Pairing Fieldworkers with Patrol Officers: A Study of Supervising Officers’ Selections

Andrea Allen¹ Scott Jacques

¹Clayton State University

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative, field-based studies of police tend not to rely on random sampling, but, instead, navigate a well-trodden path to cases. The first step is gaining a supervising officer’s (SO) consent to study their department, and the last step is convincing patrol officers (POs) to reveal what they normally do and think. Also, there is an indispensable intermediary step in which fieldworkers are paired with particular POs, a choice sometimes left up to SOs. Despite its importance, the basis on which such couplings are made is not well documented, much less understood. Thus, this article analyzes qualitative data obtained from nine SOs about why they assigned particular POs to accompany the first-author on ride-alongs. The SOs largely explained their assignments as meant to help the research by placing the fieldworker with POs who would yield more data in terms of quantity, variety, and ‘better’ answers. The article concludes by discussing the findings’ broader implications.

Introduction

Rarely are qualitative, field-based studies of patrol officers (POs) based on probability sampling, so what process produces their cases? The answer tends to be cast as involving two steps (Fox and Lundman, 1974). First, researchers seek permission from supervising officers (SOs) to study their department, and, second, try to learn what POs “really” do and think. The tribulations and techniques of navigating these steps are well documented, yet a crucial intermediary step has received less consideration: After researchers have gained access to a department but before going out for the night, or day, they must be paired with a particular PO. A fieldworker or SO may make the coupling, but the basis on which they do so has not been the focus of investigation. Herein, we analyze qualitative data obtained from nine SOs about why they assigned certain POs to accompany the first-author on ride-alongs. We find that the SOs’ decisions were meant to improve the research by assigning POs deemed most likely to provide a greater quantity and variety of data as well as “better” answers. The article concludes by considering the findings’ implications, including how “helping” research may be bad.

Sampling in Qualitative Fieldwork with Police

The “craft model” of observation-based police research (Manning, 1974) is a global endeavor, having been conducted across Africa (Diphoorn, 2016; Kyed, 2009), the Americas (Larkins, 2013; Moskos, 2008; Willis, 2014), Asia (Jauregui, 2013; Martin, 2007), Australia (Dixon, 1997, 2011), and Europe (Durão, 2011; Fassin, 2013; Manning, 1977). No matter where a study occurs, the fieldworker cannot be everywhere, so they must sample the population of cases, however (initially) defined. As noted above, the first step in sampling is selecting a department (or departments) and obtaining consent from a SO (or SOs). This has potential implications for external validity, as there may be something different about the types of officers or departments that grant permission (Fox and Lundman, 1974). To increase the odds of success, fieldworkers have proposed various strategies (Bradley and Nixon, 2009; Dixon, 2011; Engel and Whalen, 2010; Fleming,
2012). For example, perhaps the oldest tip is to draw on preexisting relationships with police, whether direct or through a third-party (Fox and Lundman, 1974).

Success at stage one does not guarantee “good” information, which brings us to step two of sampling. There are different conceptions of what makes a data set “better,” but common ones include more information (including its “thickness” or “depth”), variety, accuracy, representativeness, and reliability. Step two, then, entails generating data of that mold. A researcher probably has greater control over reliably obtaining more data of greater variety than they do over obtaining accurate and representative data. This is because fieldworkers can choose to spend more time in the field and attend to different issues, but they cannot force officers to talk and act in earnest. Moreover, subjects may subconsciously change their words and behavior due to the researcher’s presence, so “valid” and “reliable” data may not be representative of what is typical. To be clear, unrepresentative data can be useful if recognized for what they are, a point returned to in the concluding section. Nonetheless, and perhaps because it is more difficult to do, fieldworkers have proposed techniques for tapping into “normal” expressions and actions, meaning those relatively unscathed by the researcher’s presence. These suggestions include, among many others, showing nonjudgmental interest in what police do and say; demonstrating competence in and compliance with cultural norms; gravitating to officers who sympathize with the research rationale (see, e.g., Cram, 2016; Fox and Lundman, 1974; Loftus, 2009; Manning, 1974; Marks, 2003, 2004; Van Maanen, 1981, 1982, 1991).

