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Policing Football in Scotland: The Forgotten Team

By:

Megan O'Neill

Abstract: In this paper, I suggest that the prevailing literature which has been generated by academics and official enquiry on football spectator culture and violence has neglected one of the main features of any UK football match: the police. I demonstrate through reference to my own work with Scottish police officers how a significant police culture exists in relation to football. A key aspect in this culture is that the police do not operate as one homogenous unit, or 'team' in Erving Goffman's (1959) terms, but as several smaller teams working largely independently of each other. This police culture needs to be investigated further in order to gain a complete understanding of football spectator culture and violence.

Keywords: football, supporters, police, Goffman, Scotland

Biographical note: The author is a research associate working with Prof. Simon Holdaway on an ESRC funded project examining Black Police Associations in England and Wales. Her research interests include football studies, policing studies, race and ethnicity, the work of Erving Goffman, and the sociology of time and space.

Policing Football in Scotland: The forgotten team¹

A large and consistent feature of any football² match in Scotland is the police yet, as I will show, they have been largely neglected by academic and governmental studies. I will suggest, with reference to findings from my fieldwork in the policing of football in Scotland, that this is an oversight and that consideration needs to be given to the social as well as practical roles that the police play in football. To do this, I will use the work of Erving Goffman (1959) on 'teams' to suggest that the police operate not as one large homogenous team but as several small, independent teams.

Background to the study

While the sociological study of football violence has been a recognised area of research in England (Taylor, 1969; Marsh et al., 1978; Dunning et al., 1987; Armstrong & Harris, 1991) and Scotland (Coalter, 1985; Giulianotti, 1996) for many years, very little work has been done specifically on the police in the football context (Giulianotti, 1994: 17). Most of the work to date is either supporter-focused and only mentions the police as part of the objective context (Collison, 1989; Finn, 1994; Armstrong, 1998); is a governmental or police study into policing tactics at football and thus lacks sociological depth (The Home Office, 1990; Middleham, 1993); or looks at how the legal system over-legislates in the area of football violence through a misinformed understanding of football supporters (Armstrong & Young, 1997; Harper, 1990; Giulianotti, 1994; White, 1985). Stott and Reicher (1998) have conducted interviews with police officers to assess their views on crowds, but not specifically football crowds. Lewis (1980) conducted an ethnographic study into the policing of Aston Villa and used many of the same techniques that I have employed in this research. However, his work was largely

descriptive and did not examine the underlying social patterns that he was observing.

Garland and Rowe (1999; 2000) have written several pieces on the policing of football in England. Their work tends to focus on policing racism in football grounds or hooliganism more broadly (especially England supporters abroad), rather than on policing all types of supporters.

As such, I have conducted a qualitative research project into the sociology of football policing from the police officer's point of view. By using Goffman's (1959) work to study personal interaction between the police and supporters during a match day, I have been able to gain an understanding of the rituals, boundaries, and beliefs shared between these groups during the course of a match. Mine is an ethnographic study of the 1998/1999 season in three Scottish grounds. In that time, I have seen league matches, a testimonial, and international fixtures. Three different police forces as well as the Scottish Police College have assisted my work. Most of my data come from field notes gathered from observations of and discussions with the police before, during, and after the games. I began each football match by attending the police briefings and was assigned to a pair or team of officers for the day. In accordance with a pre-arranged plan I rotated which type of officers I observed at each match. For example, one week I would be with officers in the city centre, another week with officers in the visiting supporters' stand and another I would be with the plain clothes detectives. I went everywhere my officers did throughout the match and stayed with them until they received the final call to return to the station at the end of the match day. I walked with them while they patrolled, stood next to them in stadium, rode in the police vans or unmarked cars and sat in the CCTV rooms. I would speak to the officers around me when I could to find out their thoughts on football policing and football supporters. I did not take notes in front of them as I suspected this would make them uncomfortable, but

wrote detailed field notes upon my return home that evening that covered my observations as well as discussions that I had with the officers (a technique also discussed by Emerson et al., 2001: 356-7). I followed the same technique with the stewards, although I did not spend as many matches with them as I did with the police. I also conducted more formal interviews with higher-ranking officers outside of match days to learn more about how football policing worked from the operational and strategic levels. The following findings draw upon this qualitative research.

