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Policing the Roads: Traffic Cops, ‘Boy Racers’ and Anti-Social Behaviour

Dr Karen Lumsden

School of Social & Health Sciences, University of Abertay Dundee, United Kingdom

School of Social & Health Sciences, University of Abertay Dundee, Bell Street,
Dundee, DD1 1HG, k.lumsden@abertay.ac.uk

Policing the Roads: Traffic Cops, ‘Boy Racers’ and Anti-Social Behaviour

This paper explores the policing and regulation of young motorists known in the United Kingdom as ‘boy racers’. It demonstrates how police officers’ definitional decisions in relation to driving behaviours were influenced by a range of exogenous and endogenous factors, which subsequently shaped the landscape of enforcement and interactions with the community and drivers. A shift over time in the nature of the problem due to urban regeneration, innovations in the technology of the motor car, and the availability of anti-social behaviour legislation impacted upon the policing of urban space. The strategies employed in order to police the culture and the related urban space were reminiscent of a deeper policing tradition wherein managing incivilities and local problems is part of the community policing perspective. Data is presented from semi-structured interviews with police, residents, and ‘boy racers’, and ethnographic fieldwork with the drivers in the city of Aberdeen, Scotland.

Keywords: anti-social behaviour; boy racers; community policing; traffic policing

Introduction

Since the seminal police studies of the 1960s and 1970s, accounts of police work have shown that the definitional decisions of police officers are influenced by a whole range of exogenous and endogenous factors (see Banton, 1964; Cain, 1973; Chatterton, 1976; Fielding, 1995; Holdaway, 1983; Manning, 1977; Punch, 1979). Police decision-making is not merely a function of the individual police officer, but also of the collective culture found within police organisations (Schafer *et al.* 2006). This cultural practice results from the interaction between the socio-political context of police work and the various dimensions of police organisational knowledge (Chan, 1996). Police work is: ‘...a matter of negotiation, based on context-relevant meanings where the law is used as a resource for solving practical, situational dilemmas’ (Punch, 1985: 2-3). The situational nature of police work also inevitably shapes the pattern of deviance (Reiner, 2010). Policing does not occur in a vacuum and officers are required to work alongside other agencies, communities and the wider public. An officer’s values and behaviours are shaped by the unique area they police (Punch,

1979) and officers are required to satisfy community expectations via a balanced response (Schafer and Mastrofski, 2005).

In his classic study, *The Policeman in the Community*, Banton (1964) highlights the variety of tasks performed by police officers, which consist of either patrolling as a 'peace officer' or 'law officer'. Bittner (1967) argues that these two police procedures cannot be separated and hence 'peace keeping' will occasionally require the external aspects of law enforcement. The utilisation of lawful force by police officers is seen as the defining feature of police work (Bittner, 1980), the idea of which is continually reinforced via discourses in popular culture and the media. However in reality the majority of policing involves social welfare tasks and physical violence is a minor means of resolving the majority of incidents confronted by police (Fielding and Innes, 2006; see also Reiner, 2010). As Fielding (2002: 149) writes: 'In most cases the big stick is locked in a cupboard and the police do not even look toward the cupboard, let alone unlock it. How much its presence enters the minds of other interactants is therefore moot'.

Discretion presents police officers with compelling problems of selective enforcement or non-enforcement (Fielding, 1995). Police officers routinely under-enforce the law and can use their discretion to: '...deal with incidents in a variety of other "peacekeeping" ways even if an offence may have been committed' (Reiner, 2010: 19). The decision to use enforcement or discretion is related to the ways in which police define certain acts as illegal or anti-social. Bland and Read (2000) found that police officers generally took a pragmatic common sense view based on the operational realities they experienced in everyday police work, and that this was the case in relation to both 'criminal and sub-criminal behaviour'. Becker (1963: 158) argues that a great deal of enforcement activity is given not to the actual enforcement

of rules, but to the coercion of respect from members of the public: ‘...one may be labelled as deviant not because he [*sic*] has actually broken a rule, but because he has shown disrespect to the enforcer of the rule’. Hence the demeanour and social characteristics of an individual (in terms of gender, age, social class, and ethnicity), may also influence the officer’s use of enforcement or discretion (see Norris *et al.* 1992; Reiss, 1971; Rubinstein, 1973; Schafer *et al.* 2006). Selective enforcement is thus a routine aspect of contemporary police work (Smith and Visher, 1981) however it has been shown that police officers tend to view discretion as an alternative means to the same ends (Aaronson *et al.* 1981).

Traffic policing is one area in which an officer’s use of discretion is evident. This form of policing draws officers into interactions with members of the public who may not otherwise receive the attention of the authorities (Schafer and Mastrofski, 2005). This includes those individuals who are of a higher social and economic status than the officer (Brown, 1981) and hence are more likely to challenge enforcement decisions (Schafer and Mastrofski, 2005). Offending on the roads tends not to be viewed as ‘real’ crime, an attitude which is evident amongst drivers, magistrates, traffic police and driving instructors, who have similar perceptions about speeding offences (Corbett, 2003: 26). Becker (1963) points out that we do not think of the person who commits a traffic offence as different from the rest of us, and thus their infraction is treated ‘tolerantly’. Furthermore, the traffic violator will likely subscribe to the very rules which they have broken. Wells (2008) draws attention to the changes in traffic policing due to ‘techno-fixes’ such as the speed camera. Recent road safety legislation puts faith in these interventions however: ‘...the self-ascribed identity of normal, respectable, non-criminal drivers is threatened by technologies of risk and “techno-fixes” which... construct identities as risk-carrying, deviant, and criminal’

(Wells and Wills, 2009: 259). Speeding is a majority activity (Corbett, 2003). Drivers discriminate between ‘appropriate speeds’ and ‘acceptable speeds’ thus justifying breach of the rules of the road depending on the context (Wells, 2008). In Wells’ research, drivers called for a return to traditional traffic policing instead of speed cameras: ‘The police officer acts as a gatekeeper to the criminal justice system that, it is assumed, will function as a common sense filter’ (Wells, 2008: 814). Therefore:

Procedurally just enforcement practices can be seen to depend upon a differently conceived notion of accuracy dependent not on the reliable measurement of acceptable levels of speed, but on the reliable identification of people and actions that should and should not be criminally problematized.