After gaining permission to study a department yet before any given observation period, the fieldworker is joined with a particular PO or two on patrol, such as a “ride-along.” This coupling is not a one-off event, but, rather, happens whenever the researcher goes into the field. Potentially, a researcher may join one PO during the whole study or, at the other extreme, accompany a different PO every time, and that choice – as well as who to observe – may depend on a number of factors, such as whether the researcher uses sampling to study a predefined population or to learn about and thereby define the population of cases and explain them (for details on this distinction see, e.g., Katz, 2001; Small, 2009). In any case, this “intermediary stage” of sampling is important but, for whatever reasons, has had less attention than the others. Usually, for instance, authors detail how they came to study particular departments and obtain a certain amount of data (e.g., number of observation hours of persons interviewed), but leave largely unexplained how particular officers came to be spoken with and observed (see, e.g., Durão, 2011; Kyed, 2009; Larkins, 2013; Jauregui, 2013, 2014; Martin, 2007; Stalcup, 2013; Willis, 2014). Certainly, we do not cite these works to criticize them, but only to illustrate that the fieldworker-PO coupling stage of sampling is something of a mystery.

**Researcher- and Supervisor-Driven Sampling**

The pairing of fieldworkers with POs may be “researcher-driven” or “supervisor-driven,” meaning decided by the fieldworker or an SO, respectively. An example of the former is given by Brown (1981: 16), who notes “There were no restrictions set by any of the departments, and I always selected the officers and the beat.” An example of supervisor-driven sampling is provided by Rowe (2007: 39), as “[u]sually the shift sergeant
allocated me to officers.” Little is known about how fieldworkers or SOs choose particular POs to be observed in situ, despite that this may affect external validity if selected POs are different from their colleagues. Indeed, what is known about the intermediary stage is anecdotal, meaning not based on dedicated inquiry. One such example is Rubenstein’s (1973: xiii) discussion of his researcher-driven sampling:

There were men who were reluctant to have me along (although none ever refused) and others who were eager for me to join them, but generally I worked only with those men who willingly accepted me as a worker and not just as a passenger.

Speaking to the same technique, Manning (2015: 57-58) comments:

[O]ne relies more on some informants than others, and a lonely ethnographer will be attracted to and enjoy the company of some rather than other informants. This appears to be patterned by the gender of both the ethnographer and the informants.

And, Van Maanen (1988) explains that he focused on officers working in two squads because, among other reasons, their beat had the most activity and he already knew many of them.

Whereas those examples concern researcher-driven sampling, a related but distinct technique is supervisor-driven – the focus of this article. An insight into SO’s decision-making is provided by Van Maanen (1978: 315), who wrote about a public relations officer arranging for him to ride-along with selected patrol units:

What one learns on these tours is, of course, only what the hand-picked officers who guide the tours choose to reveal. … [O]ne is given what Union City officers referred to as a “whitewash tour” on such ride-alongs. … This usually means one is told about recent technological innovations the department has instituted, various hints for personal protection a la Dick Tracy “crime stoppers,” or carefully sanitized versions of the latest gimmick in the police repertoire of public service gestures.

Loftus (2009: 204) provides another insight into SO’s thinking, as she relates a funny instance in which she “ask[ed] the sergeant whether he would mind if I came back the next day, [and] he looked a little anxious as he said, ‘Bloody hell, it took me a week to decide who to crew you with just for today!’” She went on to explain the sergeant’s apprehension:

That day I had been paired with the only female on the shift who had been allocated the unpopular task of responding to the relatively trivial incidents that had been on the police system for a number of days. This task … restricted the requirement to respond to any IR [Immediate Response] incidents. (p. 204)

The experiences of Loftus (2009) and Van Maanen (1978) suggest that SOs may place ethnographers with certain POs in order to create a favorable perception of the department free of serious trouble. Loftus (2009: 204) added, though, that the restrictions “were soon dispelled as my presence became more normal and
accepted by the police.” This suggests that SOs may be more likely to couple fieldworkers with POs responsible for serious incidents when the parties are more familiar with each other.[1]

**The Present Study**

This study aims to better understand the intermediary sampling step involved in qualitative, field-based studies of police, especially that which is supervisor-driven. We do so by analyzing data obtained from nine SOs about why they selected POs to ride-alongs with the first-author, here forward referred to as the fieldworker. For sake of clarity, in this section we distinguish the “policing study” from the “methodological study,” the latter of which reflected on the former.

