

## Aberystwyth University

### *Reflexivity and Participatory Policy Ethnography*

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*Published in:*  
Reflexivity and Criminological Research

*Publication date:*  
2014

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Blaustein, J. (2014). Reflexivity and Participatory Policy Ethnography: Situating the Self in a Transnational Criminology of Harm Production. In K. Lumsden, & A. Winter (Eds.), *Reflexivity and Criminological Research: Experiences with the Powerful and the Powerless* (pp. 301-312). Springer Nature.

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This is a pre-publication version of Blaustein, J. (2014) 'Reflexivity and Participatory Policy Ethnography: Situating the Self in a Transnational Criminology of Harm Production'. In K. Lumsden and A. Winter (eds) (2014) *Reflexivity in Criminological Research: Experiences with the Powerful and the Powerless*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, Chapter 23.

## **Reflexivity and Participatory Policy Ethnography: Situating the Self in a Transnational Criminology of Harm Production<sup>1</sup>**

**Dr Jarrett Blaustein**

### **Introduction**

The concept of reflexivity is central to research that aspires to interpret and reconstruct global, comparative and transnational dimensions of crime and its control. It is crucial for understanding how and why criminal justice policies travel between contexts and for interrogating the motives and the interests of the agents and the institutions which facilitate these 'policy transfers' (Jones and Newburn 2007). Reflexivity in the context of global criminology can be understood as the idea that '[t]here is no one-way street between the researcher and the object of study; rather, the two affect each other mutually and continually in the course of the research process' (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009, 79). The reflexive praxis described by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) holds important methodological implications for criminologists who are interested in studying globalisation 'as an interactive rather than a hegemonic process' (Cain 2000); in other words, a process that is continuously shaped by local and global forces. The concept is therefore crucial for understanding how globalisation facilitates the diffusion of 'Western' mentalities of crime and punishment

throughout the Global South (see Chan 2005) and it provides a vehicle for working towards the actualisation of what Bowling (2011, 374 original emphasis) describes as ‘a **criminology of harm production** emphasizing the role of the discipline in documenting the harms produced by global crime control practices and the role of criminologists in speaking truth to power...’

For researchers afforded the opportunity to utilise ethnographic methods to access the global fields through which transnational criminal justice policy meaning is negotiated and constructed, the ‘global’ aspect of interactive globalisation can be reconstructed via the researcher’s active reflections about how their background, experiences and ethnocentric preconceptions shape their interactions with the field and their interpretations of it. The ‘local’ aspect can be represented through the researcher’s reflections of how their interpretations and interactions may have been altered as a direct result of their progressive immersion in the setting. Continuous reflection during one’s field work may allow a researcher to actively situate their ‘self’ within the field of study and recursively mitigate their own harm-generating potential. Retrospective analysis further provides the researcher with a method of reconstructing this praxis and representing it in textual form.

This chapter illustrates the alleviatory potential of participatory research on international criminal justice policy transfers in the Global South using retrospective analysis of my ethnographic research with United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) pilot ‘Safer Communities’ project in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). The field work took place over a period of three months between January and April 2011 and my access agreement with UNDP in BiH afforded me the unique opportunity to overtly immerse myself in the institutional culture of a multi-lateral international development agency that was actively developing a

community safety project for transplant to BiH. Through my roles as a doctoral researcher and a 'Project Intern' with the Safer Communities team, I used overt participant observation, ethnographic interviewing and observational methods to interpret the power asymmetries affecting the police development assistance process and the mediatory capacity of various stakeholders including international development workers and local police officers (see Blaustein 2014).