‘Us’ and ‘Them’: Finding the boundaries to police teams

Goffman suggests that ‘in many interaction settings some of the participants cooperate together as a team or are in a position where they are dependent upon this cooperation in order to maintain a particular definition of the situation’ (1959: 96). The police as a whole could be seen as a large ‘team’ in Goffman’s terms in that they seek to define any situation as being ordered and controlled by them. For instance, Stott and Reicher (1998) have found that the police in crowd control situations see the crowd itself as heterogeneous and that this was a view held collectively by the police. Thus while the crowd may be heterogeneous, Stott and Reicher represented the police in their study as homogenous, or, as a unified team. Young (1993), in his anthropological look at the police from the inside, has described their many techniques and symbols for preserving their own unity and sanctity in the face of the unclean public. Rituals and shared belief systems are rife, and he presents a very clear image of the police (especially in the rural forces) as a unified team. Manning (1977: 28) suggests that the police force as a whole is an *organisation*, as ‘a team exists situationally’. In Manning’s terms, an organisation is a label which can ‘bind actors into collective moral obligations, demand loyalty’, and

‘limits the range of impressions they can attempt to convey’. However, Manning further states that when interacting with each other in specific situations, the police constitute teams. He suggests that teams are transitory and based solely in the moment, whereas organisations are more enduring.

My work suggests that the police could be more accurately described as several small, permanent, and contextual teams that exist under the guise of one large general team. In contrast to Manning, I argue that some teams within the police are stable, or at least re-occurring, e.g. in the context of football duty. The various police teams I will describe next can be found at every match, although the specific actors may change from game to game. These teams are based in the sub-division from which the officers originate, in the geographic location the officers are assigned to patrol, their specific duties, their rank, and the time of day. They have come to develop established ways of interacting with the supporters, public, and each other so that each team is significant in routine social interaction at football matches.

While the police force as a whole does seek an ordered and controlled situation at football, it is each interaction team within the police that actually seeks it, yet in a different way. To demonstrate this, I will examine the personal interaction between different groups (teams) of police officers and illustrate how communication breakdowns and internal police politics prevent them from becoming one unified team. I will also examine the way each team of officers interacts with supporters. Not only is the audience for each team’s performance different, but also the way they perceive and relate to the supporters varies.

I will begin the analysis of police interaction with each other by considering the decisions made by senior police officers for the duties of uniformed officers in pre-match patrols. Based on my observations at these meetings, the usual approach the

Superintendent or Chief Inspector takes towards the policing of the football game is one that is very strict, managerial, and almost militaristic. Officers are given a wide variety of information in pre-match briefings about what the arrangements are for the day and their specific responsibilities and powers (Rubinstein, 1973: 54). The senior officers I observed often instructed their officers to arrest known troublemakers, or 'hooligans', on the spot if they 'give any hassle'. The police are 'not to mess about with them anymore' and to use arrest of one offender as a deterrent and warning to the others. Uniformed police constables (PCs) in the City Centre are organised into pairs that have specific locations to observe. Their main task is to ensure that the opposing groups of supporters are kept apart by directing them to separate routes to the stadium, and to break up large groups of supporters into smaller groups. The Superintendent surveys these tactical positions before and after the match either in the CCTV room, or by walking or driving around to see how the officers are doing and if they are in the right places.

However, it is impossible to determine the effect the Superintendent's approach has on the supporters and public because the officers do not implement it in the pure form he suggests. This is the first example of the police operating as small independent teams. Although they are supposed to be vigilant in their duties, the PCs I observed enforce the laws on a situational basis and at the complete discretion of the particular officer (for more on police discretion see Skolnick, 1966: 71-2, 90; Chatterton, 1976: 117; Sacks, 1972; and Reiner, 1994: 722). Although police discretion is not in itself a novel topic of study, it demonstrates here how the constables and senior officers are actually separate interaction teams, as the PCs do not try to maintain the same performance as that advocated by their superiors. Most encounters with football supporters outside the ground were friendly, and the build-up of the police presence in the City Centre seemed to me to be more of a benefit to the public at large than a

controlling mechanism against football disorder. Members of the general public asked the officers for directions, assistance in calling for medical help (not football related), or found an open ear for a quick chat. The time the officers spent directly dealing with football disorder was really quite minimal. The organising of officers into pairs is also very conducive to police socialising, especially if another pair is encountered during a particularly slow afternoon. Whenever a senior officer would appear though, the PCs would quickly end conversation and start walking to appear busy (Roy, 1973).

