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Art, Craft and Science of Detective work

Abstract

> The failure of high profile criminal investigations and falling detection rates have led to public criticisms of the effectiveness of detective practice. Furthermore, the lack of research on crime investigation and the apparent mystery surrounding what detectives actually do and how they do it, reinforced by fictional representations of detectives guided by 'instinct' leaves a distinct lack of transparency. This paper presents a typology of logics guiding detective work (the art, craft and science of investigation) that provide a useful framework to examine what detectives do and the changing nature of their work. It is argued through these different perspectives that more needs to be done to articulate a theory of detective practice in order to provide transparency and rich information from which future generations of detectives can learn key skills.

There is, at present, public concern about the effectiveness of crime investigation and of detective training. A number of *causes célèbre* have brought to light investigative errors which have been blamed for delays in discovering crucial items of evidence, failure to identify suspects and the collapse of criminal prosecutions (Macpherson, 1999; Smith 2002; Bichard 2004). In the worst cases, investigative errors have led to convictions later found to have been unsafe and

unsatisfactory (Naughton 2005) There is little research available on detective work, but what there is reveals a different perspective to that of popular media images of the detective as 'super sleuth'. In reality the informal and formal building of detective reputations rests on the basis of successful cases and detection rates, which serve as motivation for detectives to achieve results (Hobbs, 1988; Skolnick, 1994; Young, 1991). The practice of effective detective has been shrouded in mystery, although the RAND study* criticised detectives for their inability to solve crime unless the public provided information of a suspect or lead (Greenwood *et al.*, 1977). Bayley (1998) reaffirmed this view by arguing that the detective approach to investigation is routinely 'suspect-centred'. These views clearly identify detective work as a process that relies upon the public identification of offenders rather than the intuitive insight of detectives.

Although policework has traditionally been thought of as an intuitively learned 'craft', efforts have been directed for some time at developing police 'professionalism' based on a more scientific approach to policing practice (e.g. Bayley & Bittner, 1984). Kleinig (1996: 34–7) suggests that among the defining characteristics of the profession are possession of special knowledge and expertise, and their enhancement through higher education and training. In crime investigation, the need for a new professionalism is particularly clear as detectives have to master increasingly complex technology and scientific methods of investigation (Kleinig, 1996: 35; Lyman 1993). Moreover, detectives are increasingly called upon to engage with other branches of policing and to work in teams with people from other agencies (e.g. in community safety units) towards newly defined goals such as crime prevention (Bowling, 1998: 320–1).

There are competing perspectives regarding the nature of detective work. Indeed, the terms 'art', 'craft' and 'science' all help to characterise criminal investigation (Reppetto, 1978). Debate has suggested that investigative work ranges from any one of these approaches to a combination of all three (Reppetto, 1978). The 'old regime' perspective of the seasoned detective highlights the notion of detective work as a 'craft'. The 'craft' is seen as emerging from experience on the job, an understanding of the role of suspects, victims and police involved in the process of crime investigation and an ability to craft or organise the case in a manner considered suitable by the detective (Hobbs, 1988). The use of manipulation and negotiation with victims, suspects, police managers and supervisors to achieve either organisational ends or a form of justice considered appropriate by the detective may all be seen as relevant characteristics of the craft of detective work (Chatterton, 1995; Corsianos, 2001; Ericson, 1981; Rose, 1996).

The 'art' of detective work concerns intuition, instinctive feelings and hunches towards problem solving in an investigative capacity. Ericson (1981) and Sanders (1977) argue that the 'art' lies in the ability to separate the false from the genuine, but also in identifying effective and creative lines of inquiry. These lines of inquiry are not only formed by leads from forensic information but also from the 'reading' of criminal behaviour and those who commit or witness crime. An officer who can practise the 'art' of detective work not only reads the behaviour of those surrounding the crime but also considers motivation and strategies to avoid detection. The failure of the police service to clearly articulate and develop the detective 'art' of investigative decision making has led to the belief that only some detectives can be recognised for their brilliance within the detective hierarchy. This 'art' of detective work appears from some perspectives to be a quality that only experience can provide, as

theory in classrooms and books does not help the detective 'read' the streets (Simon, 1991). Not only are few detectives perceived as being able to practise the 'art', but the manner in which it is achieved is not clearly articulated. A position that Flynn (2002: 207) identifies as practitioners claiming 'to know what works and what does not, without necessarily being able to demonstrate it' providing barriers to transparency and accountability.