With this chapter, I reflect specifically on my personal contributions to the development of a UNDP policy brief that outlined the case for introducing community safety partnership reforms to the City of Sarajevo in 2011. The example illustrates that a researcher's awareness of the reflexive praxis described by Cain (2000) can foster the realisation of a particular variant of Bowling's (2011, 374) transnational criminology of harm production that involves limiting the impact of one's presence unless it is clear that it will not exacerbate structural asymmetries or generate what Cohen (1988, 190) describes as 'paradoxical damage, that is, the possibility that even a 'benevolent' criminal justice policy transfer can inadvertently generate harms due to cultural and structural differences between the context of origin and the recipient society (Cohen 1988, 190). To this effect, the chapter highlights how a researcher's direct immersion in an active policy node<sup>2</sup> can create unique opportunities for this individual to move beyond ex post facto critiques of ethnocentrism and the structural inequalities associated with international police development assistance programmes (Ellison and Pino 2012; Ryan 2011) by addressing these issues on a continuous basis as a participant. To be successful in this capacity, the researcher as a cultural and contextual outsider must accept the limits of their expertise and exercise modesty in their interactions with local stakeholders so as not to undermine their power. Reflexivity as a component of participatory policy research thus provides the researcher with a means of simultaneously achieving a

transnational criminology of harm production which allows them to interpret the ‘harms produced by global crime control practices’ (Bowling 2011, 374) and to achieve modest impact by speaking *truths* to power rather than a singular ‘truth’. This distinction is important because it recognises that the reflective praxis of ethnographic research in a transnational setting illuminates a plurality of perspectives and experiences that must not be marginalised by the research process lest key local stakeholders be denied meaningful opportunities to interact with globalisation.

### **Situating Safer Communities**

Policies associated with the concept of a community safety partnership have proliferated throughout the Global South over the past two decades.<sup>3</sup> They represent an increasingly popular feature of plural policing and crime control models in advanced Western democracies and their touted success and purported value as locally responsive models governing security at the community level rendered the model an attractive template for entrepreneurial reformers looking to capitalise on an emergent market for police development assistance in developing, transitional and post-conflict societies (Crawford 2009). Community safety partnerships were first introduced to Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2003 by two different international development agencies, the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. The logic was that establishing local ‘citizen security forums’ (CSF) would complement local community policing initiatives by improving the capacity of the police to initiate holistic solutions to addressing local public safety issues.

By 2009, both of these agencies had either withdrawn their support for community safety reform projects in BiH, or were in the final stages of doing so. Members of UNDP's Small Arms Control and Prevention (SACBiH) project learned of this impending policy vacuum and developed a proposal to provide continued support for five CSF's in the municipalities of Bratunac, Prijedor, Sanski Most, Visegrad and Zenica. UNDP approved the project and the SACBiH team proceeded to pilot its 'Safer Communities' project using limited seed funding provided by the SACBiH budget and a small grant from the Danish Government. The seed funding covered the salary for an in-house Community Policing Advisor who, along with the SACBiH Project Manager and a Project Associate, worked with these forums to develop their administrative capacities and develop relevant project activities designed to address local sources of insecurity. Situating my 'self' in the Safer Communities project meant continuously working to gauge the nature and the impact of my involvement with the project by reflecting on how my mentality and actions were being influenced by my progressive immersion in a transnational field as well as the structural politics of liberal state-building in Bosnia-Herzegovina (see Blaustein 2014).

My ethnography of the Safer Communities project highlighted the problems of aid dependency and the ethnocentric proclivities of international development workers tasked with financing community safety partnerships designed to improve the local accountability and responsiveness of security governance in a fledgling, fragmented democracy (Blaustein 2014). Like other critiques of police development assistance (for example see Ellison and Pino 2012; Ryan 2011), I concluded that the capacity of international development workers to initiate police reforms that prioritised the needs of local policy recipients over the interests of powerful international donors was severely restricted by structural constraints and the limited availability of core funding to support locally defined project activities (Blaustein 2014).

Although pessimistic, my conclusion was not entirely fatalistic as my participant observation illuminated the malleability of our collective habitus<sup>4</sup> as well as our agentic capacity as individual members of the Safer Communities project team. Our agency enabled us to participate in a recursive process of ‘policy translation’ (Lendvai and Stubbs 2009) by assuming the role of transnational policy mediators. This analysis was consistent with Cain’s (2000) description of globalisation as an interactive process discussed in the following section.