(Wells, 2008: 814)

This paper is concerned with the policing and regulation of young motorists and the range of endogenous and exogenous factors which influenced police officers’ definitional decisions. It focuses on the policing of the particularly prominent ‘boy racer’ culture in the city of Aberdeen, Scotland.¹ Data is presented from semi-structured interviews with police officers, residents, and drivers, and participant observation with the ‘boy racers’ and at various formal and informal community meetings held between 2005 and 2008. Key to the discussion is the shift over time in the nature of the problem from a concern with deviant driving to a focus on anti-social behaviour. This was related to urban regeneration from the late 1990s onwards, advancements in the technology of the automobile, and the use of anti-social behaviour legislation from 2004 onwards. Officers’ views of anti-social behaviour legislation tell as a great deal about their interactions with the public and what they perceived as a decline in respect for law and order. The tactics and strategies employed in order to police the culture were reminiscent of a deeper tradition of policing wherein managing incivilities and local problems is part of the community policing perspective. It was also reminiscent of how non-police agencies conduct

social control work. The discussion thus illustrates how a complex web of internal and external factors impacted upon the police officers' definitions of deviance, and hence their attitudes towards, and interactions with, a range of social actors.

The first part of the paper provides a background to 'boy racer' culture and outlines the methodology. The discussion then turns to the factors which influenced police officers' definitions of driver behaviour. The discussion ends with a consideration of police engagement with the local community and the 'boy racers'.

'Boy Racers'

In contemporary Western society a number of adolescents participate in car cultures (see Best, 2006). The youth driving scene is typically associated with deviant driving behaviours (such as speeding and street racing) and the practice of car modification, which are areas of concern for the media, police, government, and road safety organisations. There is a long-standing association between male juvenile delinquency and the automobile which goes back to the 1950s, as exemplified in the classic teenage rebellion films of that era such as *Rebel Without a Cause* starring James Dean. Car modification has played an important role in the history of the automobile. It allowed the first motorists to redesign the car and: '...re-negotiate their cultural identities and their relationships to public space in terms of gender and technical expertise' (Franz, 2005: 3). Within the United States, car modification has its roots in the early days of automobility and has continued among several subcultures following World War II, such as hot rodders, drag racers and stock car racers (Franz, 2005). Car cultures which have recently been the focus of social scientific investigation include the *kortelliralli* street racers of Helsinki (Vaaranen, 2004), the *raggare* in Sweden (O'Dell, 2001) and Chicano Lowriders in the United States (Allard-Holtz, 1975; Bright, 1998; Vigil, 1991). 'Boy racers' have been an area of scrutiny in the United

Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia² with scholars highlighting the link between working-class masculinity and participation (see Author, 2009a; Bengry-Howell and Griffin, 2007; Dawes, 2002; Falconer and Kingham, 2007; Hatton, 2005; Leigh, 1995).

The city of Aberdeen, Scotland, has a particularly prominent ‘boy racer’ scene which dates back to the 1960s when motorists began to test the limits of their cars and motorbikes on the city’s newly constructed Beach Boulevard. This quarter-mile stretch of road is the main thoroughfare from the seafront to the centre of Aberdeen, and forms part of the drivers’ ‘cruising’ circuit. Known locally as the ‘Bouley Bashers’, the city’s racing culture has been an object of community and political concern from the late 1990s onwards due to regeneration of this area in the form of residential and retail complexes. The reputation of the Beach Boulevard is one of accidents, crashes and deaths, reflected in extensive local (and on occasions national) media coverage. This is still the case in 2012, with a speeding driver having been jailed for killing a young female pedestrian due to dangerous driving on the Beach Boulevard in 2010 (Swanson, 2012). As a Traffic Officer remarked:

From the day I started in Traffic the Beach Boulevard has been, probably, one of the most policed roads in Aberdeen just roughly because of the driving behaviour. We spend a lot of time down there enforcing the road traffic legislation with a view to try and stop them from potentially killing themselves.

(Interview with Officer 1, Roads Policing, October 2006)

Local newspaper the *Press & Journal* cited five accidents in 2002, three of which involved injuries. In the same year a 16 year old pedestrian died after being knocked down on a nearby street. On 13 January 2007, an off-duty police officer sped through a red light on the Beach Boulevard and collided with another car resulting in the death of the 16 year old female passenger. After trial at the High Court in Edinburgh, the police officer was sentenced to five years in prison. According to

media reports the police officer, in his high-performance Audi S3 Quattro, was ‘...driving at speeds which caused bystanders to take notice. Although estimates by witnesses of his speed were unreliable, he was doing well in excess of the speed limit of 30mph’ (Robertson, 2006). According to Innes and Fielding (2002), some crimes and disorders are influential in shaping the formation of beliefs about an area. They call these ‘signal crimes’. For Innes (2004: 353) the ‘signal crimes’ perspective: ‘...construes criminal and anti-social behaviours as forms of communicative action that are interpreted by individuals and collectives as indicators about levels of security, risk and hazard’. They: ‘...manifestly shape the beliefs that are constructed by individuals and groups about the degree of safety and security in an area’ (Innes and Fielding, 2002: para 5.1). Hence the occasional road collision or fatality at Aberdeen’s Beach Boulevard is a sign of dangerous driving on the part of young motorists who occupy the area and disregard the rules of the road.

