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Policing football ‘risk’? A participant action research case study of a liaison based approach to ‘public order’.

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Abstract

This paper reports upon the first formal academic analysis of the deployment of a dialogue based and explicitly non-coercive ‘Police Liaison Team’ (PLT) within the public order policing operation surrounding a football fixture. The study uses an approach based upon Participant Action Research to first generate changes to operational practices and then to analyse the consequences of these changes upon the dynamics of the event and of the public order policing operation itself. Data is drawn from multiple sources including direct observation and post event focus groups. It is argued that the PLT played an important role in terms of enhancing police capacity for dialogue and communication with ‘risk’ fans, adding depth and quality to risk assessment as well as assisting in the avoidance of ‘disorder’ and police coercion. Problems were identified in terms of strategy, inappropriate deployment of the resource by police commanders and resistance to change among police staff. The implication of the study for understanding ‘risk’ are discussed along with the role of PLTs in helping to achieve proportionality and efficiency in the policing of football.

Keywords: Public Order, Policing, Crowds, Football, Hooliganism, Liaison, Dialogue.

Introduction.

In April 2009 there were demonstrations surrounding the G20 international summit in London. During those protests Mr Ian Tomlinson, a local newspaper seller on his way home from work, was struck with a baton and pushed over by a police officer. Mr Tomlinson died shortly afterwards. In the wake of his death a high profile media campaign forced the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) to request an inquiry into its policing of the event by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of the Constabulary (HMIC). What began as a specific inquiry into the policing of the G20 (HMIC 2009a) then grew into a fundamental review of public order policing across the UK (HMIC, 2009b). The recommendations laid out in the HMIC's *Adapting to Protest (ATP)* review led to some of the most significant and far reaching policy reforms in the UK with respect to police national guidance for public order since the 1980s (ACPO, 2010, College of Policing, 2014, HMIC, 2009b).

Underpinning these reforms is recognition of the centrality of the Human Rights Act (1998; HRA) for command decision-making with respect to the policing of crowds (Fenwick, 2009; Channing, 2015; Mead, 2009; Stott & Gorringer, 2014). The changes were also reinforced conceptually by a theory of crowd psychology referred to as the Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM) (HMIC, 2009b, Chapter 4; Stott, 2009). Consequently, a number of recommendations within ATP focused on the development of police capacity to engage in 'non-coercive' dialogue with crowd participants as an integral and primary component of public order policing within the UK (HMIC, 2009a,b¹); manifest in early 2011 in the form of specialist police units with skills in communication referred to as Police Liaison Teams (PLTs) comprised of Police Liaison Officers (PLOs).

In the UK 'public order policing' is primarily delivered by Police Support Units (PSUs). The PSU is a formation of twenty-five police officers trained to use coercion to maintain and restore 'public order', each equipped with 'protective equipment' or 'riot gear' including a shield, baton, helmet, fireproof overalls, and padding. A PSU consists of 3 vehicles each with a driver, 18 police Constables, three Sergeants and an Inspector. They are trained to work together in a unified fashion and can be deployed to create cordons, provide marching escorts, contain or disperse crowds, if necessary through the use of force.

In contrast, PLOs are officers in ordinary police uniform who wear light blue tabards with the words 'Liaison Officer' displayed clearly across the back in order to visibly differentiate them from their yellow jacketed (PSU) colleagues². Their primary role is non-coercive and they work before, during

¹ Specifically: Adapting to Protest Part 1 (July 2009): Review of MPS policing of protest during G20 Summit in April 2009. Recommendation 2: improve dialogue with protest groups. Adapting to Protest Part 2 (Nov 2009): Review of national framework for policing protest. Recommendation 5: communication strategies + understanding of crowd dynamics

² The PSU is a formation of police officers trained to use force to maintain and restore public order each equipped with 'protective equipment' or 'riot gear' including a shield, baton, helmet, overalls, and padding. A PSU consists of 3 vehicles each with a driver, 18 police Constables, three Sergeants and an Inspector.

and after crowd events acting as a link between public order commanders, event organisers and crowd participants. Their function is to promote perceptions of police legitimacy among crowd participants and use their communication and negotiation skills to resolve and create solutions for minor problems. They also play an important role in building relationships of trust with crowd participants, gathering information and otherwise creating a police capability for avoiding the undifferentiated use of force against crowds as a whole. Importantly, while there is some considerable variability across the UK with respect to their deployments, their primary function is not to gather formal intelligence but to concentrate on facilitating human rights.

There is some evidence that the communication capacity delivered by PLTs is playing an increasingly important role within public order policing operations with respect to reducing conflict, police deployment and expenditure. Existing research suggests that these liaison-based approaches are effective at de-escalating tension during protest events because they enhance police capacity for problem solving, limit setting, and mediating. It is understood that liaison based tactics can be undermined, however, through poor understanding of the approach among police commanders. Moreover, that PLTs assist in the avoidance of conflict because they also actively prevent disproportionate use of coercion by the police. In other words, PLTs do not simply play a role in policing crowds, they also are important in policing the police (Gorringe, Stott & Rosie, 2011; Stott et al, 2013; Waddington, 2012, College of Policing, 2015a; Stott et al, 2015).

It is currently the case that the use and analysis of PLTs has taken place almost entirely in direct relationship to the policing of political demonstrations and other forms of protest (e.g. English Defence League, (EDL) anti-fracking protests). Yet for some large metropolitan forces a significant proportion of expenditure on public order relates to the policing of football. For example, in West Yorkshire over the three football seasons across 2011 to 2014 a total of 18,326 police officers were deployed to football related public order operations at a cost of over £4 million (XXXXX). Despite the widespread adoption of PLTs and their impact in managing protest there is as yet no routine deployment of PLTs in the context of football. As such the function and potential effectiveness of the use of PLTs in that domain is not yet understood. This study contributes toward addressing this knowledge gap by providing the first empirical exploration of the use of PLTs in a football context within the UK.