A key factor in order for a team to maintain the definition of a situation is communication. According to Goffman, if a performer does not know all the aspects of his or her role (1959: 94) or is unsure what information is to be portrayed and what is to be kept secret (1959: 141) then the overall team performance will be weak or will fail. Teams cannot operate successfully without clear communication. The above and following examples show that communication was severely lacking among the different groups of police officers. The orders from the Superintendent in pre-match briefings experienced many mutations in their implementation (as discussed above). On other occasions, many of the uniformed officers I was observing were unsure who the main troublemakers were, those whom they were supposed to be watching. In order to maintain some kind of segregation before and after the game, the officers are instructed to direct each support side along different routes to the ground to prevent them from encountering each other. On some occasions, the City Centre officers would express confusion over exactly what the specified routes were for the opposing supporters to take and thus had problems in keeping them apart. As such, the PCs had better communication among each other and a mutual understanding of which definition of the situation they wanted to maintain, rather than a shared understanding of these things with their supervising officer (Fielding, 1988: 138, 177). As such, PCs and senior officers can

not be considered members of the same team (see Reuss-Ianni, 1983, for more on relationships between constables and senior officers).

Stewards are now employed through private companies in most professional football grounds (Garland and Rowe, 2000: 146-8). The job of the steward is to assist the supporters in finding their seats and the facilities within the ground, to ask those disturbing others to stop or eject them if necessary, and to help evacuate the ground in the case of an emergency. Football at one time had only police officers in the grounds, but stewarding was introduced to reduce the number of officers needed and thus the cost of keeping a stadium safe. Police officers within a ground charge the club to be there (Loader, 1999: 375), so it is in the interests of the club's budget to have fewer police and more stewards (who cost considerably less to employ). I have observed, in my fieldwork, a larger social effect from this split in crowd management between the police and stewards. The presence of the stewards reduces the role of the uniformed police officers to that of law enforcement only. They are not there to keep the peace or to assist the supporters. Those tasks are the job of the stewards in this setting. The police officers' remit is mainly in a reserve capacity to take out the supporters who are deemed to be breaking the law (mainly through the Scottish criminal offence of 'breach of the peace'). Thus the police presence inside the stadium becomes inherently confrontational and reactive. For example, a police officer I was with once became visibly annoyed at being asked where the toilets were during a match and made sarcastic remarks later about not being a steward. This role is almost the polar opposite of that of the PCs I observed in the City Centre, who are largely friendly and supportive of the public. As these two groups of PCs are presenting different definitions of the situation, they cannot be seen as a unified team.

'Us' and 'Them': Identifying the audience

In order for interaction to occur, two teams must be involved. Goffman has said (1959: 97) that it is necessary 'to call one team the performers and to call the other team the audience or observers'. This section will examine just who the audience is for the many performances of the police.

Previously it was mentioned that the uniformed officers in the city centre have difficulty in identifying the known troublemakers at football. Several told me that they possess an idea of who these people are and what styles of dress they may adopt, but that most PCs are inexperienced when it comes to recognising established football hooligans. This confusion on the part of the PCs suggests that the hooligans can not provide the PCs team with a discernible audience for their actions. Senior officers are a much more available and ready audience, and the PCs I observed tend to orient their actions more towards them than towards the supporters. Together the PCs present the image of assurance and familiarity in their duties for the senior officers, although many PCs may be very unsure of exactly what it is they are supposed to be doing. They may have also just ended a personal conversation with another officer because an Inspector approached and are walking about to appear attentive to their area (as I witnessed more than once as an example of Cain's 'easing behaviour' [1971: 72]). Therefore, the stage is set whenever a senior officer is around, rather than when a supporter approaches. Consequently, police officers as a whole can not be a united team as they often perform for each other in public, rather than with each other.