The societal response has been extensive and includes measures such as redesigning the road layout (which included a single carriageway to deter racing, street lights, traffic lights, and parking restrictions), the use of CCTV cameras, a proposal by the local authority to close the Beach Boulevard road each evening (with access to residents only), speed cameras, police operations, and the use of powers under the Antisocial Behaviour (Scotland) Act 2004. This included the implementation of a Dispersal Order³ on two occasions in the summer of 2005 and the use of Seizure of Vehicles⁴ powers from 2004 onwards. Grampian Police were the only force in Scotland to use a Dispersal Order in relation to anti-social driving and made the greatest use of Seizure of Vehicles powers in Scotland, with 814 warnings and 83 seizures issued between 2004 and 2007 (Scottish Government, 2007). During the designated period of the Dispersal Order, Grampian Police recorded a 53 per cent

drop in recorded incidents of anti-social behaviour (Crawford and Lister, 2007).

Although ‘boy racers’ still frequent the Beach Boulevard (upon writing in 2012), this discussion focuses on the policing of the road from 2005 to 2008. Participants also often refer to the time-period before 2005, when they note a shift beginning to occur in driver behaviour and complaints from residents.

Methods

Data was collected between 2005 and 2008 as part of a doctoral study into Aberdeen’s ‘boy racer’ culture and the related societal reaction. The first strand of the research focused on the police, residents, politicians, council and media. Access to the police was negotiated via the researcher’s employment at the Aberdeen Youth Justice Strategy Group,⁵ of which the Chief Superintendent of Grampian Police was a member. This led to contact with the Neighbourhood Officer for the Beach Boulevard vicinity, officers from the Antisocial Behaviour Unit, and from Roads Policing. Five officers took part in formal semi-structured interviews. These officers had close involvement with and direct knowledge of the ‘boy racers’, hence the reason for the small sample. I also conducted interviews with a local councillor, Member of Parliament (MP), Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), three journalists, two council officials, two local residents and one group interview with four residents present. Interviews were transcribed and respondents’ identities were anonymised via the use of pseudonyms. I also attended a formal community meeting (held in a local community centre) where residents, police, politicians, council officials and business representatives discussed the ‘racers’,⁶ a formal council meeting held to discuss and vote on the proposal to close the Beach Boulevard road, and a road safety event held by Grampian Police. Fieldnotes were taken at all meetings.

The second strand of the research involved overt participant observation with the culture. Access was facilitated by Grampian Police, officers of which regularly met with a group of drivers from the beach area of the city. These ‘Drivers’ Group’ meetings took place every three months and were attended by a Neighbourhood Officer and approximately five drivers. Although the Neighbourhood Officer and a representative from the drivers recorded minutes of the meeting, the meetings were generally informal in nature and took place in a café near the Beach Boulevard in the evenings. The officer who organised these meetings introduced me to Debbie, the main representative from the ‘Drivers’ Group’, who also hosted a website centred on car modification. Debbie⁷ became my initial gatekeeper to the setting and helped me successfully negotiate access to the group. She introduced me to Robert who hosted a website centred on Fiats and became my second gatekeeper. 150 hours were spent with the culture over a one-year period, from September 2006 to August 2007. I spent weekend evenings in the main setting – Aberdeen Beach and attending ‘Drivers’ Group’ meetings. I also attended two car shows in Aberdeen, one of which was organised by the ‘Drivers’ Group’ and the other by *Fast and Modified* magazine, an Italian car show in St Andrews and four meetings (referred to as ‘meets’ or ‘cruises’) in various locations across Scotland. Fieldwork also involved socialising with members of the group, as well as accompanying them to scrap yards, car auctions, garages and shops to search for car parts and accessories. Data collection also consisted of eight semi-structured interviews with the drivers (which were recorded and transcribed).

Lastly, content analysis was employed regarding media articles which focused on ‘boy racers’ in Aberdeen. Articles dating from the early 1990s to September 2008 were collated from two daily local newspapers: the *Press and Journal* and the

Evening Express; and two free newspapers distributed weekly across Aberdeen: the *Independent* and the *Citizen*. Over 200 articles were collected and analysed. Relevant articles from national media outlets such as *BBC News*, the *Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Scotsman* were also collected during this period. Official documents from Aberdeen City Council and data provided by Grampian Police in relation to road traffic offences and anti-social behaviour legislation were also analysed.

The following section presents findings relating to the policing of the Beach Boulevard. It begins with a discussion of the shifting nature of the problem over time from a concern with traffic offences to a focus on anti-social behaviour.

Definitional Decisions: From Traffic Offences to Anti-Social Behaviour

Due to urban regeneration of the Beach Boulevard and surrounding area, the nature of policing at Aberdeen's seafront shifted from a focus on road safety to the issue of anti-social behaviour from 2004 onwards. The Beach Boulevard had been used as a playground of sorts by motorists since the 1960s and policing was reminiscent of the strategy of containment highlighted by Bittner (1967) in his study of policing on skid row. However, traffic offences were no longer the main source of residents' complaints, which now centred on behaviours classified as anti-social. According to a Traffic Officer:

The whole policing or the nature of how we police down there has changed a lot in the last few years and it's basically down to the anti-social behaviour. We still go down a lot, down to the Boulevard. We're still detecting road traffic offences but I think because of the development of the flats and the number of residents who are now there... it's had an impact on how we police. Way back when I first started in Traffic we'd be called down by residents who'd be saying that the cars were racing up and down the Boulevard. We still get those types of calls but they're few and far between now. Whereas what's more likely is that there's loud music, there's litter, there's the kind of anti-social behaviour element. That's more what we get called down to by the people down there. It's to deal with a disturbance which is anti-social.