The policing study was of a department in the Southeast, United States, from January 2011, to April, 2012. The study partially emerged from the fieldworker’s administrative position there. In the capacity of an “inside outsider” (Brown, 1996; see also Reiner, 2000), the fieldworker rode along with POs to collect data on a predefined population, namely their encounters with citizens, including how they became involved in said interactions. During the policing study period, a total of thirty-three officers worked in the patrol unit, including a supervising staff of a Major, Lieutenant, four Sergeants, and four Corporals. POs were divided into four teams, each supervised by a different Sergeant and Corporal. Two days prior to a ride-along, the fieldworker asked the Major to initiate the process of scheduling a PO to participate. Typically, the Major asked a Sergeant to select one, but on some occasions the selection was made by the Major, a Lieutenant, or Corporal. Thus, eleven SOs made PO ride-along assignments, seven of whom did so multiple times. SOs could choose any PO for any reason, and the fieldworker did not request SOs to consider specific criteria. SOs were made aware that the study’s purpose was to learn how and why officers become involved in and handle encounters with citizens. The SOs chose sixteen POs to participate in a ride-along, which was about half the population. All POs who were asked to participate did so, and they were made aware of their rights as a research participant. During thirty ride-alongs with POs, the fieldworker collected two hundred fifty-five hours of observation data. Most observations were of the sixteen POs assigned to a ride-along, though an additional ten POs were observed because it was common for multiple officers to respond to the scene of a police-citizen encounter.

After completing the policing study, the fieldworker conducted a methodological study to better understand how SOs decided to assign certain POs to ride-alongs. The fieldworker interviewed nine of the eleven SOs about this process. Two SOs were not interviewed because one had been terminated from the position, and the other could not be “pinned down” before the fieldworker moved out of state. Of the interviewed SOs, three were a Corporal, three a Sergeant, two a Lieutenant, and the other a Major. Seventy-nine percent of SOs were white and the rest black; one was female; their average age was thirty-three years; four had a college degree; and, their average number of years employed at the department was seven.
Interviews with SOs about their assignments were semi-structured and open-ended, as this produces consistency in topic coverage while allowing participants to talk freely at length. Each interview lasted thirty minutes to an hour. The protocol had two broad sections: To avoid beginning the interview with a leading question, the first question was, “What factors did you consider when assigning officers to do the ride-along?” Second, the fieldworker asked a series of pointed questions about potentially important factors: “Did you consider officers’ proactivity? Sanctioning propensity? Beat assignment? Personality? Rank? Age? Or familiarity with me?” Also, the fieldworker asked follow-up questions about why each variable was (not) considered.

Data were examined with grounded analysis techniques (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Sradley, 1979). The goal was to uncover why SOs – in their own minds – decided to assign particular POs to a ride-along with the fieldworker. Toward that end, each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and uploaded into NVivo 10. With this software package, data were coded into categories by giving them “tags” (i.e., labels), allowing easy retrieval of information for focused analysis. First, data were coded into broad categories reflecting the general variables of interest, namely those described above. Second, data in each broad category were further coded to capture SOs’ explanations of why a variable weighed or not on their assignment(s). All names are pseudonyms.

**Findings**

In response to the initial, open-ended question about assignment rationale, all SOs explained their choice of POs as guided by perceptions of what would make the ride-along “good” for the research. More specifically, SOs assigned POs deemed likely to generate more data of greater variety or “better” answers. For instance, five SOs assigned more proactive POs to the frequency of observed cases per ride-along and thereby make the research more productive. In Barker’s words, “When I assign you to ride along with somebody, I assign you to someone who is more apt to get out there and do something. That way you could get the most out of your time.” Similarly, Johnson said, “Some officers are more proactive than others and like to get into things and so forth. So I wanted to put you along with somebody that you could probably see more and kind of do things.”

