**How people judge policing**, by P A J Waddington, Martin Wright, Kate Williams and Tim Newburn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 208 pp., £44.99 (PBK), ISBN 9780198718888

It is with great sadness that we begin this review by noting this was the last book that Tank Waddington wrote before his death in 2018. His scholarship exemplified all that is excellent within criminological research: theoretically rich, empirically grounded, with a deep knowledge of policing policy and practice.

In *How People Judge Policing*, Tank and his colleagues (Kate Williams, Martin Wright, and Tim Newburn) expertly bring to life the contested and conflictual nature of police-citizen interactions. Their theoretically grounded and expertly analysed findings show that officers are both protectors and regulators; that discretion is fundamental to policing; and that the speed with which officers make sense of ambiguous and complex situations and apply legal categories can be dizzying to those of us who do not do this job. Crucially, they show that the same encounter can be seen by different observers in quite different ways: while the evaluative criteria used by research participants were largely the same—people generally focused on (a) the procedural justice displayed by officers and (b) whether officers seemed to respect the limits of their rightful authority (Trinkner et al. 2018), particularly in the case of regulatory encounters involving violence or the potential for violence—there was striking variation in the application of these criteria, and this variation was often linked to the degree to which research participants identified either with the citizen or with the officer.

The authors offer a novel methodological approach to studying how people judge policing. They drew upon recordings of four different policing events, clips that were taken from the BBC’s ‘Traffic Cops’ series. There was a group of officers turning up at the scene of a robbery of an elderly man in his home; a group of officers stopping a suspected stolen car on the motorway; a suspected car theft in a supermarket car park; and a violent arrest outside a nightclub. These recordings were the centre-piece of thirty-four focus groups involving participants from the ‘Black Country’ of the West Midlands, drawn from different faith, income, age, and marginal groups.

The chief (but by no means only) innovation was to employ to great effect one of the defining features of the focus group: namely, the ability to draw out dissent, disagreement and consensus in the myriad ways in which social actors draw meaning and significance from social action. Each of these groups was asked to discuss a set of carefully selected videos of police-citizen contacts and the book’s primary goal is to organise and interpret the emergent themes of these conversations. The book makes use of a considerable number of write-ups and verbatim citations, providing not only a goldmine of colourful quotes but also fascinating insights into how citizens and the police evaluate police actions.

The first chapter of the book presents an overview of the literature on perceptions of the police. The authors start with a discussion of the ‘brute facts’ of social differentiation, such as race, class, age, and gender, acknowledging that the influence of sociodemographic variables on attitudes regarding the police is largely filtered through the socio-cultural lens of the individual’s community and neighbourhood. They also consider media effects. They argue that the generally positive portrayal of the police can help maintain trust in the justice system; however, this is a double-edged sword as well-publicised scandals can also hurt the police image. Afterwards, the authors skilfully walk the reader through the research on police encounters, using procedural justice theory to make sense of the contradictory evidence, arguing that “[procedural justice is] a theoretical framework that brought conceptual order to the kaleidoscope of experience contained in a ‘contact’” (p.23). In line with procedural justice theory, the book argues that the perception of respect and fairness are the cornerstones of how people judge policing, and that to increase their legitimacy, the police need to explain themselves, give voice to citizens, and admit to their mistakes when they make them. The authors also emphasise that perceived fairness of the police is motive-based, which can explain the diversity of opinions in the assessment of similar police encounters. In this thorough introductory chapter, the highlighted gaps in the literature are also noteworthy, such as the dearth of research on legal socialisation, which was the topic of a contemporaneously published book (Tyler and Trinkner 2017).

Chapter two covers the applied methodology and sampling with welcome transparency. The exclusion and inclusion criteria for selecting the videos from the 292 incidents of the ‘Traffic Cops’ series is clearly set out, and the coding scheme for the analysis of the focus group discussions is not only well-justified, but its results are also included in full (p.40-47). The sample of focus groups comprised thirty-four pre-existing groups from diverse backgrounds, including groups of various affluence (e.g., deprived, better off) and at different stages in their lives (e.g., school students, young mothers), marginal groups (e.g., tenants of a homeless shelter, young offenders serving their community sentences), members of various faiths (e.g., Sikhs), groups with special interest in community safety (e.g., neighbourhood watch), and members of other volunteer organisations (e.g., race equality campaigners). In addition, four groups were sampled from the local police force, where new recruits, more experienced officers and managers were all involved. Particularly because of the high level of detail and transparency, there are three notable omissions that caught our attention: (1) the authors failed to mention the topic guide used for the focus group discussions, (2) they did not declare the role of the researcher in the discussions (e.g., facilitator vs moderator), and (3) the authors did not discuss how recurring and spill-over themes were addressed (i.e., when a discussion started during an earlier video was picked up again) (Liamputtong 2011). These missing aspects are only worth mentioning because of the otherwise exceptionally rigorous methodological review.

The following three chapters of the book review the citizen focus groups findings. Chapter three is thoughtfully positioned to provide both a methodological introduction on how the focus group results are going to be presented, and an adept illustration of how the emerging findings speak to the broader theory. As part of the discussions in focus groups, norm-actualisation can either produce consensus or dissension (within or between the focus groups). As an example of consensus, when one of the videos showed a police officer taking a statement from an elderly man, inquiring regarding the man’s well-being multiple times, and patiently listening to his unprompted—and unrelated—story about being a prisoner of war during the Second World War, the officer received universal praise for being attentive, caring, and respectful (p.51). By contrast, there were dissenting opinions about whether the same officer checking his watch during the interview was a sign that he wanted to “rush through” the interview, or if he only did it for time-keeping purposes (i.e., noting down the time on his pad) (p.52). This disagreement is a fitting example of the concept of motive-based trust, where the attribution of the officer’s intent lies in the eye of the beholder. Motive-based trust is often associated with previous personal experiences and based on the results achieved or observed. In another video, an officer imposed a second fine on an individual for not rectifying an issue with his car despite having been warned to do so earlier. Members of the neighbourhood watch focus group gave this officer the benefit of the doubt, while a group of young offenders serving their community sentence thought the officer was simply “taking the piss” (p.61).