'Risk' and the policing public order at football matches.

It is often assumed that football 'disorder' is the outcome of the convergence of groups of fans predisposed toward conflict (i.e. 'hooligans'). Accordingly, the very presence of these fans is anticipated to pose a 'risk' to 'public order'. Therefore, police guidance at a national and international level revolves around the categorisation of fans as either 'risk' or 'non-risk' (College of Policing, 2014; Council of Europe, 2010). 'Risk' fans are formally defined as any "person, known or not [to the police], who can be regarded [by the police] as posing a possible risk to public order or antisocial behaviour, whether planned or spontaneous, at or in connection with a football event" (Council of

Europe; Council Resolution 2010/C, p.21). This broad and encompassing definition underpins a policing approach concentrated on the identification, exclusion and control of 'risk' fans, primarily through the use of surveillance, intelligence gathering, coercion and Football Banning Orders (FBOs) (Hopkins, 2014; Hopkins & Hamilton-Smith, 2014; James & Pearson, 2015; Stott & Pearson, 2006; 2007).

Within the UK the task of identifying 'risk' fans is an assignment undertaken primarily by Football Intelligence Officers (FIOs) and 'spotters'. These specialist police officers focus upon the fan groups of specific clubs within their force jurisdiction. On match days they are usually deployed to monitor pubs, travel hubs and other places where fans will gather. Their assessment is the primary basis for the host police operation to categorise fans³, which in turn has a profound impact on how they are policed (Hopkins, 2014; Hopkins & Hamilton-Smith, 2014; Stott, et al, 2008, 2012). However, research also suggests that when dealing with 'risk' fans 'spotters' can have an important 'liaison' role that can sometimes be undermined by their parallel criminal intelligence duties and it remains unclear how the role 'spotters' and dedicated PLTs will interact (XXXX). Moreover, the loose definitions of 'risk' can and do overwrite the subtle differences within football fan culture and combine with the practical realities of public order policing to regularly create situations where large numbers of fans posing little prior threat to public order are classified as 'risk' and policed coercively (Hoggett & Stott, 2010; James & Pearson, 2015; Pearson, 2012; Robson, 2000).

In short there is a danger that policing interventions designed to control 'risk' can actually initiate dynamics of 'risk' escalation because of their impact on crowd psychology and dynamics. Moreover, these interventions increase the risk the police will also unlawfully infringe rights of peaceful assembly protected under the HRA (Hoggett & Stott, 2010; James & Person, 2015; Stott et al, 2008; 2012). Correspondingly, we suggest that 'risk' to 'public order' in the football context should not be understood merely as a fixed characteristic of specific categories of fans. Instead, 'risk' can also be an outcome of processes embedded within the group level dynamics of crowds. The challenge confronting the police is therefore not merely a matter of identifying and controlling 'risk' fans. Rather policing should also be focused on effectively managing the group level dynamics of the crowds within which such fans are understood to be present (*Citations removed to protect integrity of review process*). Given this is precisely the legal and scientific rationale for deploying PLTs in the context of protests it provides a prima facie case that they will have some meaningful role to play within the policing of football.

Current study

This study therefore aims to advance evidence and theory by providing an analysis of the impact of PLT deployment during a routine football related public order operation within the UK. However, given their lack of routine

³ As well as over time building profiles of fan's affiliations, involvement in disorder as well as collating evidence of criminal intent and pursuing Football Banning Orders against those fans convicted of football related offences or suspected of on-going and future involvement in 'disorder'

deployment in this context in order enable this research it was necessary to first stimulate a process of operational reorganisation such that PLTs could and would be deployed. This requirement for parallel processes of research and reform makes this particular project ideally suited to Participant Action Research (PAR); an approach widely adopted in healthcare settings (Koshy, Koshy & Waterman, 2010) but also applied increasingly to a range of policing and criminal justice issues (e.g. Audrey, 2002; Geva & Shem-Tov, 2002; Rai, 2012).

PAR is an approach based on the seminal work of Kurt Lewin (1946). Its aim is to provide a platform for enhanced quality of practice by empowering practitioners through engagement with research and implementation processes (Meyer, 2000). Rather than a strictly defined method it is a research framework with the specific purpose of informing and influencing practice (Elliot, 1991; McNiff & Whitehead, 2005; Winter & Munn-Giddings, 2001). Thus, we have adopted Koshy et al's (2010) definition of it as an approach employed by practitioners for improving practice as part of the process of change. Our adaptation loosely orients toward that of Reason and Bradbury's (2006) in that it involves planning a change, acting and observing the processes and consequences of that change and then reflecting analytically on these processes and consequences.

Thus, we adopted a set of practices that were designed to respond to an aspiration among some police commanders within West Yorkshire Police to act innovatively in the face of practical and demanding problems. The approach involved academic researchers and practitioners in collaborative relationships of knowledge co-production and exchange in order to create a platform in which evidence based reflection and development could take place. Accordingly, we adopted the three core components set out by Meyer (2000) in that the research was participatory, oriented toward empowering democratic forms of practice and designed to address the 'theory-practice gap'; addressing the latter by adopting an ethnographic case study format enabling an in depth and detailed case analysis of a specific moment of theory and evidence led change within the organisation.

In this respect we implemented an ideographic mode of research where the intention was to provide depth of analysis rather than seeking to uncover generalizable principles (Bryman, 1988). The case study format adopted here enables an in-depth level of contextual and detailed analysis. The specific case presented here is drawn from a wider collaboration between the first author and West Yorkshire Police, which itself has formed within the framework of the N8 Policing Research Partnership⁴. [Add something here about needing to explore processes]

The second author was an accredited public order commander who was allocated the role of Silver for a fixture between Bradford City F.C. and

⁴ The N8 Policing Research Partnership is a formal collaboration of social scientists within the eight research-intensive universities of the north of England.