In addition to considering POs’ proactivity, Haynie and Hanson assigned officers deemed safer to accompany. To quote the former: “I wanted to give you to the officer that would ensure your safety the most. And the one that would give you probably the best amount of stops during the night to show you some activity.” Hanson also mentioned seniority as indicative of an officer’s ability to protect the fieldworker:

> I just considered the seniority of the officer and also the officer productivity level. … Seniority because it’s a little bit easier to trust your older officers to know not to put you in situations that’ll be too dangerous … [P]roductivity so that you’ll have the chance to gather your data that you need for your research.
Another two SOs – both of whom made multiple assignments – explained their decisions as increasing the variety of observed policing styles. These SOs attempted to do so by assigning POs with different personalities. When asked on what basis she assigned POs, Dallas responded: “Making sure that they were different [is how I decided]. That each one had different personalities and different things that drove them to do like traffic stops or just answering calls.” Asked the same question, Luke replied:

Different styles. I mean some people like to get out with suspicious people, some people like traffic stops. People police different ways so if you’re going to do ride-alongs with different people then you should see different ways that officers do it.

The third research-related rationale of SOs relates to POs’ ability to provide “better” answers. Dillon, for example, stated: “Probably the most important one [factor] is the officer’s knowledge of the job.” O’Hare figured, “Usually the ones that have more knowledge and experience can, I guess, give you better answers.” These SOs reasoned that certain POs could provide “better” answers by saying more (i.e., providing more data) or giving the “correct” answer (i.e., the valid one) according to law or departmental policy.

When SOs were asked pointed questions about potentially important traits of POs, they consistently reflected on whether the factor would affect the research and, then on that basis, specified whether and why the variable impacted their assignments. For example, one of the pointed questions concerned POs’ proactivity. In addition to the five SOs who mentioned this before being asked about it (see above), the other four stated they too were prone to assign proactive POs. All nine explained this preference as meant to generate more data. Examples include, “I wanted to give you the best show you could get for your work” (Haynie); “So you could get your data that you needed for what you were researching” (Hanson); “Just to make sure you had the opportunity to have a worthwhile experience” (Garrison); “Because you would get to see more. You’d get more traffic stops or how they dealt with people, or just the public in general” (Dallas); “More proactive, the more likely to get into things. You get the exposure that you might want” (Dillon). The following SOs went into more detail about why assignments were affected by POs’ proactivity, or lack thereof:

Barker: [S]o that you could get the most out of your time, so you could see and experience most of the things that we go through. One officer … may not do a lot of traffic stops, not write a lot of tickets, things of that nature, then you got others who do. So [if] you ride with somebody who does, you get the most out of your time.

Luke: If I had an officer … who was more into property checks then you’re not really, I mean you’re going to see them check property, but that’s it. Whereas if I put you with an officer that was going out and making traffic stops, getting out with suspicious people, then you would see more.
Conversely, no SO referred to POs’ sanctioning propensity as affecting assignments. They explained this was a nonfactor because POs do not vary much in this regard. As Barker stated, “[T]o be honest with you, everybody’s discretion is kind of in the middle. They probably do things just about the same.” Asked why he did not consider POs’ sanctioning propensity, Luke said, “It’s discretion, but usually we give a lot of warnings, which is what you’re probably going to see most. Even if we arrest, it’s probably something any of us would have arrested for.” Likewise, Garrison answered, “Each officer has … discretion, but I don’t know that we currently have any officers that fall to either side of the [severity] scale.” And Haynie responded:

I think for the most part, most of us here …, we do things [the same] pretty much across the board, especially on my team. … [W]e play off each other and I pretty much, when we get out on a traffic stop or I’m with that officer, I know what he’s going to do before he does it. So it’s not an issue.

A few SOs said that their assignments were affected by POs’ beat, of which there were four. These SOs explained beat mattered because, as Dillon put it, “Certain areas get more activity than others.” Like the rationale to assign proactive officers, SOs assigned POs on the most active beats because this would generate more data. Haynie stated, “Depending on which beat you [the researcher] are [on], that’s where you’re going to get the most activity. Get the most bang for your buck.” And Barker commented, “There was a time where all the action would be on the Southside at night. The Northside it seems to me, all the action is over there [now].” Other SOs did not consider beat because they deemed it irrelevant to what would happen during the ride-along. As Hanson explained, “The way that I’ve always run my team is: yes, you may be assigned to a beat, but you’re free to go wherever you choose so long as your area is taken care of.” Similar answers include: “Officers kind of go everywhere, so that wouldn’t have been a factor for me” (Dallas); “Even though they’re assigned to a beat that they’re responsible for calls for, they still pretty much ride all over the place” (Luke); and,

O’Hare: Every officer knows that they’re not stuck to just one area. Wherever you go and whatever you get into is on you. You know you’re only assigned to that area to respond to calls, but ultimately when you’re riding around you ride wherever you want. You’re just responsible for that area when it comes to reports.