### **Policy Translation and Transnational Criminology**

‘Policy translation’ is a conceptual off-shoot of the more widely used term ‘policy transfer’ which Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 344) define as the process whereby ‘knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions etc. in one time and/or place is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions in another time and/or place’. A growing literature on transnational criminology is critical of policy transfers initiated by Western actors to promote the ‘democratisation’, ‘modernisation’, and ‘transformation’ of criminal justice institutions determined to be underdeveloped or indigenous in the Global South (see Bowling 2011). These concerns draw from Cohen’s (1998) discussion of the potential consequences of introducing ‘Western Crime Control Models’ to the ‘Third World’ and suggest that these policy transfers are one-directional and driven by the interests of powerful donors rather than the needs of recipient societies. The objects of these transfers are said to cause ‘paradoxical damage’ (Cohen 1998, 189-94; Bowling 2011) to recipient societies and have been described as tainted by ethnocentrism (Cain 2000; Nelken 2009). From a normative perspective, policy transfers associated with

police reform in the context of transitional democracies have also been criticised for undermining the political freedoms of recipient societies (Ellison and Pino 2012; Ryan 2011).

Cain's (2000, 86) discussion of ethnocentrism and the interactive character of globalisation provides an important framework for developing a reflexive, 'transnational criminology of harm production' (Bowling 2011). Rather than presenting a deterministic account of globalization, Cain's analysis recognises that local actors have an important role to play in mitigating the paradoxical damage and structural inequalities of international policy transfers. Cain (2000, 86) writes:

The trajectory is usually from the more to less powerful, but the recipient groups may, if they choose, if they are strong enough, interact with that idea, re-situate it within their own discourses and practices, modify it, make it their own, and so create an alternative model, which, ideally should then find its own place in a global pool of possibilities.

The remainder of this chapter expands upon the argument that human agency can mediate the forces of globalisation and play a role in mitigating the harms generated by international criminal justice policy transfers. It does so by illuminating the reflexive capacity of researchers and their capacity to alleviate the 'paradoxical damage' (Cohen 1988) that may result from field work in a transnational setting.

### **Situating My 'Self' in Safer Communities**



In assuming the role of a Project Intern with UNDP's Safer Communities team, I contributed to an active police development assistance project in a weak and structurally dependent society. I drafted numerous concept notes that explored the marketability of the project to prospective donors; contributed to the project's sustainability report; conducted a five week qualitative study of community policing in Sarajevo; and authored a policy brief that outlined UNDP's recommendations for introducing the community safety partnership model to Sarajevo. I openly jotted about my experiences in a small field diary and I spent my evenings reconstructing the days' events as field notes. These field notes established a record of key project activities, documented the institutional culture of UNDP in BiH, reflected on my contributions to the project and described my ongoing interactions with various stakeholders such as my colleagues.

I was assigned the policy brief by the Project Manager in only the second week of the internship. The plan was for me to research and write the report and the Project Manager would provide me with regular feedback. I was also informed that in the next couple of weeks, we would meet with a senior municipal official from Sarajevo Canton to seek his political support for the proposal. Once drafted, the final report would then be reviewed and approved by the Project Manager, translated into Bosnian and submitted to the municipal official and the Minister for Interior Affairs for Sarajevo Canton. I quickly established that the assignment reflected the UNDP's capacity development ethos and its advocacy of generating local ownership of its reforms. In order to align my work with what I interpreted to be the habitus of my colleagues, I made a concerted effort to embrace these principles and use them to structure my work.