Oldham F.C. on the 5th April 2014⁵. The fixture initially attracted a risk classification of category C but this was subsequently reduced to a category B fixture (see also below). There is a UK wide formal process for 'risk' assessments surrounding football fixtures. These assessments in turn lead to fixtures being categorised at different levels of risk that range from Category CS - club security only, A - low risk of disorder, B – medium risk of disorder, C – high risk of disorder, or C-IR – the highest risk classification, which requires increased resources. The categorisation in turn underpins the operational planning for the police public order operation and largely determines the number and role of officers that will be rostered to police the event.

Given the central role a Silver commander plays in setting tactical parameters this created an ideal opportunity for him to deploy a PLT into the public order operation, in order to observe the impact and reflect analytically upon outcomes. At this point West Yorkshire Police had a small team of trained and operationally experienced Police Liaison Officers (PLOs) seven of who were able to deploy at this fixture. The second author sought and received clearance from the Gold Commander and in this manner the opportunity was created for this specific case study to take place.

The approach to data gathering for this study was based upon previous research of this type (*Citations removed to protect integrity of the review process*), built around principles of participant observation within the PAR framework set out above (Drury & Stott, 2001; French and Bell, 1973; Lewin, 1958; Johnson, 1976; Pearson, 2014). Following these principles the second author participated within the event in his role as the Silver public order commander. As such he was integral to the planning processes and in a position to gain oversight of the operation as a whole and also to reflect subsequently upon his own experience. The first author also liaised with the second author throughout the planning process and attended on the day of the event making observations. This included attending briefings, conducting interviews and recording field notes. During the operation the first and third author 'shadowed' the PLT commander, but at times broke away to observe situations from a short distance and to avoid interfering with the policing operation as far as this was possible. This also enabled a series of opportunistic interviews to be conducted with police officers and where possible with fans. Field notes were recorded as soon as was possible after incidents and events occurred.

Some days after the event the second author was able to gain audio recordings and transcripts of the police radio log, which the second author crossed reference for accuracy. We were also able to obtain copies of the operational order, arrest reports and public order command decision logs. In addition we were provided with written reports from two Bronze commanders and one of the PLOs. This data is further supplemented by transcripts of two debrief sessions, one held with seven PLOs and another with thirty force 'spotters' that were conducted as part of the wider collaboration but which

⁵ The second author was also engaged in the research process through his involvement in an M.St in Criminology at Cambridge University.

made reference on several occasions to this specific fixture. The research team, including both authors along with the force lead for public order training and the third author who is a PhD student, were then brought together to discuss the data and draw out a general set of themes. The data was initially triangulated to build a consensual account of the general pattern of events. These then formed the framework for the thematic analysis set out below.

Analysis

Intelligence and fixture categorisation.

Oldham F.C. has among their supporters a notorious group who refer to themselves as the 'Fine Young Casuals' (FYC). The FYC are a group with long-standing links to far right political activity. For example in 2003 twelve people affiliated to the group were convicted for their involvement in violence during the 2001 'riots' in Oldham. These 'riots' are widely understood to have developed as a consequence of racial tensions and far-right activity in the town. In September 2009 the 'Oldham Evening Chronicle' ran a front-page article discussing the role of one of these convicted individuals as a local branch leader of the English Defence League. This individual was said to have "*led the football firm the Fine Young Casuals, involved in the Oldham riots, for ten years*" and who wanted "*extremist Muslims off the streets*" (Hooton, 2009). In contrast Bradford City has a 'hooligan' following that are referred to as the 'Ointment'. The Ointment is a group that has a number of ethnically 'Asian' individuals among their number including one of the group's more influential and prominent affiliates. According to one Ointment affiliate, that we spoke to directly during the event, their antagonism toward the FYC is in part due to what are seen as their racist politics and an 'anti-racist' orientation among the Ointment.⁶

It is worth noting that this political and ideological tension between the two groups did not feature in the intelligence report, which instead gave focus to disorder that had occurred at the two previous fixtures between the sides. It was acknowledged that there was at "*this time*" no intelligence of pre-planned disorder but equally that "*pre-planned disorder is highly likely to be arranged in the near future*". Note was made that the fixture was essentially a 'local derby' and that over one hundred Oldham fans had travelled and "*caused issues throughout the day*" at a cup fixture against Nottingham Forrest in January 2103. It was not clear why a cup fixture in January 2013 against another club was directly relevant other than this was an example of what can happen when the FYC see a fixture as "*their 'big away day'*". It was implied that this fixture was being seen in those terms by the Oldham 'risk' contingent. The report also made clear that the Bradford 'risk' group were "*active*" and that "*it is inevitable that this group will be in telephone contact with opposing 'risk' members and will try to arrange meetings*".

In addition, the report also made clear that there was potential for 'risk fans' from two additional clubs to attend this fixture and that the FYC "*will include members of these groups in their ranks if they need extra numbers*". Given

⁶ Indeed, the affiliate we spoke to was recognised by one of the observers as having attended a counter-demonstration to an English Defence League rally held in Bradford in late 2013.

this background context the risk classification had been set idiosyncratically as a category B with increased risk (B-IR)⁷. This classification led to a deployment of 151 officers, of which 7 were PLOs under the command of a PLT Bronze who worked directly to Silver. The operation cost West Yorkshire Police £31,168.00.

Planning phase.