All but two SOs said their assignment decisions were affected by POs’ personality. As already noted, Dallas and Luke considered this because they wanted to expose the fieldworker to multiple policing styles and thought it varied based on POs’ personality. Barker, however, worried about the effect of POs’ personality – specifically their propensity to talk – on the amount of data collected: “[Y]ou got some officers that don’t like people riding with them. You got some officers that don’t communicate.” Also, SOs considered POs’ personality because it could affect the creation of “good” or “bad” findings about police. To quote Dillon, “If they don’t have a good personality, … if you get somebody that complains about every single thing … and we stick you with that person, then you might think, ‘Is this the way all cops are like?’” Relatedly, SOs thought POs’ personality could cause an (un)pleasant experience for the fieldworker. O’Hare stated: “I didn’t want you to be bored out
of your mind [because the PO doesn’t talk]. There’s certain people you know that they hate to have people riding with them.” Garrison said, “There may be one or two people I avoided putting you with because … they may be less polite or not want somebody in their car or something like that. I would try to spare you of that.” Contrariwise, Haynie opted to pair the fieldworker with “an officer that would kind of put you at ease of being on the road.”

The majority of SOs made assignments based on POs’ rank.[2] Some SOs considered rank to promote variation in what was observed. Haynie’s thinking, for example, was that the fieldworker would benefit by obtaining a “mixed bag” of policing styles. Luke verbalized the same: “Different policing styles [is why rank matters]. A senior officer may have different ideas and different ways of policing. You should see different ways of doing it.” Barker considered rank because he wanted to avoid putting the fieldworker with someone who would give the “wrong” answers. In his words, “I didn’t want to put you with someone who is not seasoned, and didn’t really know the laws and things of that nature. I don’t want them to give you the wrong information.” Yet other SOs sought out lower rank POs because they have more encounters with citizens. As Dallas put it, “You’d probably see more if you were with a Corporal or a patrolman because you would be answering the calls. You wouldn’t be sitting up here doing administrative stuff.” Johnson said:

A lot of the supervisors, especially the Sergeants, they’re dealing with more admin stuff …, doing the end of shift [tasks] and checking their reports and all that stuff, so I don’t think you’d have gotten a fair shake riding with some of the Sergeants.

Garrison added that the fieldworker’s presence could distract from the supervisor’s duties: “I would probably try to avoid putting you with a supervisor just to not take away from their supervisor duties. Also, the fact that they wouldn’t necessarily be dispatched to calls because they’re the supervisor.” A final note regarding POs’ rank is that for SOs who stated it was unimportant, their thinking was like that of Hanson: “[R]ank is not necessarily indicative of maturity level or proactivity.”

Only a couple SOs considered POs’ age when making ride-along decisions. They perceived younger officers as more proactive, and so assigning them would improve the research by increasing observations. Consider the following:

Barker: Normally when I assign you to ride along with somebody, I assign you to someone who is more apt to get out there and do something. That way you could get the most out of your time. … The younger officers who are just now getting into the career, they’re kinda your go-getters.

Johnson: [A] lot of the times, some of the officers that are coming in, or some of the new ones, are more apt to try to prove themselves …, and they’re not burned out by any means …, and they’re going to try to get into things and so forth. They’re a little bit more active than some of the older ones.
The other SOs perceived no clear connection between policing styles and POs’ age, so their assignments were unaffected by it. O’Hare stated, “I don’t think age matters when you’re riding with somebody. I don’t know how it would come into play.” Garrison echoed that comment: “I don’t really see age as being a determining factor on activity level and I don’t know that those two would even be correlated.” Luke was unequivocal in stating no demographic factor weighed on his decision-making, though creating variation in policing styles did: “I wasn’t putting you with them for age, because of sex or race. I was putting them with you so you could see different policing styles. None of that other stuff played a factor.” Several officers spoke to how age is not necessarily connected to being a “good” officer possessing “better” information. When Dillon was asked why age did not matter, he stated, “’Cause good officers come in all ages.” Hanson and Haynie said, respectively, “Experience and maturity speak more than just age in my opinion” and “I don’t think the age has much to do with it. It’s more experience in my opinion.” In many facets of life, age and experience are highly correlated, but Dallas explained why that may be less true in police work:

I don’t think age is a factor. I don’t think it’s relevant in this profession ’cause we have officers who start really young. You have officers who start after military. So to me, it really is not a factor of what their experiences are or what their knowledge is of the job.

