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Revisiting the classics: women in control? The role of women in law enforcement: Frances Heidensohn

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Revisiting the classics

Women in Control? The role of women in law enforcement: Frances Heidensohn

The detective you will meet in the following stories is usually regarded as the first female professional detective to appear in fiction. She is a mysterious and somewhat shadowy figure. We learn little about her..Even the police don't seem to know her real name..she often works undercover. All this obfuscation makes sense when you realise that when 'The female detective' was first published in May 1864 there were no women detectives in Britain-in fact there were no women police officers.

Mike Ashley Introduction to the Female detective by Andrew Forrester.

Women's entry into policing post-dates the establishment of police forces which were, until then, male only organisations. Their appearance both in reality, and fiction, were much delayed after the establishment of what became recognised as formal police organisations and the invention of detective crime fiction. They remain a gendered minority in both and, until relatively recently, their experiences and the significance of their role in policing remained obscured.

This was to be changed by Frances Heidensohn's research on women in policing published in 1992. Her book is rightly accorded the status of a 'classic' on a number of grounds including "significance, impact, originality, and lasting importance" which are Frances' own criteria when she and her British Journal of Sociology co-editor were considering texts in criminology entitled to that claim (Heidensohn and Wright, 2010).

Before presenting a re- reading of this book, it is worth setting into context the project that Frances Heidensohn embarked upon which can be encapsulated as 'putting women in the frame' of criminological analyses. This was originally to render visible women offenders and her debut paper, published in 1968 on the deviancy of women, was credited with setting the foundation of feminist criminology (Mooney, 2009). As Mooney notes, not only were women largely absent from criminological analysis at that time, but also Heidensohn's fellow academics were puzzled and uncomprehending as to why anyone would want to study women. Having explored female offenders, *Women in Control?* was a further 'fragment' in Heidensohn's exploration of modern women. Having looked at women out of control this was the reciprocal analysis of women, notionally, in control. The research she reports illuminates much about the experiences of policewomen, hitherto somewhat shadowy figures as indicated in the quotation above. As with the deviancy study, Heidensohn established the 'equipment' with which to study women in policing (p228). There were no adequate constructs to hand, rather "it was necessary to rely on 'grounded concepts' derived from the research study itself." As Heidensohn notes policewomen's personalities were rather 'elusive' (p92). Moreover her research was an early example of a comparative analysis with Frances utilising the ideas of constants and contrasts between the USA and UK in order to illuminate the inroads made by women into policing.

This book was an early monograph published by Clarendon, anticipating a series of innovative books in criminology, which now number over 60 titles. Conceived in early 1990s, the series aimed to provide a forum for "outstanding empirical and theoretical work in all aspects of criminology and criminal justice" (Loader, 2009). Deriving from a collaboration between the Cambridge Institute of Criminology, The Mannheim Centre for Criminology at the London School of Economics (LSE) and the Centre for Criminology at the University of Oxford, this forms a veritable library of criminological texts by many of criminology's key exponents. LSE was Frances' alma mater which she joined in 1961. As Mary Eaton says, "this was an exciting time to become part of Britain's most significant school of social and political science" as it was here that sociology and criminology became established as twentieth century disciplines and whose pioneering founders such as Herman Mannheim (after whom the Mannheim Centre was named) were still teaching (Eaton, 2000). Frances and her fellow LSE students and colleagues (such as Paul Rock, David Downes and Stan Cohen) were to become the next generation of leading criminologists firmly establishing its modern scholarship.

The theoretical idea underpinning the book is the notion of social control. Heidensohn charts this concept historically as originating with Durkheim, Marx and Weber and the rise of the concept of legitimate authority. A century later, Foucault, Ignatieff and Cohen identified institutions' role in social control. Thereafter Heidensohn identifies the place of policing and finally social welfare as agents of control. She observes that not only were women absent as exerts of social control they were non-existent in much of the criminological and sociological analysis, although men too were invisible in the sense that they "were treated as 'people' and their experiences as 'society' and their masculinity never rendered problematic" (p12). As she, and later commentators say, "it matters a great deal who controls social control in our society and how they do it" (p155). Heidensohn extended the notion of social control to include both formal and informal agencies, its locale to include home, school, work thereby embracing public and private areas. This enlargement of the scope of social control is made possible by its examination through the gender lens. Historically women were confined to the private and informal spheres but as the nineteenth century progressed they began to exercise influence through their social welfare activities, bringing them into the public domain. Their entry into the police in the twentieth century is a case example of women's attempt to extend that influence. This is crucial for as Heidensohn says "at the heart of formal control in ordered societies are authority and legitimacy. Without these it is not possible to impose sanctions nor achieve redress for wrongs" (p231). Later she concludes "police or similar organisations require both legitimacy and authority if they are to function in a democracy" (p236). This analyses predates much of the work of Tyler in the States and Bradford and colleagues in the UK about procedural justice (see Bradford et al 2013). In essence this idea employs legitimacy as the *raison d'être* for the exercise of police authority and the compliance to it (another way of discussing social control). Procedural justice is premised on notions of fairness, and by implication, equality.