West Yorkshire Police football operations sit within a generic gold Strategy that is set at the beginning of each season. The strategy for 2014-15 defines the overall aims of the policing operation in terms of ensuring the safety of spectators and the communities surrounding venues. It defines police core responsibilities of preventing crime, protecting life and property and the maintenance of the “*Queen’s peace*”. This strategy is then underpinned by a series of core intentions that focus explicitly upon keeping risk fans apart, preventing disruption and providing reassurance. Interestingly, the strategic framework makes no explicit reference to facilitation⁸, realising the principles set out in national guidance or the forces’ positive and negative obligations created by the Human Rights Act (1998).

The Gold commander for this operation, while supporting the ‘trial’ use of PLTs, felt that their potential for conflict reduction enabled him to withdraw one PSU. This reduction of resources had the effect of leaving those involved in the operation with the sense that they were under staffed and lacked a ‘contingency’ should the PLT not function effectively. Moreover, in addition to the generic strategy Gold made clear that a core strategic priority would be to avoid an escort of Oldham ‘risk’ fans through the city centre.

While the decision to use PLTs was made in the planning phase, they were never written into the operational plan⁹. Consequently, there had no formally defined role or position within the command structure. Additionally, the Silver commander for the fixture was unavailable during the early stages of planning, so an ‘Acting Silver’ was appointed. This Acting Silver had no previous familiarity of using PLTs and was therefore unclear how they should be deployed in this relatively novel setting and instructed them to gain information about potential travel arrangements for Oldham ‘risk’ fans. This is a task that is routinely undertaken by Football Intelligence Officers (FIOs). As a consequence conflict emerged almost immediately whereby the FIOs felt their role was being undermined. The PLO involved was acutely aware of this conflict and quickly fed this issue back to Silver who withdrew him from the task.

Match day and engaging with ‘risk’

On the day of the event the policing operation began with a 10.00am briefing where it was confirmed, “*that around 70 [away] ‘risk’ were set to attend the*

⁷ National guidance uses a category B to denote a medium risk fixture but does not use the B-IR denomination.

⁸ Other than to facilitate the safe and free movement of the highway wherever possible.

⁹ The operational plan is a document created by the Force planning department that details the identity and specific role of police officers involved in the operation. It is usually referred to as the ‘Op Order’.

fixture” and that there was a “*high likelihood of disorder*”. In line with Gold’s strategic intent Silver’s goal was to gather, and therefore contain, Oldham affiliated fans arriving by train in the Queens Public House, just adjacent to the railway station. At around 11.40am the operation received information from British Transport Police that a group of approximately thirty Oldham fans described as ‘drinkers’ were travelling by train and would be arriving at Bradford’s railway Interchange¹⁰ at 12.19pm.

A team of four PLOs deployed to the train station to meet this group who arrived at the expected time. Our field notes record that this was a group of around twenty young white males who fitted a profile of ‘risk’ fans¹¹. As the group left the station a PLO approached them, placed his arm around the shoulder of a ‘prominent’¹² individual and began interacting positively with him. The prominent received this attention in good humour and there was a period of friendly interaction as the PLO guided the group toward the Queens. The PLO later explained his rationale for approaching this specific individual:

“From his demeanour, from the way that the others in the group were interacting with him, [I judged that] if there were going to be any trouble in any way shape or form that they would look at him...” (PLT1, Focus group)

This opening non-coercive interaction enabled them to immediately begin constructing a relationship with the group.

“So from our point of view it was a case of right, we’ll go up, not confront him but we’ll... try and socialize with him, try and be reasonable with him and at the point of being reasonable with him, just let him know look... we’re police but we’ll be right with you and the, the ball is now in your court, whichever way you chose to take it.” (PLT2, Focus Group)

Certainly, the PLTs took the view that this intervention helped create a positive relationship between the police and these fans but also helped judge their attitude and level of compliance.

“We’ve met them [on arrival] and we’d introduced ourselves and we spoke to them, we’ve identified who the ‘players’ were. We’ve also directed them to the place we wanted, so initially we weren’t in their face. We kind of built a bridge and had a laugh with them to get, as much information as we could that would help the Commander. Most of them went where we asked them to go because we said that’s

¹⁰ The name given to Bradford’s main railway station.

¹¹ This judgment was the first author’s and based primarily on their demeanour and style of clothing.

¹² The term ‘prominent’ is often used to describe those fans police see as posing a threat to public order. It is used interchangeably with the term ‘risk’ and ‘nominal’. We will use it here to describe this particular individual throughout the rest of the analysis.

the away pub, that's where you will be safe, where you can enjoy yourself and have a good day." [PLT2, Focus group]

Given its designation by the police as an 'away pub', by around 12.50pm the Queens had become busy with around 100 Oldham fans. By this time spotters had arrived and categorised the group that had reached Bradford on the 12.19 as 'risk'. Given the formal categorisation the Bronze commander for the city centre deployed a PSU and an Evidence Gathering Team (EGT).¹³ Silver also came under immediate pressure from his Bronze commander to withdraw the PLT on the basis that it was inappropriate for them to be engaging with 'risk' fans.

In contrast Silver judged that it was a 'heavy' police presence that could undermine the PLOs ability to positively interact with the Oldham fans. He therefore instructed his Bronze commander to withdraw his PSU and EGT and to keep them largely out of sight. Our field notes record that the Bronze reluctantly complied. Indeed, the radio records his dry conformation that the PSUs would now be "*hiding*" behind the adjacent hotel and his post match report explicitly indicates his view that the PSU and EGT should not have been withdrawn at this time.

A 'serial' of six yellow-jacketed officers from the PSU remained in close and visible proximity to the Queens whilst a number of individuals from the Oldham 'risk' group, including the 'prominent', stood drinking on the pavement immediately outside. At around this time an individual, who it would appear was a Bradford fan, walked confidently past the Oldham group and became agitated toward them; a verbal altercation quickly developed. This confrontation appears to have been embedded in the racism issues outlined above. As one PLT who witnessed the incident commented:

Because he [the Bradford fan] walked past and he was really being abusive. He was accusing them of being racist but [the prominent] hadn't been racist. [The Bradford fan] were screaming 'he's just called me a Paki.'...He hadn't called him that at all, I were stood right next to him and kept him calm but as the [PLT] sergeant has tried to lead him away and nobody was helping, I left and walked [the Bradford fan] off with the Sergeant [PLT4, Focus Group].