The fourth and fifth chapters examine the two themes that caused the most dissension in the focus groups: reasonable suspicion and police use of force. Reasonable suspicion (probable cause in the US) is a fundamental element of the exercise of police power, as it permits officers to stop and search individuals and vehicles and place people under arrest. Based on the focus group discussions of three relevant videos, the authors adroitly identify three major reasons why the public found someone suspicious: (1) anomalous behaviour (e.g., unexplained aggression), (2) stereotyping and presumptions about ‘normality’ (e.g., young people wearing hoodies or intact makeup on a woman after being threatened at knifepoint), and (3) making a case (“joining the dots”) by up-weighting certain pieces of information and down-weighting or disregarding others. Importantly, however, even when the focus groups shared the officers’ reasonable suspicion, procedural justice still mattered. When a plain-clothed officer stopped a group of young people for smashing in a car window, there was consensus across the groups that the officer’s suspicion was warranted. Yet, the officer’s conduct divided opinions, because he ordered one of the youths who was protesting the arrest to “watch his language”, physically confronted him by almost going nose-to-nose with him, and threatened him with arrest without giving any justification of the why (pp.88-89). This example demonstrates the complexity in the evaluation of police-public encounters: despite finding the young man’s behaviour impudent, several people also regarded the officer’s conduct improper and unprofessional, and found it highly problematic.

The discussion about police use of force in the following chapter can also be interpreted through the theory of procedural justice. Verbally or physically forceful police behaviour was only condoned when those actions appeared to be justified. In comparison, the proportionality of the use of force (in other words, whether the use of force was judged excessive or not) hinged upon the perception of necessity to achieve the goal of compliance or prevention of further criminal action. Use of force appeared to be more controversial than suspicion, with different groups disagreeing what level of use of force was acceptable. Again, the initial predisposition of the groups was important and often related to who they were likely to most identify with: in the same footage, while young mothers found a specific use of force ‘brutal’ (p.118), a resident consultative group found the same use of force ‘derisively soft’ (p.116). Overall, officers were expected to be civil, act professionally by being polite and “keeping their cool”, and make every attempt to defuse a situation instead of antagonising the suspects, even when they ended up using force.

The authors devote chapter six to the police focus groups, providing a refreshing look at how members of the police evaluated the very same videos, as well as outlining police expectations regarding public response. The discussions among the police participants are remarkable for two reasons: their similarity to how the public perceived each video, and the fact that they mirrored not only the cases where there was a consensus, but also the dissensions. This alignment in attitudes was true despite the police focus groups empathising and identifying with the officers in the video-clips and often using the pronoun “we” when discussing the on-screen police behaviour. The police were also largely accurate in their assessment of how the public might perceive the videos, not surprisingly, as they broadly agreed with them. Moreover, police participants were also sensitive to procedurally just cues, condemning, for instance, the hostile officer who used a patronising tone and confronted one of the suspects instead of de-escalating the situation: “It’s all ego. It’s all testosterone” (p.137). The police focus groups also expressed regret that in some of the videos the officers needed to use force, which they recognised was detrimental to perceptions of police, and they all agreed that whenever possible there should be a prioritisation of communication over the use of force.

The final chapter of the book highlights the unique contribution of this research and provides an elaborate discussion of legitimacy, which was only passingly mentioned in the introduction. The authors recognise the importance of legitimacy (which incidentally they equate only with duty to obey the police, in contrast to most procedural justice researchers, who define legitimacy as duty to obey *and* the perceived normative appropriateness of the institution) in establishing and maintaining consensual policing tactics. They identify reasonable suspicion and use of force as focal points of police-citizen encounters, and stress that the police need to consider the citizen perspective in both cases. Additionally, the authors voice their apprehension regarding the potential success of well-intentioned police reforms. Instead of putting faith in such “easy fixes”, they choose to caution policymakers and encourage the police to show greater willingness to admit when they make mistakes, place more emphasis on training police officers in the appropriate proactive use of force instead of in defensive strategies, and pursue community policing including procedurally just principles.

The implicit message of the book is that public perception of the police is a multi-faceted topic, and that there is great potential in using qualitative methods to shed light on some of the arising complexities. Certainly, the authors make a persuasive case for why projects using similar methodologies should be pursued. However, they also express scepticism and sometimes outright antagonism towards quantitative methods. The authors find such approaches reductionist, lacking ecological validity (p.33/36); they claim that attitudes regarding the police are fluid (p.69/147) and that there is no established way to measure them (p.69). At various points they also show a misunderstanding of statistical models, when they claim that their goal is to “discern the ‘signal’ and ignore the ‘noise’” (p.49/147). Noise is an inherent characteristic of every model, it defines the uncertainty of estimation, and one could easily imagine a study designed to quantify consensus and dissension in how people judge policing. These unnecessary digressions are a pity because, otherwise, so much of the book is methodologically astute and analytically helpful.

Overall, *How People Judge Policing* is an original and gripping book with a plethora of excellent examples showing how procedural justice is understood, voiced and evaluated by ordinary citizens and the police alike. It urges its readers to use novel methods both to generate new hypotheses and to answer existing research questions, which is why we recommend it as an exceptional read for criminologists, policymakers, and the police. This volume is a thought-provoking and memorable swansong for the primary author, whose contributions are already sorely missed from policing research.

**References**

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