When considering the interaction of police and supporters inside football grounds, one of the main issues to consider is that of segregation. In British grounds, the opposing supporters are kept physically separate inside the stadium (usually by a

large fence or wall) and often outside as well. The police and other authorities herald all seated stadia and CCTV as instrumental in the reduction in overall violence during a football match (Garland and Rowe, 2000; NCIS, 2000). But they deem segregation as vital to the smooth running of a game (Giulianotti and Armstrong, 1997), even though it is not a legislative requirement nor essential to their stadium licenses. Two of the football grounds I visited no longer use insurmountable physical barriers to keep the rival groups apart, but a flat cloth tarpaulin which runs down the length of the stand and covers about three columns of seats. A few stewards and police will sit along one side of the tarpaulin during the match. This technique of a soft barrier not only keeps the opposing supporters apart, but also prevents them from becoming aggressive towards each other verbally. According to the police I interviewed, the supporters know that while they could physically reach the other supporters to carry out their verbal threats, the other supporters could physically reach them as well. The lack of safety from retaliation has been deemed as enough to keep the insults from being hurled in the first place.

However, I found that this technique is not employed in all grounds. And the grounds that do use it do not use it consistently. Next to the line of police and/or stewards along the tarpaulin there is usually a gap of a few columns of empty seats before the seating begins for the opposing supporters. The number of empty seat columns varies depending on who the visiting support is. The police praised the 'psychology' of the soft barrier to me and acknowledged that the closer the support sides are to each other the less hostile they become. Nevertheless, they do not trust this theory completely. A larger gulf of empty seats is still employed for the traditionally more aggressive visiting supporter sides (e.g. those that hold a long-standing rivalry with each other such as Celtic and Rangers). While this seems to run in contradiction to the entire

point of using the tarpaulin, it is still seen as the best way to ensure the minimal amount of football fan violence. Police who have the misfortune of being allocated positions along the remaining hard segregation walls in the other grounds that I visited say that the walls are a source of much hostility. The fans know they are safe from each other, and the police told me about often being hit by coins and other passing debris during their duties there. So while physical assaults are no longer possible inside the grounds, other ways of injuring the opposition are found in throwing missiles.

It is apparent from the above examples that the audience for the performance of the uniformed officers inside the stadium is the supporters, unlike the officers in the city centre mentioned above whose audience tends to be senior officers. Thus we see again how these groups of police constables are actually separate interaction teams as they are performing different definitions of the situation to different audiences. However, the performance the supporters see in the stadium and the behavioural expectations placed on them in return can vary between forces and grounds as well as between sections of the same stadium. Because a consistent police policy for segregation in Scottish stadia has yet to be implemented, supporters can never be certain of the definition of the situation (as dictated by the police) for each ground and each section of the ground. One PC with whom I spoke suggested that travelling supporters may get arrested for conduct or actions in the ground they are visiting that they can get away with at home. They do not know the limits the police set in the other grounds. As such, the rules for interaction are often unclear.

Conclusion

Deliberately or not, the police officers working at Scottish football games have come to organise themselves into different and independent social interaction teams. As I have demonstrated, police constables in the city centre perform *for* their supervising officer rather than *with* him or her, thus demonstrating a separate team status. When constables in the city do interact with football supporters, it is usually in a friendly and jovial way. However, police constables within the football stadium tend to take a more stern approach to supporters as customer service work is left to the stewards. By doing so, the presence of all these separate police teams with their own definitions of the situation may create confusion and conflict with football supporters who may perceive them as one team, unified in purpose and outlook (Muir, 1977: 15; Zerubavel, 1979: 40). Each time a supporter encounters a police officer at different spatial, temporal, and hierarchical points, the definition of the situation (as dictated by the police) and the requirements made upon the supporter's behaviour changes. Thus the police have helped create a situation where norm violation on the part of the supporter is more likely to occur.