Finally is POs’ familiarity with the fieldworker, which no SO said weighed on their assignments. A few SOs explained this was inconsequential because it would not affect the findings. In the words of Luke and Dillon, respectively, “It’s not going to change their way of policing” and “It shouldn’t really matter [in policing]. It shouldn’t be a factor in it.” Dallas reflected this variable may have mattered, except “I feel like you’re professional and you would ask them questions that somebody maybe not as outgoing as you might have had a difficulty with it.” Other SOs said this factor was irrelevant because this information was unknown to them; thought it was unimportant to the fieldworker; or, were unconcerned about the fieldworker’s comfort. As Garrison put it: “I don’t know who you know.” Haynie and Hanson did have this information, but did not make a decision based on it due to thinking, respectively, “I just didn’t think you cared much [whether you knew them]” and “You seem like you can get along with anybody.” And though O’Hare was worried about the fieldworker’s boredom (see the subsection on ‘Personality’), he declared, “I didn’t care about your comfort zone.”

**Discussion**

To recap the findings, SOs referred to various factors when explaining why they coupled the fieldworker with particular POs on ride-alongs. The vast majority of these reasons were geared toward helping the research. More specifically, SOs were intent on assigning POs deemed likely to provide more data, of greater variety, and “better” answers. To produce these outcomes, SOs selected POs by considering their proactivity, knowledge, experience, personality, beat, rank, and age. The SOs saw these variables as relevant because they were correlated with POs’ propensity to engage in more encounters with citizens, engage in different types of policing, or say more (that is “correct”) to the fieldworker. On the other hand, SOs were apt to cite a variable as
irrelevant (e.g., sanctioning propensity) if they thought it would not affect research outcomes. Through their assignment decisions, then, the SOs not only dictated which POs would be the primary participants in the “policing study,” but also shaped the nature of what was seen and heard on ride-alongs by selecting POs because of how they police (e.g., are more proactive) or what they know. In other words, the SOs not only decided the composition of the PO sample, but also that shaped that of the policing observation sample; see figure 1.

—Figure 1 about here—

**General Relevance**

How do the SOs’ explanations of their ride-along assignments compare to findings of prior studies and, as such, inform the study topic? For one, the present study’s findings largely contradict those of Van Maanen (1978) and Loftus (2009). Whereas the participants herein placed the fieldworker with certain POs because they were proactive and thus likely to produce cases, Van Maanen (1978) and Loftus (2009) perceived their coupling with certain POs as intended to do the opposite. A reason for the difference could be that we or Van Maanen (1978) and Loftus (2009) are wrong about why SOs assign certain POs. Another possibility is each study presents valid findings and, thus, the different outcomes are caused by variable factors, such as the familiarity between the fieldworkers and officers.

On that note, all SOs stated their assignments were unaffected by the fieldworker’s familiarity with POs. This null effect differs from the experience of Loftus (2009), who, recall, stated SOs increasingly placed her with POs involved in more serious incidents as they became better acquainted. Perhaps such an effect was not evident in the present study because the fieldworker was an employee of the department before the study, thereby precluding a within-study change like that of Loftus (2009). Indeed, that also would explain why SOs assigned Van Maanen (1978) and, initially, Loftus (2009) to POs without regard to helping their research, and perhaps meant to do the opposite.