Given their close proximity their view was that, to prevent further escalation, the 'Bradford fan' had to be pushed away. However, the PLTs held the view it was not their role to use force and felt aggrieved with their PSU colleagues, who were standing close by, but had not intervened despite the obvious tensions.

"No [PSU] officers stepped in to assist with a drunken male who was wanting to fight Oldham fans. We are not there to

¹³ The primary aim of and EGT is to gather video evidence that can subsequently used in criminal prosecutions or fed into intelligence.

arrest or deal with public order however this still seems to be lost on other police staff” [Post event written feedback PLT1]

The PLOs on-going contact with the ‘prominent’ enabled them to continue dialogue with him. Their presence also allowed them to observe the interactions he was having with the other Oldham fans in and around the pub. On this basis they felt able to intervene to undermine his negative influence.

“Initially, he tried to mingle amongst the group and instigate them but we kept pulling him out, talking to him. ‘Listen you know sort it out’.. And he actually calmed it down in the end.” [PLT3 Focus group]

In contrast the spotters did not see the value of having PLTs present in the Queens and were concerned that once again their role was being duplicated. As one commented:

So when you are going in to do your normal role, going in to ID the risk and see what potential problems you have got PLTs are there. PLTs are then passing the same information back. [SP1, Focus Group]

Spotters also describe how they felt that ‘liaison’ with risk fans was their role and introducing PLTs was a tacit reflection that they “*were not doing their job properly*” [SP2, Focus Group]. The antagonism from their colleagues was evident to the PLTs.

There was a very bad feeling between them [spotters] and us [PLTs] [PLT1, Focus Group]

At around 12.20pm the radio transcript records that approximately 20 Bradford ‘risk’ had been identified in the Ginger Goose, a public house within line of sight of the Queens. Our field notes record that at around 12.40pm an individual, who claimed affiliation to the ‘Ointment’, stood across the road from the Queens. He explained to us that he had come to reconnoitre the situation. Then at around 12.50pm a group of around 30 males, fitting the profile of ‘risk’ fans, walked out of the Ginger Goose toward the Queens. Observations record that they appeared, by their demeanour and from their verbal utterances, to be seeking to confront the Oldham fans gathered in the Queens. However, as they approached the pub no Oldham fans came across to engage with them. The group turned and ran along an adjacent road, apparently to avoid being apprehended by the police, who were by now aware of their presence.

While there was considerable potential for ‘disorder’ to develop from this situation it would appear that one of the factors preventing conflict may have been PLT activity. Certainly, PLOs expressed how they had diffused tension among the Oldham fans when they had become aware that a group was actively trying to confront them.

Well they [the Oldham fans] were angry, they wanted to sort of get over to that group of Bradford fans. You could see that, and just by us standing there and speaking to them and calming them down... I'm saying well, what do you want confrontation for? What's that going to achieve? Everybody's going to get locked up, just have a good day. We diffused it there. [PLT2, Focus Group]

This capacity to de-escalate the tension among the Oldham fans was described by the PLT to be a direct outcome of their facilitatory approach, which they contrasted with a coercive style of policing.

I'm the one that if I come and ask you to do something or calm down, I'm not being clever, I'm not trying to be a cock police officer, I'm trying to make sure that you continue on with your afternoon and enjoy it. And the majority seem to take that on board and they do comply when we ask them to do stuff because they realize that we're not just trying to bully them or spoil stuff. I'm not saying to you if you don't do this, I'm going to lock you up. It's you know do as I say or not at all. I'm conversing with them and they seem to like it, a lot of them. [PLT5, Focus Group]

The struggle to avoid coercion.

The Silver commander was now faced with a difficult situation. On the one hand, he had a large group of Oldham fans, containing categorised 'risk', gathered in a city centre public house some 3.5km from the stadium. On the other he had a large group of apparently hostile Bradford fans that had evaded apprehension. His concern was that if the Oldham fans walked en masse to the stadium serious disorder would occur. Consequently the Silver commander gained the required approval from Gold to go against the strategy and began planning and mobilising to contain and then escort all the Oldham fans gathered in the Queens. At 1.09pm the radio log records contact with the National Police Air Service, warning them of an impending request for helicopter surveillance, and at 1.16pm six mounted officers were deployed into the city centre to support the escort.

By this time the PLT had begun to understand the nuanced differentiation among those gathered in the Queens. Rather than a homogenous group of 'risk fans' actively seeking confrontation they judged there to be:

"three or four different types of groups within that pub. There were some people there that just wanted to watch the match on television, some people that wanted some trouble and some people that were genuinely nice people and wanted to go to the game with their family [PLT 5, Focus Group]."

Aware of the impending escort the PLTs began to 'problem solve'. Initially fans had expressed their concerns about the costs of the taxis, so the PLT Bronze commander liaised with drivers in the rank outside the pub and secured a fixed price. He then communicated this to the Oldham fans along with information about a second 'away' pub nearer to the stadium called the Bradford Arms.

We kept telling them 'look you don't want to walk to the ground, which stops them going through the city centre and having a fight. [We told them] it's miles, it's all up hill, it'll kill you. We'll get you a taxi, we'll [get] a good price for you. The taxis come down and everybody goes that wanted to go [PLT2, Focus Group].