In this book Heidensohn asks the important and enduring question "what is policing?" (p31) She notes not only how achieving an answer to this question with any consensus and clarity is intensely problematic (policing by whom, for whom

and of whom). This anticipated later analysis of these questions (by e.g. Brogden and Ellison, 2013; Millie, 2013; Reiner, 2013) who confront the problems of a wide police mandate in times of austerity. As budgets get tighter and police numbers decline, it is a highly relevant contemporary issue. In particular these authors dispute the idea that policing is solely or primarily about fighting crime. The Independent Commission into the future of policing chaired by Lord Stevens looking at police reform emphasised the community based neighbourhood policing role of crime prevention and social engagement whose reassurance, listening and non-confrontational character seems especially suited to women's style of policing (Independent Police Commission, 2013).

Heidensohn anticipated another strand, that of leadership, recurrent in the current debates on police reform through her discussion of 'top cops'. This concept was rather undeveloped with respect to women as not only were their careers not well researched (p154) but also there were relatively few of them and none at the most senior ranks. Heidensohn notes the lack of role models and their experience of isolation and hostility. This line of research was the subject of a thesis by Frances' post graduate doctoral student, Marisa Silvestri (Silvestri, 2000). Silvestri and Paul (2015:190) note that gendered analysis of police leadership still remains rare. Heidensohn had observed that at times of crisis the police service often turns to women as "a desperate remedy" being an antidote to corruption by demonstrating a more caring and ethical side of policing. Silvestri and Paul catalogue the most recent series of disasters besetting the police. Silvestri, Tong and Brown, (2013) suggest, given that senior policewomen tend towards a more holistic, participative, consultative, inclusive and transformative style, so by incorporating women into the control of social control may well effect long-term change in policing and bring the service in line with a greater 'ethical' and 'quality of service' culture and ultimately greater legitimacy in its relationships both with the public as well as within the workforce. Silvestri (2000,2003) had shown that women still experienced exclusion although this becomes less tenable as more women moved higher up the ranks. Dick, Silvestri and Westmarland (2013) suggested that the greater presence of women in policing offers the prospect of 'transformational spaces' in which change may occur. This acknowledges a concept derived by Heidensohn which is discussed later. Silvestri, Tong and Brown (2013:62) also reference Heidensohn's analysis when commenting on the removal of Sir Paul Stephenson and the search for a new Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police

"In predicting possible successors,[to Sir Paul]the *Evening Standard* (19 July 2011) ran a double-page spread on potential female candidates entitled 'Can these women save the Met? Restoring trust lies with senior females'. Such calls for more women in leadership to 'clean up' policing has become a familiar mantra in times of crises, controversies and 'integrity lapses'.

In 1992, Heidensohn concluded that whilst women were *employed* in positions of social control they are less widely *deployed* and emphatically not in charge of formal control agencies (p237, emphasis added). As gender is such a feature of social control it follows that this is key to unlocking reforming change in institutions such as the police. As Heidensohn says (p247) "there are no rational reasons why men should dominate policing, nor so totally dominate formal social control. They are widely

judged not to be doing it very well and to be getting worse." Since *Women in Control?* was published women have been appointed to some senior and influential leadership positions. We have had two women Home Secretaries, a dozen or so women chief constables and a woman appointed as DPP and Attorney General in the UK and similar advances have been made in the USA. These appointments have not been sufficient to achieve the 'tipping point', mentioned by Heidensohn, so it remains difficult to evaluate the degree to which women are making a difference.