It is important to point out here that this article has not been about football hooliganism *per se* and interactions between police officers and 'hooligans' (whatever and whomever that may be – see Coalter, 1985; Redhead, 1991 and O'Neill, 2002: 224-6 for discussions on the variable definitions of 'hooliganism' and 'hooligans'). While this type of violent supporter came under my gaze at times during the fieldwork, most police interaction was with the basic football supporter, and this includes those who may occasionally decide to throw a coin over a segregation wall (as mentioned above). Thus the behaviour violations I discuss here that may be inadvertently encouraged by the differentiated police performances at football are not only the more dramatically violent ones ('hooliganism'), but also the more subtle actions that some police officers allow at

matches while others may not. For example, some police officers I observed felt shouting and swearing at football was not worth trying to reprimand, as 'letting off steam' is what football is all about. Other officers took great offence at this, especially if it was directed at them. Supporters were left to develop a sense of how much tolerance the police around them had of these types of actions, and this is one example of a behaviour that could experience wide variation in its control within the same police force.

As such it is impossible to measure with any certainty whether football disorder is on the increase or not. In fact, actual football 'hooliganism' itself can be perceived in many different ways. Garland and Rowe (2000: 154-5) argue that hooliganism is changing and that unorganised and spontaneous violent behaviour is becoming more common now, as opposed to the organised 'fighting crews' of the 1980s. The National Criminal Intelligence Service, from which Garland and Rowe obtained their data, have also distinguished between different types of disorder at football by saying that while overall arrests for football related offences were down in the 1999/2000 season, arrests for 'violent football hooliganism' were up. However, they then proceed to undermine the strength of these statistics by saying:

Statistics for football-related offences have, in themselves, become an unreliable indicator in providing a true assessment of football hooliganism. As the reports show, there are many occasions when a major incident of disorder - quite often well away from a football ground - will lead to comparatively few or even no arrests. Conversely, a police commander might well decide to take action, in order to prevent disorder, that might result in a large number of arrests (NCIS, 2000).

In addition to showing the futility of trying to measure football disorder, this quote also supports my own argument in that the police have a significant role to play in the experience of a football match day but that this role has not been used consistently.

Giulianotti (1994) has also argued that the perceived threat football hooligans pose is a malleable one, which has changed over time depending on political and social agendas of the moment.

We can see from the work of Goffman that social interaction includes a delicate balance of actions, reactions, and predictability. It is for precisely this reason that I have used his theories to illuminate the social tensions and negotiations occurring during football policing. If we are to truly expect football supporters to observe ‘normal’ behaviour rules, the definition of the situation must be one that is based on those rules as well. To present one social team with another team that constantly changes those rules is not going to encourage behavioural compliance. However, I am not trying to argue a causal link between the level of football disorder and police unity. Firstly, as the preceding discussion demonstrates, it is impossible to measure or establish a consistent definition of football disorder. Secondly, I am not suggesting that the police should become more operationally united as that would be impossible. Police forces are becoming ever more specialised and fragmented and as I have already discussed, stewards inside the grounds relieve them of even more of their duties. However, I would suggest that as all these groups must routinely work together in this one arena they could go a long way towards making their jobs easier and more effective by presenting a common definition of the situation, transient though it may be, for this particular context. The police need to consider the impression that they give off as a whole, and should try to work towards a united and constant presentation of self for the supporters. Increased communication between the various police teams and the stewards is vital to accomplish

this united performance. This would help to diminish confusion over what the expected interactive behaviour from the supporters is and thus possibly reduce the likelihood that violations will occur, be they subtle or more overtly violent. This analysis is based on selected observations from an extensive database, which includes further observations with more senior police officers, detectives, Mobile Support Units, CCTV operators, and also covers the perspective of female officers. Yet it can be said with certainty that the role of police teams in football matches can be illuminated by the utilisation of Goffmann's analytical categories, and potential improvements in the efficacy of such policing identified on the basis of such analysis..

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² The term 'football' will be used in this paper to refer to the sport also known as 'soccer'.

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