In this context of facilitative policing, fans began to offer up important operationally relevant information. For example, field notes record how one PLT expressed pleasant surprise when one of the Oldham 'risk' fans showed him a phone text he had just received indicating that his peers were organising to meet in the Star Public House. The radio transcript also records that at around this time a PLT had indicated that Oldham 'risk' fans were 40 in number and that while their intention was to "*have disorder with like minded people only*" [Radio log] they would only do so if confronted by opposition groups. In other words, while they were classified as 'risk' fans by the spotters, the PLT was able to give nuance information that this group may not be actively pursuing confrontation.

Because the majority of Oldham fans had left by taxi, within around twenty minutes there was only some ten 'risk' fans, including the 'prominent', remaining in the Queens. As a consequence, Silver stood down his plans to escort. The fans categorised as 'risk' were now a much smaller grouping, whom themselves then left the Queens and took taxis to the Star Public House, somewhat closer to but still some distance from the stadium. Unfortunately, inside the Star were three individuals, one of whom had a history of affiliation to the Ointment¹⁴. Our field notes record that there was no obvious indication inside the pub that either 'risk' group were either aware of or seeking disorder with each other. Nonetheless the presence of two categories of 'risk' fan in the same pub caused immediate concern to the public order Bronze, who saw this as a problem arising from a failure to take more forceful control of the 'risk group' earlier on. In a post event log his POTAC¹⁵ states that:

"There were a few opportunities to 'grip' some of the Oldham fans and as a result some ended up at the Star where Bradford risk were also meeting. In this instance I perceived this to be a simple public order situation. As PLTs

¹⁴ The radio log acknowledges their presence in the pub from as early as 11.00am.

¹⁵ POTAC is a public order tactical advisor who accompanies the relevant public order commander to offer advice and support.

are not necessarily level 2 trained¹⁶ I wondered why they arrived there.”

Given his perception of this as a ‘public order’ issue the Bronze commander dispatched a PSU who arrived at the Star and a decision was taken to contain, remove and escort the Oldham ‘risk’ fans to the stadium. However, a PLT who was present in the Star made his own contrasting assessment of the situation:

So we then go up to [the Star] which has got supporters at it, we’re at it, there is [PSUs] around it... [but] there’s nothing happening inside. There was some old lady with a pink cardigan and about 10 lads. It was total, total overkill in, in my opinion. We went in, talked to a few people. I couldn’t see any issues at all. I couldn’t see any reason for being there at all. And then we’re blocking doors and someone seals this door so they can’t get out, it were just madness.... We created a tension in a pub that was never there I don’t think. That group of people didn’t really need an escort. You could have just let them filter. Again, they’d be done and dusted there and I don’t think we would have got the problem we had about 20 minutes later (PLT4, Focus group)

Field notes record the Oldham ‘risk’ fans were compliant with police instruction to leave. However, once the small numbers of fans were under escort a equally small group of Bradford ‘risk’ fans were identified at a road junction, through which the escort would shortly be heading. This ‘intelligence’ presented problems for the public order commanders who had to hold the Oldham fans whilst they waited for further resources to contain and then disperse the Bradford group.

Our observations record that there were only fifteen Bradford fans contained at the junction and they made no attempt to confront the Oldham ‘escort’. Equally, the Oldham fans remained compliant and made no attempt to move out from the cordon toward the Bradford group. Once the police were satisfied that the route was clear, the escort progressed without further incident. However, despite their otherwise good behaviour on arrival at the stadium one of the ‘risk’ fans was arrested for the offence of being drunk whilst entering a football ground.¹⁷

Throughout this period PLTs were also deployed at a second ‘away’ designated public house in close proximity to the stadium, the Bradford Arms, which was crowded with very large numbers of Oldham fans that were

¹⁶ Level 2 is a minimum standard of public order training required for a PSU officer to be deployed into a conflict situation such as a riot.

¹⁷ Given the police had facilitated their access to the Queens, encouraged them to move on to a second pub, contained the group in the Star, ensured that they had been unable to leave the escort, which took them directly to the entrance of the stadium, it was unclear what options this individual had to avoid committing the offence.

drinking heavily. So much so that at 2.07pm the radio log records that the pub had run out of beer. The assessment of this crowd was that it did not contain 'risk' fans and as such did not attract much police attention beyond the deployment of PLOs who felt their mode of non-coercive intervention was warmly received by the Oldham fans.

They like the fact that... rather than standing there, arms crossed just glaring at them while they're trying to have a good time. There were one lad says I quite like it now you're here because we're all still doing our chants and singing our songs but they're [the police] are not getting as lairy as they as they usually would. It's nice to interact with you rather than being started at all the time, just glaring and spoiling people's fun (PLT6, Focus group).

Once again PLT assessment of the fans based on their interaction with them was in contrast with the 'non-risk' categorisation by the spotters. Moreover, that in this context of friendly policing there might be receipt of high quality 'intelligence'.

A lot of them were your ambers [risk] that could've been persuaded had they come involved with the likes of [the prominent] and his mates. They could be. A bit of beer, a bit of banter; they could be persuaded to get involved. But they were the ones that appreciated us being there because we were keeping them a little bit calm. It was a nice atmosphere.... and they're the ones that will come up to us and say actually, so and so up there he's looking for a bit a trouble.

The match kicked off at 3.00 pm. During the fixture PLTs were deployed into the area containing Oldham fans and instructed to try to ascertain the 'risk' fans post match intentions. Field notes record that this deployment was counter-productive in that many of the Oldham 'risk' fans simply refused to interact with the PLTs, an antagonism perhaps amplified because simply wanted to watch the match and one of their number had just been arrested.