### ***The Ethics of Participation***

Despite my admiration for UNDP's 'capacity development' ethos, I had personal reservations about the long-term consequences of my participation in this task. The prospect of taking on the assignment and using it to develop a personal understanding of how development workers at UNDP interpret and contribute to police development assistance was appealing yet the prospect of developing policy recommendations for government officials in a foreign country was intimidating. I lacked local knowledge and feared that if I did somehow manage to produce a competent report my recommendations would inevitably be tainted by my ethnocentric interpretation of the city's problems and my naivety about local politics and governing institutions that would presumably shape the implementation process. What I found perhaps most disconcerting at this early stage of my field work was that my colleagues appeared to be treating me as an expert on the community safety partnership model due to my educational background and long-term residence in the United Kingdom. To accord somebody expert status is to empower that individual and I did not wish to be empowered because I recognised that my knowledge of operational aspects of community safety partnerships was almost entirely academic. At this point in my research I had yet to encounter the formal terminology of 'paradoxical damage' (Cohen 1988) but my hastily jotted field notes indicate that even a novice researcher is capable of reflecting on their harm generating potential as a participant:

...I arrive at the office at 8 am [and] the Project Manager tells me... that I am to write a policy brief extolling the virtues of the Safer Communities model for application in Sarajevo and add some recommendations [for] how it should be implemented in relation to the city's structures/institutions... I am very excited about this prospect but it occurs to me that I have no idea what I am doing or how to even write a policy brief! I hope that I do not ruin the

state of policing in Sarajevo...any more than it already is at least. (Field notes, 21 January 2011)

In order to ethically justify my participation in this particular task, I decided that I would need to establish that the policy brief was actually warranted on the basis of local needs. The emphasis on local needs reflected both my interpretation of UNDP's capacity development ethos and my commitment to the harm principle. The fact that my ethical obligation as a researcher aligned with UNDP's commitment to capacity development in this particular instance was important because it ensured that my ethical judgment would also influence the team's decision of whether or not to promote the model in Sarajevo Canton.

Working with my colleagues, I established that my participation was ethically justifiable because there was an evident rationale for pursuing the project in relation to local needs. Specifically, we determined that there was a lack of coordination between the police and different municipal agencies and that this might be addressed through the creation of a 'citizen security forum'. The secondary data that we consulted in forming this judgement consisted of a public perceptions survey that was commissioned by UNDP in BiH in the Fall of 2010 and an evaluation report on local community policing practices throughout Bosnia that was written and researched by a United Kingdom based UNDP Evaluation Consultant in 2010.<sup>5</sup> The decision also benefitted from the subjective experiences of my colleagues who were long-term residents of Sarajevo. My colleagues openly reflected on their perceptions of the security situation in Sarajevo and the advantages and limitations of the capacity development approach as a means of promoting local ownership of security sector reforms. These reflections allowed me critically interpret the empirical evidence they also represented a valuable source of data for my research.

### *Safer Communities as Interactive Globalisation*

In early February, I met with a senior municipal official in Sarajevo to discuss the policy brief and to generate local support for implementing the proposal. Also in attendance was the Safer Communities team's Project Manager and a graduate student from the University of Sarajevo who had volunteered his time to contribute to the research for the policy brief. The encounter and my colleagues' subsequent reactions to my concerns illustrate the interactive nature of globalisation described by Cain (2000).

At the beginning of the meeting, the official made it clear that he was interested in specific policy recommendations that could be used to improve community safety in Sarajevo. The meeting then took an unexpected turn when the official proceeded to discuss his interest in working with UNDP to develop sentencing reforms having recently read about the benefits of 'alternative sentences' (i.e. community penalties) in Serbia and believed that they might help to reduce overcrowding of prisons in BiH (field notes, 3 March 2011). From the meeting, I quickly determined that the official's interpretation of 'community safety' was significantly broader than my own or that of UNDP in BiH and I left there fearing that I was in over my head. I returned to the office and discussed my concerns with the project's Community Policing Advisor who assured me that it was not our role as development workers to propose concrete policy recommendations. Rather, the Community Policing Advisor told me, 'UNDP is about giving local stakeholders the tools to do this' and that this was why we advocated a flexible framework for establishing citizen security forums in local communities. Along these lines, a second member of the Safer Communities team advised me to 'keep it broad' and 'avoid too much detail' because we need to 'let them figure it out for themselves' (personal communications, 3 March 2011).