(Interview with Officer 1, Roads Policing, October 2006)

The focus of residents' concerns *vis-à-vis* the 'racers' had shifted from risky driving practices (such as speeding and racing) to anti-social behaviour associated with street noise such as loud car stereos and exhausts, revving engines, flashing headlights, and groups of drivers congregating near residences. According to a resident:

When this place was all warehouses... the only people they were annoying were Wales Street. They've always had a problem with the noise but since they knocked [the houses] down and this has all come up then they're obviously causing more of a nuisance now because there are a lot more residents around. When I first moved in the noise was just horrendous. Everybody had their boot open and I mean they spend thousands on these cars! I mean, they'll probably spend £1000 on a car and spend £13,000 doing it up. Why? They'll put £3000 worth of stereo gear in it - things that make a hell of a noise and it's like being at a rock concert. That was what it was like when we first moved in. It was really, really noisy.

(Interview with Phil, local resident, August 2006)

The 'boy racer' problem was related to their tendency to park their cars near residents' homes and engage in disorderly street-related offences. Behaviours which were not inherently deviant or criminal were perceived of as such. However police questioned residents' perceptions. Millie (2008: 384) highlights the subjectivity and context specificity of anti-social behaviour claiming that: 'It is the contested nature of different people's "everyday" activities within urban spaces that can lead to certain groups' behaviours being labelled as anti-social'. Although officers did not view certain behaviours as anti-social they still had to intervene:

If you listen to the locals, the 'boy racers' - to use that expression, have been a problem at the Boulevard for three decades. Over the years various attempts have been made to try and address it, with various degrees of success but it's a long-standing problem since I've been here... Things have changed because before you would have had motorists with badly conditioned cars and it gave us substance for action. The reality is that the motorists down there are insured, the car is maintained to a reasonable standard, and in many cases the car is their pride and joy. So it takes away from us the ability to punish them for road traffic offences. We're reduced to tangible offences - speed for example. Your perception of speed and my perception of speed might be worlds apart. People phone in regularly complaining about speed. I'm not saying they're wrong, but from my point of view as a law enforcement officer it's difficult for me to

prove they are speeding other than having guys on the streets with the [speeding] guns on them. It's like noisy music from car stereos. What you think is loud and I think is loud may be worlds apart. It's not sufficient for me to go to the Court and say: 'He was playing a noisy stereo'. I've got to prove their stereo was noisy.

(Interview with Officer 3, Antisocial Behaviour Unit, August 2006)

This officer drew attention to the discrepancies between individuals' perceptions of speed and various forms of anti-social behaviour. He also drew attention to the need for sufficient proof in order to justify enforcement. As Reiss (1984) notes, tests for speeding may construct reality differently when the tests are an officer's judgement of speed as opposed to the use of a police radar.

Anti-social behaviour legislation allowed officers to hone in on the technical and aesthetic modifications which motorists made to their cars. At a 'Drivers' Group' meeting the youths voiced concern regarding the application of the legislation:

Next in the discussion was the new legislation being used at the beach which covers noise from exhausts and levels of window tints. Paul told [the officer] the way the legislation was being used was unfair. He had been stopped and fined but someone else he knew had been fined more and got points on his licence. The officer told him the reason for this is the level of tint and whether or not it is determined to be dangerous for driving. He also said that these new powers have been available to them for three years and it's only now they've decided to enforce them. Other parts of the country have been doing it for a while now. Debbie said she was stopped for having a noisy exhaust. The first reading they took with the meter was over 100 decibels but then the second was 90-something so she was ok. Paul asked whether or not they take background noise into account when taking the reading. The officer said if they are taking a reading they should make sure they take the car to a quiet side street so that there's minimal background noise.

(Fieldnotes from 'Drivers' Group', December 2006)

A more scientific, evidence-based means of evaluating discretions applied which involved 'techno-fixes' (Wells, 2008) such as light emitters, through which officers could measure the level of tint on car windows. Noise meters were also used to measure the noise emitting from car exhausts. As Atkinson (2007: 1909) points out: '...the local state... has increasingly pursued socio-legal strategies to control anti-

social behaviour generated by social nuisances...' and music from cars '...create[s] an increasingly constant and contested presence challenging notions of public use and access'. Car modifications which did not comply with road traffic legislation were a concern for police:

The stuff that goes on there now, it's more what we call the construction and use regulations. How they personalise their cars. They add lights onto them, they add different exhausts, they do stuff to the engines – tune the engines. They can, in that respect, do it without the full understanding of the law.

(Interview with Officer 1, Roads Policing, October 2006)

Seizure of Vehicles powers helped officers to address these illegal modifications:

They're given one chance. If I go down, for example, and they're playing loud music or they're revving their engine or if they're sitting at lights, skirl the wheels, and take off at the lights, then I stop them. They're given an official warning under the terms of the anti-social behaviour legislation. The warning is then recorded on a national computer. They're also sent out a letter by the Antisocial Behaviour Unit saying: 'You've been warned. If you get another warning, i.e. if you're stopped again we'll seizure your vehicle'. So they get a chance... It's a different way of thinking rather than just reporting it to the [Procurator] Fiscal. It takes months to report something and the Fiscal might not take any proceedings at the end of the day. It's unusual but that can happen. This way you're stopping them at the time. They're being told, 'Don't do it again'. If they do it again they're well aware that they've been warned and we'll take their vehicle and I think that has a more profound effect because you're stopping them at the time of the offence and they're being dealt with at the time rather than three, four, five, six months down the line.