In short, this view sees the detective as an 'artist' who can demonstrate brilliant insight and intuition which ultimately results in the crime being solved (Reppetto, 1978). However, there is no script or method available to trainee detectives on how they may reach this elevated cultural status. Rather, the 'art' of detective work is acknowledged through colleagues' perceptions on the basis of results and reputations as good thief-takers (Hobbs, 1988). Therefore, recognition of quality in terms of practising the 'art' of detective work is not open to external scrutiny, but rather is internalised and admired by detectives themselves. This leaves the general practice of detective work to be a matter of routine relying upon witnesses, and intelligence on databases or DNA matches. The investigative pedigree for these tasks is not insight or skill but routine. Rather than offering increased professionalism, the management of crime is encouraging what Maguire *et al.* (1992: 25) correctly identify as 'deskilling'.

A perspective in direct opposition to the concept of the detective as artist is one of the investigator as scientist. In this conception of detective work detectives are skilled in scientific approaches, crime scene management, the use of physical evidence, investigative interviewing, informant handling, offender profiling and managing the investigative process (Osterburg & Ward, 2000; Rachlin, 1995). The detective here is one who requires an advanced level of

knowledge and instruction in interview technique. The scientific detective is not confined to forensic science but also has an appreciation of the psychology of interview technique, and of the social sciences of crime analysis and policing. Bayley (2002) argues that the use of science in the context of DNA evidence has initiated a shift away from a 'suspected-centred' approach towards an 'evidence-centred' one. The scientific approach to detective work points to a potentially evolving 'professional' detective significantly different from the detectives in the past. Both the 'old' (detective as 'artist') style detectives and the professional detectives (detectives as 'scientists') are 'ideal types'. In the cultural perspective of the detective as an 'artist', of course, it is implicit that only a few officers will attain the status of detective. In the perspective of detective as 'scientist', there is an inherent expectation that many will be able to attain the status of detective, as science can be taught to exact principles in the classroom and the workplace. Essentially, detective work as a science arguably removes some of the mythical and cultural barriers to learning and practising detective work.

The craft/art/science debate is reflected in the changing nature of detective work and the variety of methods available to the police. Although rapid development in science has provided an argument that the modern detective will have the attributes aligned with the 'scientific detective', these claims are not new. Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, argued:

> Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner.
> (cited in Wright, 2002: 75)

Recent scientific developments in detective work include: offender profiling; forensic science; and information technology (Britton, 1997; Canter, 1994; Ericson & Haggerty, 1997; Kaye, 1995; Saferstein, 1995; Shepherd, 1988). All three developments are influencing the practice of detective work. The increasing prominence of scientific methods (Morgan, 1990; Tilley & Ford, 1996) and the changing police environment challenge traditional approaches to policing (Morgan, 1990; Southgate, 1988).

It is clear from the literature that there are certain weaknesses in the 'art' of policing, but only if it remains shrouded in mystery. There are dangers of a 'sink–or-swim' approach to learning from experience when there is not a structured and coherent learning strategy in place. The craft of policing acknowledges important 'entrepreneurial' skills (Hobbs, 1988) that have their place in ethical and transparent approaches to police work. While the contribution of science continues to evolve in an investigative context, it is unsurprising given the lack of research in this area that little is known about the work of detectives. In order for detective work to develop with the same recognition as that given to other professional public bodies, then how detectives learn the art, craft and science of investigation must be delivered in a robust learning framework supported by good research.

Note
* The RAND study was an extensive two-year study conducted in the early 1970s in America and focused upon the effectiveness, organisation and contribution of police investigation (Greenwood *et al.*, 1977).

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