversary, and the police are not described as fighting him, nor as seeking a victory. The

From data that I cannot present to-day*, especially from the descriptions of the police and their unknown, resultless but important and satisfactory activity, it seems clear that the adult's description of the policeman is the same as some parts of the child's description of the adult, especially of the father. I mean here the good, powerful father, including the authority figure as a component but not as the most important one. In other words, calling a policeman is mainly (but not exclusively and not consciously) "pretending" to be a child calling its father.

* But which, of course, are presented and discussed at length in the full project-report (in preparation).

As to the vast subject of when and why we play this game I can only say that we solve problems at the play level mainly when at the level of everyday reality we either cannot or will not solve them, and are not prepared to leave them visibly unsolved. This, it can be argued, is the function not only of police-calling but of the whole criminalization system; not to solve problems, but to disguise our non-solution of them.

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