(Interview with Officer 4, Antisocial Behaviour Unit, August 2006)

The officer's comments about reporting offences to the Procurator Fiscal are reminiscent of Banton's (1964) observation that officers feel it is fruitless to proceed against offenders if the courts are unwilling or reluctant to convict them for the offence. Instead, the officer believed that anti-social behaviour legislation was more effective since police were able to deal with offenders on the spot rather than relying on the inefficiency of the criminal justice system. Moreover, the mobility the car affords its user was challenged through its immediate removal.

Decline in Public Respect: ‘The Cynical Old Dinosaur’

Anti-social behaviour powers helped address what officers perceived as a public decline in respect for law, order and policing. This was reflected in their interactions with young drivers who deliberately flouted the laws of the road:

The problem is youngsters. It's the really young. We've caught folk speeding the day that they passed their [driving] test... down the Boulevard travelling at excessive speed. We had a guy very recently who had lost his licence, not lost his license but his full licence was revoked.⁸ He had to resit his test. So that was on Tuesday but we caught him on the Sunday night. He was doing 96mph in a 70mph limit. Where as a society do we go with that? He's already had one shot across his bow.

(Interview with Officer 2, Roads Policing, October 2006)

This officer expressed feelings of hopelessness with regards to adolescents' driving behaviour(s). The necessity for individuals to take responsibility for their actions was reiterated by another officer:

The shock tactics only work over a very, very small period of time. I could take you through to the collision investigation office and show you some real humdingers but, you know, that's what I have to deal with and that's what it comes back down to. It's about them taking responsibility for themselves and in today's society we're getting further and further away from actually taking responsibility for ourselves.

(Interview with Officer 1, Roads Policing, October 2006)

This further reflects officers' attempts to preserve their dominance in interactions with members of the public (Loftus, 2009). A Neighbourhood Officer reiterated this:

This is my personal opinion being an old cynical dinosaur I suppose. It's basically symptomatic of society as a whole. There has in the twenty plus years I've been in the job been a general reduction in respect for law and order. People are not treating law and order with the respect that they once did and you can see that in court, in terms of those appearing in court. When I first joined people were in dread of going to court. Some of these people now, it doesn't bother them, its part of their day-to-day life. The penalty they know for speeding the chances of getting locked up is far lower than it once was. So what you have there is just a microcosm of society as a whole. When I was a young man I wouldn't have thought of upsetting old aged pensioners the way some of these people do.

(Interview with Officer 5, Neighbourhood Officer, May 2007)

The difficulty in retaining this dominance was further evidenced in a police/public encounter at Aberdeen's Beach Boulevard, which on-looking drivers observed in amusement:

We watched a motorist at the other side of the Boulevard whose car had broken down. They were blocking the left hand lane so a police van stopped in front of them to find out what was going on. Two of the police officers then helped the passenger to push the car onto the pavement so that the traffic could pass safely. The drivers watched in amusement with Jay sarcastically remarking: 'Look - that's what we pay our taxes for!'

(Fieldnotes, Beach Boulevard, September 2006)

This comment highlights the problems faced by officers when they engaged in behaviours which were not viewed by the public as real 'police work' (see Fielding, 2002). Police officers believed that anti-social behaviour legislation opened up dialogue with the drivers and thus helped to challenge the attitudes of motorists, in contrast to enforcing road traffic legislation via the issuing of tickets:

The vast majority of offences now are dealt with by use of the anti-social behaviour [legislation]. I think it has a better effect on them. I mean, I don't know, they may see it differently but from my point of view I think it has a much better effect than just giving out tickets. It's about changing attitudes. That's what it's about and it's not going to happen overnight.

(Interview with Officer 1, Roads Policing, October 2006)

This reflects Banton's (1964: 135) observation that Scottish police officers felt that traffic offences were best dealt with by a verbal warning: 'If the police enforce traffic laws rigidly they may reduce motorists' commitment to the prescribed norms and the level of observance will fall'. Literature on procedural justice demonstrates that people's reactions to their personal experiences with the authorities are rooted in their evaluations of the fairness of procedures those agencies use to exercise their authority (Murphy, 2004). For police officers, powers such as Seizure of Vehicles assisted their ability to govern the roads and fed into the punishment of driving

offences. The legislation was viewed as a means through which to restore traditional law and order and respect for the work of police, expressed via interactions with the public. The ‘cynical disposition’ of police officers was also the result of an underlying tension between the expectations of what police work involves and its daily realities (Banton, 1964; Loftus, 2009; Punch, 1979). Thus law enforcement officials are likely to adopt a pessimistic view of human nature (Becker, 1963).

Enforcement: ‘Shooting Fish in a Barrel’

At Aberdeen’s Beach Boulevard police operations had been held at weekends and evenings to catch speeding motorists and/or check for vehicle defects. A Traffic Officer reminisced about operations conducted using ‘unmarked’ rental cars:

We just sit and it was like, I remember in 2002, it was like shooting fish in a barrel going down there.