The municipal official as a local stakeholder and my colleagues in their capacity as representatives of a global institution each recognised that the content of the policy brief would be decided upon within a transnational policy node that was largely inaccessible to the prospective policy recipients. This interaction therefore illustrates the power imbalance between the global and the local with respect to international police development assistance in BiH. My colleagues however were aware of structural asymmetries inherent to their work and they worked to facilitate balanced interactions wherever possible. In this instance, my colleagues did so by advising me to ‘keep it broad’ so that a plurality of local actors would later have a meaningful opportunity to interact with our recommendations and adapt or reject them for application in Sarajevo Canton as they saw fit. As a cultural outsider, I felt reassured by this guidance because it provided me with a suitable justification for extracting myself from a situation in which I feared that I would find myself ‘speaking truth to power’ (Bowling 2011) that I had yet to fully comprehend.

### *Final Drafts*

I submitted a draft of the policy brief to the Project Manager on 31 March 2011. I had actually finished drafting the report weeks earlier but held-off on submitting it in order to afford myself a chance to reflect on the evidence generated from a parallel study that I had been conducting which focused on the actual implementation of community policing in Sarajevo. Based on my observation of two specialist community policing units, I hastily added a final paragraph to the policy brief that included a specific recommendation that:

Based on the findings of a recent assessment of [community policing] activities in Grad Sarajevo, it is our recommendation that a citizen security

forum be established in [a specific municipality] at the earliest possible convenience...It is clear to us that launching this forum would help to reinforce the authority of these CBP officers in the eyes of their partners as well as to enhance their capacity to respond to less conventional community safety issues that they regularly encounter during the course of their duties. For example, such a forum would provide the officers with a functional venue for addressing issues such as stray dogs or poor street lighting as it would serve to enhance the transparency of this problem-solving process and create additional pressures on key service providers to respond to the community's needs in a timely manner. (Draft of Policy Brief, 31 March 2011)

The Project Manager cut the entire paragraph from the final version of the policy brief because it was too specific and thus, incompatible with the capacity development ethos.

The final version of the policy brief which was ultimately submitted to the Deputy Mayor and the Ministry of Interior Affairs in July 2011 contained no specific recommendations. Rather, the Executive Summary (translated) proposed that:

A Community Steering Board (CSB) should be formally established through cooperation between the Mayor's office and the Ministry of Interior Affairs by [date withheld] to oversee the implementation and institutionalization of this plan by the end of the year;

CSB should create an Operational Security Plan (OSP) based on SARA methodology that defines the city's community safety and security priorities

annually and a rulebook that will serve to guide the activities of Citizen Security Forums (CSF) at the municipal level;

Establishment of discretionary budget (renewable) that will enable CSB to coordinate and financially support CSF activities that aligns with CSB Operational Safety Plan;

CSFs should be formally established within each municipality. CSFs should be officially recognized by the municipal councils (similar to 'Commissions');

Establishment of discretionary budget through the municipal councils (renewable) that will enable CSFs to implement community safety projects in cooperation with key service providers;

Formal requirement that municipal-level Mayors serve as permanent members in CSFs;

CSFs designate procedure for utilizing SARA methodology to identify and address [community-level] security and public safety issues. (UNDP 2011: p. 4)

Exiting the field has since made it difficult for me to gauge the impact of this document and of my participation with the project but I have learned from the graduate student who attended the meeting with the Deputy Mayor that the policy brief prompted the formation of a working group comprised of local government officials, criminal justice practitioners, and local academics from the University of Sarajevo who met to discuss the proposals in September 2011. Insofar as my participation appears to have fostered a public dialogue that