Following the match there were no further issues until at 5.16pm the radio log records that Oldham fans had been identified in the Ginger Goose, a pub earlier and traditionally frequented by the 'Ointment'. The officer sending the transmission stated "I've got Oldham risk on one side and Bradford risk on the other". This led to an immediate reaction by the public order commander who deployed a PSU to the pub and surrounded it with a cordon of officers. PLTs, the public order Bronze, spotters and observers went into the pub to evaluate. In contrast to the sense of urgency and threat, our field notes record a very relaxed situation inside the pub. The spotters confirmed they did not know the five Oldham fans as 'risk'. However, they did categorise six Bradford 'risk' inside the pub at which point the public order Bronze then made the decision to remove and disperse the Oldham fans.

Our observations record that the Oldham fans were subsequently forced to leave and were apparently angered by their treatment. During this episode the actions of the PLT was once again of some concern to their public order colleagues. Of issue was the fact that there were two Bronze commanders in the pub – one public order and one PLT - and it was therefore unclear whose instruction had authority. This command ambiguity, led the public order Bronze to feel that his ability impose 'facilitation' through coercion was undermined. As he noted in a post event report:

After the match a small group of Oldham supporters went into the Ginger Goose that was full of Bradford supporters. Although they [the Oldham fans] were not risk and were not wearing team colours they were being identified by Bradford supporters as away supporters and this was creating tension. I made the decision that these five supporters to be withdrawn immediately, even without being given the opportunity to finish their drinks because significant resources were required to prevent disorder breaking out. I therefore instructed the PSU inspector to facilitate the removal of these five fans... In this case this was a potential flashpoint and in my assessment it was not a time for persuasion or negotiation but a time to issue a firm direction to leave. The situation was better dealt with by the Public Order Serial under the command of the PSU commander.

One of the key priorities in the post match phase, was to identify any Oldham 'risk' fans and then get them onto trains so that the police football operation could be concluded. At 17.22 the radio log records that seven or eight Oldham risk fans were now located in the Queens public house and were planning to drink in the city for the next couple of hours. As a consequence, the PLTs were instructed by their own Bronze commander to try to assist in forcing the Oldham risk fans onto the trains. It was unclear what legal powers the police could and would use to enforce this direction to leave. Indeed, one of the PLTs was uncomfortable with this enforcement role and resisted the idea that these were actually 'risk' fans.

There was one risk lad in the Queen's at the end of the match, but he was with his elderly family members, he was no trouble that day and they escorted them down from the ground. We were looking saying well, why are they escorting that group, he's not risk. Yeah, they are risk, he's risk. Yeah, but he's not risk today, he's with his granddad and his dad and his uncle. And now you're making them all get on the train ... and this man of 65 is saying to me 'why should I. I just want a pint now.' His lad wasn't going to do anything but because this lad had got tag of being risk, you're all going ... and that was causing problems.

Nonetheless the radio log records that at 18.00 the Oldham fans had boarded the trains and that remaining pub clientele were "normal drinkers". By 18.17

the radio log records that policing operation had been “*concluded without issue*”. It notes there were “*2 arrests for drunk and entering the pitch*” but that there was “*no disorder or incidents of note*” and the football operation was concluded. There was an attendance of 13,816 spectators of which 1,270 were supporting Oldham.

Discussion

The aims of this study were essentially two fold. The first was to provide an empirical case study exploring the utility and impact of deploying a PLT in the context of a football related public order operation within the UK. The second was to analyse this using a framework of PAR that was focused as much upon creating change as it was about merely analysing existing operational practice. The case study certainly suggests that the PLT played a beneficial role in terms of realizing some of the operation’s core strategic goals, especially that of preventing ‘disorder’ and avoiding an otherwise apparently inevitable police escort of fans through the city centre. Notwithstanding these apparent positives there were also some clear limitations and negative outcomes that relate to force strategy, antagonism among police colleagues, contrasting risk assessments and the use of coercion.

It is evident that West Yorkshire Police strategy for football makes no reference to police obligations to facilitate peaceful assembly or to some of the core reforms flowing from ATP (College of Policing, 2014; HMIC, 2009b). Instead it sets a framework for maintaining the “Queens’ peace” by keeping risk fans separated. In this respect the football strategy stands in stark contrast to that adopted for recent EDL protests in the county where detailed attention was paid within the strategy to the recent guidance reforms and the force’s obligations under the HRA (i.e. operations Firefox and Woolfox, West Yorkshire Police, 2013, 2014). As James and Pearson (2015) assert jurisprudence does suggest that football fans enjoy the same rights of assembly, association and expression as those who engage in political protest. Thus this case study does begin to suggest a need for the force to revisit its strategic intent for policing football.

It is also evident that within the current strategy the PLT does not have an obvious function. Moreover, for this event PLOs were assigned on a largely ad hoc and trial basis. Additionally, they were never properly nor formally integrated into the operational plan. This lack of clarity concerning their role and function was amplified by inappropriate allocation of tasks by senior commanders. Their deployment also had the effect of the Gold commander withdrawing a PSU. These factors appear to have led to an insecurity, ambiguity and antagonism regarding PLT role and function among some police colleagues who, from the outset, essentially felt that they were undermining a ‘tried and tested’ football related public order operation.

Beyond these ‘teething’ problems the PLOs in this operation were the first to evaluate and then ‘meet and greet’ a group of Oldham ‘risk’ fans as they arrived onto the operational footprint. In line with their mandate the PLTs did not seek to assertively impose coercion on these fans, rather to liaise with them. This initial interaction appears to have been important in terms of

opening up a process of dialogue and positive influence or the 'risk' throughout the rest of the event. The continued engagement across time by PLTs allowed for 'limit setting', which appeared to undermine attempts by the Oldham 'risk' to agitate others. This capacity to promote 'self-regulation' within a small crowd of Oldham fans seems to have potentially undermined conflict in an otherwise 'high risk' situation that may otherwise have required police use of force.