(Interview with Officer 1, Roads Policing, October 2006)

Road traffic violations included speeding, construction and use or lighting regulations, and seat belt offences. Police officers remarked that owners took better care of their cars and thus offences relating to vehicle defects were rare. The culture at Aberdeen’s seafront was said to relate to the ‘cruising’ scene, rather than the ‘boy racer’.⁹

The Beach Boulevard will always have a stigma attached to it. That’s where the boy racers go and whereas before they were known as boy racers, now it’s more cruisers. Boy racer tends to typify driving at high speed, trial by speed, and flaunting road traffic legislation whereas cruiser is more sedate [and] its more about their car and showing off their car than driving at high speed.

(Interview with Officer 4, Antisocial Behaviour Unit, August 2006)

The shift in driving behaviour – from speeding and racing to ‘cruising’ at low speed - was also due to changes in the road layout to include a single carriageway, traffic lights (timed to change to red on approach), parking restrictions and street

lights, all to deter racing. It was not the same drivers who were involved in the swing from 'boy racer' to 'cruising' driving styles. With the exception of a few drivers (such as Debbie who was in her early thirties), the majority participated between the ages of 17 and 24. The culture was thus a transitional rite of passage for youths.

Police officers also drew attention to the impact of intelligence-led policing:¹⁰

We've become more intelligence-led where we're trying to tackle when the complaints are coming in. What days? Not just all this: 'Must be the weekend'. It's not always the weekend. So it's a case of taking intelligence from the complaints. That's why we tell people still to phone in and report the problem times because if they don't phone in then we're not intelligence-led. We are not being told when the times are that the problems are being caused. So we look at the statistics with the days, times and dates and we try and put resources and staff down there to deal with that problem. But again the overall problem is not going to be solved by just policing. There has to be other agencies involved.

(Interview with Officer 5, Neighbourhood Officer, May 2007)

In addition to the focus on 'intelligence-led policing', this officer highlighted the involvement of other agencies. A Traffic Officer explained how resources could be directed to areas other than the Beach Boulevard as a result of intelligence-led policing:

Well it's intelligence-led and intelligence-led is saying that the Boulevard's not really somewhere you should be concentrating on. It's other roads in Aberdeen and so there's been a whole change in thinking for the police. That said, that's where the anti-social element comes in because that's taken over policing methods down the Boulevard now whereas before it was Traffic that did it, and Traffic just booked everybody. Now it's just a case of normal police officers that go down and they're enforcing the anti-social legislation.

(Interview with Officer 2, Roads Policing, October 2006)

Fielding (2005: 464) argues that where the collection of information relevant to crime control is emphasised, an analytic connection can be drawn between 'community policing' and various accounts of 'intelligence-led policing'. 'Community policing' and thus direct engagement with the various parties involved, lay at the heart of the police response to the drivers. During an informal conversation after a community meeting an officer explained:

You've got to bear in mind as well that we've had a number of public meetings and at all these meetings we've encouraged them to complain because you may not be aware that we follow the National Intelligence Model so our force is intelligence-led. So if there's no intelligence to indicate there's a problem, then we don't address it. Conversely, if we have numerous phone calls indicating that there is a problem, then as part of our overall strategy, we will target that with resources. So we actively encourage members of the community to phone in.

(Fieldnotes, community meeting, July 2005)

Non-Enforcement: Peacekeeping and Education

Police, politicians and representatives from the council met with residents and businesses at community meetings. As Fielding (2005: 460) notes: '...at its broadest, CP stands for an iconic style of policing in which the police are close to the public, know their concerns from regular everyday contacts, and act on them in accord with the community's wishes'. Communities are diverse in nature (Fielding, 2005) and officers must interact with myriad groups and deal with the conflicting interests of their members. In 2003 the property developer George Wimpey, which partly owned the Bannermill luxury housing development, was reportedly concerned about the negative publicity surrounding the 'boy racers' (*Press & Journal*, 2003). Senior directors from the company met with police and council officials to discuss the problem. In April 2003 the first meeting took place between residents, police, council officials, and members of the culture. These meetings were held regularly between 2003 and 2007.

When drivers held car events and shows in the area, officers attended in order to engage with them and keep an eye on their activities. There was a high police presence at the Beach Boulevard, particularly at weekend evenings over the summer periods. Grampian Police also utilised the force's Subaru Impreza in order to encourage dialogue with the drivers:

Grampian Police were using this event as an opportunity to get the Bouley Bashers and residents to meet and talk about issues concerning both groups. They had a small trailer with posters, videos and leaflets on road safety inside. The police Subaru Impreza was there which the police use to test braking reaction times, etc. They also had a machine which simulates the feeling of being involved in a crash.

(Fieldnotes, road safety event, Beach Boulevard, February 2005)

The proximity of officers to the individuals they policed impacted upon their views of the youths and also the way in which they policed (see Punch, 1979). The Grampian Police 'Drivers' Group' was a means through which police attempted to communicate with the drivers. An officer explained the reasoning behind the group:

I was tasked with coming up with ways to see how the thing could be solved and I felt in one way that we were kind of a bit one-sided where there was no real interaction with drivers. The first kind of contact was setting up a bit of an open day down at the beach with a caravan and all the rest of it and invited the drivers in to see what it was all about. Gave them road safety advice, showed them some vehicles and how they work and such like and some things like braking test machines... getting their interest levels going because they're interested in cars. At the same time we gave a kind of questionnaire asking: 'Would you be willing to be part of the Drivers' Group? If you are leave your name, contact number, email address'. That was the way it started. I could say it's been running for about two years. The format has changed. We tried to get it up and running from a police point of view because we knew we'd have to take charge and control to start with to get it organised.