Our analysis has focused on supervisor-driven sampling, but the intermediary step may be researcher-driven, too. Do fieldworkers, like SOs, choose certain POs to increase the quantity or variety of cases or obtain “correct” information? For example, in another study of his (i.e., not that involving supervisor-driven sampling), Van Maanen (1981: 484) explains he prefers to collect data on/from POs “knowledgeable about the various specialized interests and concerns that exist within the setting” (i.e., who have more information of a greater variety that is valid). The above question points to a limitation of this article: the findings have an unknown generalizability to other qualitative, field-based policing studies. One logical extension of the current research is to explore POs’ reactive behavior and motivations during ride-alongs (outside the “craft model”, see, e.g., Mastrofski and Parks, 1990; Spano, 2003, 2006, 2007). Also, researchers could examine the data collection process in studies geared toward other aspects of police work, such as what goes on at training centers, the station, large events like athletic matches and concerts, court, and so on (see, e.g., Campeau, 2015;
Van Hulst, 2013; Waddington, 1999). Across contexts, do fieldworkers, SOs, and POs try to “help” the research by seeking out or acting in ways thought to provide more data of greater variety and higher validity? Why or why not? If they do, how so? And if not, what other goals are they trying to achieve, how, and why?

Related to the study’s limitations and the call for further research is that alternative interpretations could be made of our data. Of course, that critique could be, and should be, made of any research, perhaps especially that on why people think they do what they do. To that point, a reviewer of this article raised some interesting alternatives to our interpretations. For instance, we interpreted the SOs’ decision-making as reflecting their motivation to help the fieldworker, who was a department colleague, coupled with their understanding of what makes research better. Yet the reviewer raised the possibility that the SOs’ motivation was one of impression management meant to portray their job as exciting, of great importance, and other positive traits. Additionally, the reviewer questioned if the SOs’ statements regarding the fieldworker’s safety and comfort may have been really intended to prevent observation of inappropriate police behavior, whereas we interpreted those words as further examples of trying to help the fieldworker. These various interpretations, and others, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as multiple motivations could be guiding SOs’ decisions. Moreover, the motivations may not be independent, but, instead, amount to streams that merge into a river of thought. None of this can be definitively sorted out within this article, if ever. But, hopefully, future research will attempt to do so and thereby improve on the implications outlined below.

Implications

The issues raised throughout this article have implications for interpreting findings of qualitative, field-based police research and also how “best” to partake in it. However, and like so much of social life, the implications are up to interpretation, too. On the one hand, it could be argued that the SOs did the fieldworker a favor by assigning POs who would produce more data, increase its variety, and provide more correct information in terms of the law and department policy. Thinking generally, then, SOs can be trusted to lead fieldworkers to valuable data, assuming they are on familiar and amicable terms. Plus, there may be benefit to giving SOs control of the intermediary stage of sampling if the goal is uncovering what they think is important, as it is reasonable to suspect that they will accordingly assign POs and thereby reveal their predilections.

A more nuanced perspective, and one with which we agree, is more data – in terms of quantity, variety, or correctness – can be bad if they skew results away from “reality” (i.e., reduce representativeness). For instance, police officers and researchers may prefer to see more “action” and “real police work,” but that could inhibit the latter’s ability to learn the job can be “boring,” there is copious “paperwork,” and so on (Fassin, 2013; Herbert, 2001; Stalcup, 2013). And though police officers and fieldworkers may favor “valid” information, what this entails may vary between them. Academically speaking, the de facto rules and procedures as well as “incorrect” understandings of law and department policy are important, so researchers will not only want to speak with POs deemed most knowledgeable by SOs.
To be clear, there is no universally right answer to whether certain selection criteria are “good.” After all, such judgments are a value call (see Kuhn, 1977), and how best to sample depends on the research goal and one’s analytic techniques (see Katz, 2001; Small, 2009). Even when there is agreement on what makes information good/bad or better/worse, it may be difficult to separate data that are accurate or representative from that which are not. Nonetheless, the takeaway point is that the process by which fieldworkers come to be paired with particular POs is likely to shape findings and, therefore, more attention should be given to how this is done.

References


Notes

[1] Another example comes from Diphoorn’s (2016: 321) research, except it was of private security and so included as a footnote. She writes of how she was paired with a PO: “Gayle was one of the first armed response officers that I accompanied, as he was a supervisor (i.e. of higher rank), and in the eyes of the company owners [which, in this case, is somewhat equivalent to SOs], was better equipped to ‘show me the ropes’.” This example suggests POs may be asked to participate if perceived to have traits – such as activity level, policing style, or knowledge – “good” for the research.
Potentially, the rank of officers who could have been assigned to a ride-along ranged from Patrolman to Major.