Heidensohn also spends some time discussing the occupational cultures of policing. Importantly she uses the plural to indicate this is not monolithic but rather notes the "considerable diversity within and between police cultures" (p77) (again prescient of critiques of this concept by criminologists such as Fielding, 1994; Waddington, 1999 and later Loftus 2009). Heidensohn argues the deployment of women undermines male cohesiveness and their self-image. Called the 'porcelain policeman' argument i.e. they are susceptible to the presence of women because it disrupts their solidarity and stretches their loyalty, Heidensohn suggests this reaction is understandable if the issue "is seen as the possession and ownership of something that is as crucial to society as its control" (p216). At the core of this argument are notions concerning gender specific norms about dominance and subordination, control and order. As Heidensohn says "it is only when one separates out these strands that one can start to understand the fairly modest progress made by women in policing in the twentieth century" (p217). In other words who has control of social control. The exclusionary treatment she reports can be seen as evidence of men's unwillingness to yield control and evidence from Loftus' work reveals the continuation of discriminatory and harassing treatment of women in the police (Loftus, 2009)

Heidensohn elaborates her methodology which began in the deviance of women's study, as a post-modern version of feminist empiricism. Her earlier analysis of delinquent women argued that women themselves were controlled through family constraints, male violence, loss of reputation and character and media exhortations. Similar mechanisms can be applied to the inhibitions placed on women in policing. Her grounded theory approach developed a set of "pliable and soft" concepts (p117) in order to explore whether gender or occupational culture was the most important factors influencing how effective women are in policing and the extent of their incursions. Contemporary reviews of the book (e.g. Brown 1994, Manning, 1994 and Morris, 1994) were most critical about this aspect of Heidensohn's empirical work especially her snowball sampling technique. But it is worth revisiting the construction of her grounded concepts in a little more detail to illustrate Frances' imaginative and pithy recreation of recurrent themes derived from the interviews.

"What emerged in fact were not a set of war stories about how these women subdued massive drunks... rather they described events in which they proved themselves in some way, thereby earning the respect of their colleagues. Sometimes this respect was only given grudgingly, almost always it was not a 'class action' which altered the status of all police women, but only a statement of exceptionalism. What these episodes did effect was a twofold process: the women themselves felt their confidence strengthened and their male colleagues granted them admission, of a kind, to the fraternity of real police. I have called these 'transformational scenes' because they remind me of the final stages of English pantomimes and plays in which the poor, shy heroine is transformed into a beautiful and well-dressed princess" (p142)

This is not only a clever evocation of her source material, redolent with meaning and memorably capturing the spirit embedded in the stories told to her by her respondents, it also provides the flesh illustrating a piece of the police occupational cultural business. Transformational scenes are women's version of the male 'rite of passage' whereby they prove their 'bottle'. But for women this is also about being 'other' in not belonging to the male fraternity so has an additional dimension, for as Heidensohn says without this "Cinderella can often not get an invitation to come to the secret Policeman's ball" (p144). So transformational scenes not only provide the means by which women police exert control out on the streets, but also how they gain legitimacy in the eyes of their fellow cops. But there is a paradox here. Given that the informal police culture is often about bending and breaking the rules, so solidarity and loyalty is credited to officers who get a result by rule infractions. Doing it by the book, professionalism, is often the way women effect their transformational scenes, potentially setting them apart in terms of practice from their fellow male officers. This dilemma fast forwards to contemporary discussions about the reform of policing (See for example chapter 6 in Brough, Brown and Biggs, 2016 and Brown's introduction in the future of policing, 2013 pp 333-340). The idea explored in these discussions is the concept of "guilty knowledge". By this is meant that those enforcing the law need to know about breaking it. Professionalism provides standards and ethics that protect the law enforcer from succumbing to nefarious practices for self-interest or other motives. The professionalism Heidensohn found in the policewomen in her sample was a shift away from the craft knowledge of the street cop and represented a move towards the authority of procedure and protocols. This was a precursor to evidence based practice professionalism avowed by modern institutions such as the College of Policing.

We learn a lot about women's experiences in the police service in both the UK and the USA at this time when they represented about ten percent of the officer complement, and Christmas tree like, were increasing less likely to have tinsel on their shoulders signifying progressively higher rank. Women in Control? was amongst the first academic studies of women in policing. Joan Lock had written a history of British policewomen published in 1979 drawing in part on her own experiences serving in London's Metropolitan Police Service from 1954 to 1960 (Lock, 1979). Sandra Jones wrote Policewoman and Equality in 1986 at the behest of the Equal Opportunities Commission some ten years after the passing of the UK's Equal Opportunities legislation and documenting widespread discriminatory practices occurring in the Metropolitan Police Service (Jones 1986). Heidensohn (p44) acknowledges her debt to John Carrier (Carrier, 1988) who had written an historic account of women's entry into policing in Britain, she was able to utilise the source material collected by Carrier when conducting research for her own book (Heidensohn, peers com). Susan Martin's Breaking and Entering published in 1980 was an account of the experiences of American policewomen (Martin, 1980) and famously introduced the *policewoman* dichotomy emphasising women's masculinised and feminised coping adaptations to the male defined occupational culture. Heidensohn is critical of this dichotomy as she and others (e.g. Rabe-Hemp, 2008:127) conclude that women do not play one or the other role as *policewoman* or *policewoman* but may emphasise

one or the other and alternate between these in their daily work lives negotiating them through interaction.