(Fieldnotes from 'Drivers' Group', February 2007)

During a formal interview Debbie explained the reasons for her participation:

Debbie: The 'Drivers' Group' came about after I'd spent around a year trying to contact the council to ask for us to be given somewhere else to meet instead of the beach. For a year I was passed from one person to the next. Eventually, it was the council that passed me on to the police and as a result the police started the 'Drivers' Group'.

Interviewer: Do you think the 'Drivers' Group' is useful and if so why?

Debbie: Yeah, it's been useful in getting the message across that we're not all 'boy racers' and that we're interested in cars and socialising - not disturbing the residents. If we can try to get the message across then it helps people's ignorance about us. For instance at the moment we have arranged to have mediation meetings between us and the residents so we can hear each other's side of the story. The police and council arranged this for us and SACRO¹¹ are running it.

(Interview with Debbie, October 2007)

Officers expressed optimism with regards to their interactions with some of the drivers, which helped break down barriers between the police and the public:

They're not a bad bunch. They're actually quite good fun sometimes. You can have a laugh with them. We have changed the way we police. I think it's better now than it was because there's more communication. The whole move to the Bridge of Don Park and Ride, you know the police were involved with them and they saw us in a different light and we saw them in a different light. That must be a good thing. We can try and say to them, not at the side of the road when we're giving them a ticket, but when we're sitting round a table discussing things, this is why we do what we do, and then in the cold light of day, if they maybe think about what it is we are trying to do, it might give them a little more appreciation.

(Interview with Officer 3, Antisocial Behaviour Unit, August 2006)

As Hawkins (1990: 457) notes with regards to regulatory agencies: 'A great deal of social regulation... is concerned with risks, rather than acts, and as a result is pre-emptive, preventative, and proactive in character, rather than responsive and reactive'. This can be said to be the case with the 'Drivers' Group', where the strategy of information-gathering and sharing between Neighbourhood Officers and motorists aids the police officers' knowledge of the locale and patterns in the behaviours of drivers. This information-gathering role on the part of the police mirrors the tactics of other regulatory agencies who use different processes to monitor and assess the behaviour of regulates and whether or not there is compliance with the rules and whether the standards are met (Raine and Dunstan, 2011). Officers were aware that the youths would likely continue to use the Beach Boulevard as a forum for exhibitionism and socialising and thus sought to contain the motorists and set standards of behaviour for them to adhere to. This included parking in allocated spaces and reporting the 'rough' elements of the group to police. Thus: '...the determination of what is compliance rests in the social construction and reconstruction of reality by control agents and by those they seek to control' (Reiss, 1984: 93). It is important for police officers to have knowledge of the various groups

which comprise a particular community and in order to keep their categories up-to-date, the police officer has to be close to the people (Fielding, 1995). As Punch (1979: 127) notes:

...largely unconsciously, the policeman [*sic*] develops a detailed but rarely cosmic map of what is 'right' and 'normal' in specific areas of the inner city; sometimes behaviour is condemned in one part of a street and sanctioned in another part of the street.

This stresses the symbiotic nature of much police work and enforcement which relies on the cooperation of the public. A more punitive enforcement strategy could imbalance this relationship, leading to an increase in the incidents of the events and problems which the police and other agencies are trying to control (see Hawkins, 1990). In this case, police work was reminiscent of non-police agencies whereby enforcement was brought into play after encouragement and education had failed (Braithwaite, 2000).

Conclusion

Police are: '...caught in a tension between expectations located in the external social system, the occupational culture and internal procedures and operations' (Holdaway, 1979: 7). Their definitions of behaviours are influenced by a complex web of exogenous and endogenous factors. The law, and changes in the law, can both constrain and enable policing (Fielding, 2002). The way in which officers in Aberdeen defined behaviours as anti-social or illegal helps shed light on wider societal expectations concerning deviance and the labelling of behaviours:

As social regulators policemen [*sic*] make practical decisions in concrete situations which can tell us a good deal about the fluctuating and sometimes conflicting norms and values in a given society concerning control, respectability, tolerance of nonconformity, acceptance of ambiguity, the dividing line between legal and non-legal deviance, the reconciliation of social disputes and so on.

(Punch, 1979: 23)

A decrease in tolerance levels on the part of the community impacted upon the behaviours which officers were required to address. Regeneration and an influx of middle-class residents from the late 1990s onwards resulted in increased contestation over drivers' use of urban space. The shifting nature of the problem from a community concern with deviant driving to anti-social behaviour influenced officers' definitional decisions. This included disorderly street-related behaviours such as littering, gathering in crowds, and noise from cars. Atkinson (2007: 1915) argues that noise and sound are difficult to contain: '...the idea that "clear edges" (Lunch, 1960) can be discerned around which such flows might be planned and managed are problematic'. Behaviours defined as problematic by residents were not always viewed as such by police. Officers voiced frustration with regards to the public's perceptions of speed claiming that the noise of car exhausts could result in individuals believing that cars were travelling faster than they actually were. Behaviours such as congregating in groups were not viewed as anti-social by police, although they recognised that passersby could feel threatened. Hence:

...what is regarded by the majority as anti-social includes behaviour perceived to be problematic – and this perception can be strongly influenced by sensory or aesthetic cues. This is clearly not a satisfactory position, as it has the potential to lead to the labelling of all young people in groups as anti-social (Millie, 2008: 383).