was relevant and accessible to a diverse group of local stakeholders, I am content that my modest contribution to the field did not serve to marginalise the preferences of local citizens. Nor did my participation ‘speak truth to power’ (Bowling 2011) by constructing or validating a ‘solution’ to an externally-defined problem. I am therefore grateful to my colleagues for welcoming me into their world and continuously helping me to conduct myself in a manner consistent with the harm principle.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrated the need for modest engagement with a transnational field by reflecting on my ethnography of the Safer Communities project in Bosnia-Herzegovina and through my discussion about why justifying a modest policy intervention on the basis of an outsider’s interpretation of local needs is challenging for both methodological and ethical reasons. Methodologically, the researcher is limited by their ethnocentrism and their status as a cultural outsider. These limitations, combined with the fact that the researcher may not be a permanent member of the field, highlights the ethical imperative for researchers to minimise impact if it may generate harm. Reflexive awareness supports one’s ability to achieve this ‘transnational criminology of harm production’ (Bowling 2011) and to facilitate deliberations that create opportunities for local stakeholders to meaningfully participate in globalization as an interactive process. A ‘transnational criminology of harm production’ (Bowling 2011) in this sense is concerned with both the harms generated by others and the harms or the potential harms generated by one’s ‘self’.

The reflexive praxis which makes this transnational criminology of harm production achievable through one’s field work is grounded in Cain’s (2000) discussion of interactive globalization, Cohen’s (1998) reflections on ‘paradoxical damage’ in the Third World and



most recently in Bowling's (2011) work on 'transnational criminology'. The ethos does not reject the possibility that international research on policing and police development assistance in the Global South may generate positive impact but rather it recognises that often, less is more. On a methodological level, it further suggests that an ethnographic approach readily lends itself to a transnational criminology of harm production because its epistemological orientation assumes that the researcher is inseparable from their field of study. Reflexive awareness provides ethnographers with a means of interpreting the subjectivities generated through their participant observation and it also provides them with a means of regulating their own ethnocentric interactions with the field.

However, it should also be considered that mixed-method approaches may also be reconciled with a transnational criminology of harm production and benefit from its call for modesty. For example, Northern criminologists training Southern practitioners and researchers to utilise experimental and quasi-experimental methods as a means of supporting criminal justice transformation must exercise reflexive awareness lest their instructions and the resultant experimental designs reflect their own ethnocentric definitions of the field instead of those of key local stakeholders. For this reason, leading proponents of experimental criminology including Peter Neyroud have discussed the importance of grounding experiments in a solid foundation of ethnographic research (see Hills et al., 2013 September). The implication is that a transnational criminology of harm production can accommodate various methods but that it requires researchers to acknowledge their limitations and the potential implications of their involvement in an active policy process. They must reflect on the ways in which structural power asymmetries may enhance their perceived expertise and disassociate themselves with the expert label when necessary. They must do these things before they 'speak truth to power' (Bowling 2011) or better yet, work to ensure that their

research speaks truths to power. Finally, they must resist the temptation to construct a problem to solve simply because the occasion or an attractive template presents itself.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my colleague Sarah Wydall, participants who attended the ESRC seminar on 'Crime Control and Devolution: Policy-Making and Expert Knowledge in a Multi-Tiered Democracy' that took place in Edinburgh on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 2013, and the editors for their feedback on previous drafts of this chapter. I would also like to thank my former colleagues and research subjects at UNDP in BiH for their support.

<sup>2</sup> A policy node describes a social space at which different actors, institutions and structures converge for the purpose of shaping an active policy-making process. The nodal space may correspond to an institutional setting or emerge through the interactions between different institutional stakeholders. The Safer Communities project represented an ideal policy node for using participatory policy ethnography to interpret the transnational power dynamics of police development assistance because it was temporally stable (i.e. it was located within an established institutional setting )yet the prospect of future instability that arose from UNDP's constant need to

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justify the existence of the node to current and prospective donors facilitated a reflective dialogue regarding the aims and impact of the project (see Blaustein 2014).

3 Some of the background and conceptual material from this section is based on Blaustein (2014).

4 Habitus refers to structured mentalities and dispositions that shape the practices and perceptions of the individuals who collectively populate a field. This simplified definition of habitus draws from definitions by Elias (2000) and Bourdieu (1977) and is intended to emphasise the idea that habitus is shaped by the continuous interplay between structure and agency and between objective and subjective forces.

5 The public perceptions survey and the evaluation report are internal UNDP documents. My access agreement with UNDP established my permission to reference these documents. The data should not be treated as 'scientific', it is for illustrative purposes only.