Like their male counterparts, policewomen wanted to belong, have a sense of mission and were loyal to colleagues. Yet Heidensohn graphically shows they were barred from entry or gained only conditional acceptance. She makes the acute observation that "gender was made important *to* them, rather than *by* them..moreover it was not just the office of constable which was regularly defined as a male prerogative, the process of law enforcement and social control was also seen as 'owned ' by males" emphasis added (p155). It was one thing for women to control other women (as had characterised their early roles) but quite another to exert that control over men as implied by the integration of policing following sex discrimination legislation during the 1970s in the UK and US. At the heart of this is a deeper concern about "who has the right to manage law and order" (p215). This is a question we are still asking today. Heidensohn drew attention to the control, and constraints, operating on women in their offending, victimisation as well as their exercise of power in law enforcement. As Silvestri says "women with power are still not viewed as part of the problem of feministic criminology" (Silvestri, pers comm.)

Women in control? was also an early example of comparative criminology. Heidensohn's rationale for engaging in a comparative analysis of policewomen in the United Kingdom and the United States which was because she 'was interested in carrying out a study of women's role in law enforcement in two nations, a form of enquiry never previously undertaken' (Heidensohn, 2008). In part this was in order to derive a new set of analytical concepts which were to prove enduring as these were further developed in the later international comparison by Brown and Heidensohn, (2000) and partly as a reforming agenda of lessons to be learnt about the progression of women in policing (Heidensohn, 2008:216). Using the comparisons and contrasts afforded by such an analysis Heidensohn identifies four themes: unsuitable job for a woman, equal opportunities, the gentle touch; a desperate remedy. Within the first theme can be discerned some answers to the question why policemen were so hostile to the entry of women. This was about the nature of police work itself and the image men have of it being hard, dangerous and requiring authority in its execution as well as involving society's more sordid aspects. Patriarchy and paternalism operated to at once exclude and protect women from the enterprise. Although as Heidensohn says it is too simplistic to locate explanations in terms of patriarchal oppression alone (similarly she is of the view that gendered oppression is too simplistic a view of female victimisation and subsequent analyses have developed these ideas, see e.g. Reece, 2013). She does insist that gender divisions are central to social control embedded within which are the rules about gender appropriate behaviours. Yet, notwithstanding some difference in approach to equal opportunities legislation and policies in the UK and USA Heidensohn concluded "the overall outcomes levels.. are not dramatically different" i.e. limited and partial (p213).

Does Women in Control? cut it in terms of Heidensohn own criteria of a classic text: significance, impact, originality, and lasting importance. Women in Control?'s place in the cannon is assured by its ambition (a comparative analysis when little was

known about policewomen in any jurisdiction); subject matter then novel, women in law enforcement; its method (a wonderful example of grounded theory); its scope (delineating the constants and contrast of two different law enforcement jurisdictions) and its conceptual analysis (examining the role of women in social control). This research was continued by her PhD student, Marisa Silvestri whose doctoral study was an ethnographic exposition of women leaders in the police (Silvestri, 2003), and Frances, with Jennifer Brown, undertook a multi-site international comparison of policewomen (Brown and Heidensohn, 2000).

I hope I have shown that her prescient analyses have had an enduring influence and significance. By her own lights she fulfils the originality criteria as a comparative analysis of this kind had not been attempted before and she had to invent analytic concepts to advance her argument. In terms of impact, reviews at the time concluded although some aspects of the method were a little shaky (e.g. the small number and selection of her respondents) this book "is studded with brilliant insights" (Susan Martin, 1994) ; is a "subtle critique of feminists notions of social control" (Peter Manning, 1995) ; that a comparative study of women in policing is "admirable" (Allison Morris, 1994) ; and provides a "fascinating and insightful description of women's strategies in managing their police careers and coping with a male infused culture" (Brown, 1994).

So yes this is definitely a classic worth re-visiting.

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