However, it is through attempts at enforcement that the actual operative rules of groups are kept alive (Becker, 1963). Police promoted themselves as: '...mediators, arbitrating, rather than imposing, the relationship of police and community' (Fielding, 1995: 76). The tactics and strategies employed in order to police the drivers and regulate urban space were reminiscent of a deeper tradition of policing wherein managing incivilities and local problems is part of the community policing

perspective. The community response to policing highlighted the constant pressure police faced to appear efficient (Skolnick, 1975). Enforcement practices were sensitive to the organisational resources available to the agency – especially concerning budget and staff numbers (Hutter, 1989). Sustaining the Dispersal Order for a third time in 2005 was not possible due to the extensive resources required to police the area. Additionally, the police expressed their support for the proposal to close the Beach Boulevard road in the evenings.

Officers voiced frustration and a ‘cynical disposition’ (Loftus, 2009) with regards to the processing of road traffic offences through the court system. Deviant driving was perceived as indicative of a general decline in public respect for traditional law and order. For officers, this was evident at the micro level via interactions between police and motorists. They viewed anti-social behaviour legislation as a means of restoring police authority on the streets. They also highlighted an educative and restorative element to the legislation.

The policing and regulation of young motorists was reminiscent of how non-police agencies conduct social control work. It highlighted a mixed model of public policing, which utilised a more administrative law model of compliance enforcement as well as the criminal law model of deterrence policing (Reiss, 1984). Hence, more critical reflection and analysis of how officers negotiate these models of policing in light of the various exogenous and endogenous factors influencing definitional decisions is required. This research focused on ‘boy racers’ in Aberdeen, Scotland, however as previously noted youth driving cultures exist in various forms in other Western countries. This paper adds to understandings of how societies police and regulate youth driving cultures. Research conducted by Falconer and Kingham (2007)

on ‘boy racers’ in New Zealand contains similar findings with regards to the societal response. For instance a ‘Not in My Backyard’ sentiment tended to:

...cause a regulatory action, which in turn leads the subculture to locate elsewhere in the urban environment. This banishment is enacted through police being vigilant for boy racers performing in a way that contravenes the law as well as the presence of council bylaws as spatially specific regulatory tools (Falconer and Kingham, 2007: 184).

The same can be said in Aberdeen where police and council efforts focused on cleansing the urban space of young drivers. The culture at Aberdeen’s seafront was referred to by police as involving a ‘cruising’ scene, rather than ‘boy racers’. The shift in driving behaviour – from speeding and racing to ‘cruising’ at low speed - was due to the redesign of the Beach Boulevard, which made street racing nigh impossible. The increase in residential population and retail and leisure complexes also resulted in increased traffic and public presence. However, the shift in driving behaviours as a result of these factors has largely gone unobserved by outside groups, specifically the media, who continue to label those motorists who modify their cars as ‘boy racers’ (Author, 2009b). The term ‘boy racer’ now incorporates anti-social street-related behaviours. It would be interesting to discover whether similar shifts have occurred in driver behaviours (for instance from ‘boy racer’ to ‘cruising’ culture) elsewhere and the related influence of external factors such as urban regeneration, police practices, and so on. More research is needed into how powers are utilised to police and regulate motorists and the public highways, and their applicability in these contexts. Studies of how police define and respond to traffic-related indiscretions can enhance our understandings of police procedural definitions and decisions and the implications for policy, legislation and enforcement practice(s).

¹ There are substantial differences and similarities between policing in Scotland and the rest of the UK. Scottish policing shares certain principles and strategies with the UK such as policing by consent and the tripartite system (consisting of police authorities, chief constables and the government).

Differences can be found in Scots law, legal systems and historical traditions such as community policing. Scottish devolution had a considerable impact on policing since 1999, with changes instigated from the government, policy makers, working groups and police organisations (Donnelly and Scott, 2008).

² In Australia and New Zealand ‘boy racers’ are also referred to as ‘hoons’.

³ Dispersal of Groups gives senior police officers the authority to designate an area (in consultation with the local authority) where significant, persistent and serious anti-social behaviour has occurred and the behaviour or presence of groups is contributing to the problem. An area can be designated for up to three-months. Police have the power to disperse groups of two or more individuals and can prohibit them from returning to the area for twenty-four hours. Failure to comply can result in a £2,500 fine or three-month prison sentence.

⁴ Gives police the power to seize a vehicle if driven in a way which causes alarm, distress or annoyance to the public on or off-road (see Scottish Executive, 2006).

⁵ Multi-agency partnerships set up in local authorities across Scotland with the purpose of addressing youth offending behaviour.

⁶ Around thirty residents attended in addition to a local businessman and two journalists from the local newspapers. The meeting was chaired by two officers from Grampian Police, the Neighbourhood Director from Aberdeen City Council and two council officials. It was the fifth meeting that had taken place in eighteen months.

⁷ Pseudonyms have been used in order to protect the identity of respondents.

⁸ In 1995 the Road Traffic (New Drivers Act) was introduced in the United Kingdom. The Act requires newly qualified drivers to retake their driving test if they acquire six or more penalty points within two years of passing their driving test.

⁹ In terms of the ‘boy racer’ label, it is worth noting that only those police officers who had direct proximity to the drivers (in addition to the drivers themselves) acknowledged the cultural (and contested) realities of the group in terms of the law-abiding majority, hence their utilisation of the term ‘cruiser’. I use the term ‘boy racer’ since this is how the media and other groups portray the culture and ensure the myth’s endurance in the public imagination (see Author, 2009b).

¹⁰ Intelligence-led policing is an operational tactic designed to reduce crime through proactive policing targeted by criminal intelligence (Ratcliffe, 2008).

¹¹ National youth justice voluntary organisation in Scotland which aims to make communities safer by reducing conflict and offending. Services include criminal justice, conflict resolution, and restorative justice and reparation.

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