The PLTs positive interaction with away fans also apparently helped provide reassurance among the wider body of Oldham fans that appears to have promoted police legitimacy and potentially helped avoid circumstances where otherwise peaceful fans could have been drawn into conflict. Their close proximity and on-going interactions with the Oldham 'risk' empowered police capacity to understand situations and react quickly and proportionately to emerging conflict. The PLTs were also capable of 'problem solving' in that they were able to facilitate the movement of the majority of the fans toward the stadium. This facilitation had the effect of leaving the Oldham 'risk' group relatively marginalised, physically isolated and small in number. It also had the corresponding effect of avoiding the otherwise inevitable escort through the city centre and the expensive deployment of a helicopter. These outcomes are entirely in line with those 'de-escalatory' functions associated with PLT deployment in the context of protest (Gorringer et al, 2011, Stott et al, 2012).

Giving the PLOs the 'room' to operate was evidently a problem for some of their colleagues. Indeed, under current orthodoxy, and in line with force strategy, it would be expected for the public order Bronze commander to get 'a grip' of the 'risk' by keeping them under surveillance and under coercive 'control'. It would be seen as important to have a highly visible police presence to both act as deterrent and impose force should it be necessary in order to keep the 'risk' groups apart (Hoggett & Stott, 2010). It was apparent that the decision to withdraw PSUs and EGTs from outside the Queens confronted this orthodoxy and evidently added further to antagonism among some key police staff, who openly expressed their view that PLT did not have a place in policing football. In this respect the PLT encountered the same issues of hostility from public order colleagues that they have been confronting in the policing of protest (Stott et al, 2013) and which have been encountered during the introduction of other forms of liaison based policing elsewhere (Havelund et al, 2013; Holgersson & Knutsson, 2011, Stott et al, 2013). In this respect the study resonates with a broader issue of the potential resistance to and the importance of managing progressive evidence led change in the police service as whole (College of Policing, 2015b)

During the event a situation did develop where PLT use of force was judged by PLOs to be necessary. This led to some concern among them that their PSU colleagues had not stepped in to exercise the necessary coercion. However, given their PSU colleagues had been specifically instructed to withdraw from the situation, and considering the novelty of PLT deployment in this context, the protocols regarding use of force were not self evident. Given the PLTs were in the direct vicinity of the rapidly developing incident and fully aware of what was actually going on, as police officers it is not immediately

clear why they should not intervene in the way that they ultimately did. Nonetheless the incident does suggest that achieving liaison based approaches in football may require some adaptation of the PLT concept to be more in line with the dialogue oriented 'Event Police' developed in Denmark who do exercise low-level use of force if necessary (Havelund et al, 2013).

It was the case that the intelligence reports informing this operation were incomplete, in that they did not acknowledge the racist street politics that appeared, at least partially, to be mediating the antagonism between these two groups. Additionally, the number of 'risk' fans that were 'spotted' was less than expected and those anticipated from other clubs affiliated to the Oldham 'risk' failed to materialise. Indeed, it also is interesting to note the different numbers of 'risk' fans that were variously categorised at differing stages of the event. In this respect, PLT analysis of 'risk' appears to have provided a 'richer' information picture that had real time relevance and was based around a broader and more dynamic understanding of 'risk'; not least of all because it delivered a nuanced assessment of fans' underlying intentions and demeanour rather than mere and apparently quite blunt categorisation provided by the spotters and FIOs.

On various occasions PLT assessments of 'risk' deviated, even openly contradicted, the assessments being used by some of the public order commanders. Equally, once categorisations of 'risk' were in place there was a corresponding trajectory toward coercion, which was both resource heavy and created its own problems. Moreover, toward the end of the operation the dispersal of Oldham fans from the city had no self-evident legal justification. This configuration of 'risk amplification' and propensity toward coercion appeared as central to the momentum of policing in this context and was an impetus that only the PLT seemed capable or willing to disrupt. In this respect the capability of PLTs to critique 'intelligence' and act as a counterweight to coercion seems self evidently beneficial. Indeed, their presence in this operation appeared to be the only route toward 'de-escalation' and achieving the more proportionate forms of policing called for both in policy and in academic research (College of Policing, 2015; James & Pearson, 2015; Hopkins & Hamilton-Smith, 2014; Stott et al, 2012).

This study therefore contributes to broader debates about the definitions, assessment and management of 'risk' in this context. The evidence is consistent with the idea that a route to effective football crowd policing, even in high 'risk' scenarios, is through implementing a liaison based policing approach (*Citations removed to protect integrity of review process*). In this respect the study reinforces the contention that 'risk' is not merely about the presence or indeed absence of fans categorised as 'risk' by the police. Rather this is just one element of a broader array of factors that need to be taken into account and managed within the complex group level dynamics of a crowd event. This is because the 'risk' the police are exposed to in policing football does not simply relate to the presence and absence of 'disorder'. Equally 'risk' relates to the potential reputational damage and loss of public confidence that can flow from accusations of excessive expenditure and the infringement of rights protected under the law. Both of which are high profile challenges that

have been levied at West Yorkshire Police as a result of their policing of football across the preceding two seasons (e.g. BBC, 2013; Examiner, 2013; Yorkshire Post, 2015)

There are of course important limitations to this study. Not least of all it is focused ideographically upon a single event, which severely limits capacity to generalise beyond this single case. Moreover, the impact of the PLTs on the operation is to a large extent speculative since it is impossible to determine whether or not other police officers (e.g. spotters) could and would have performed the same function and achieved the same outcomes if PLTs had not been deployed. Indeed, as has been argued elsewhere 'spotters' can and do on occasion provide a similar 'liaison' capability (*Citation removed to protect integrity of review process*). In this sense it is also largely conjectural to assume that PLTs did help prevent 'disorder' since we have no guarantees that the potentially escalatory situations we encountered within the study would have otherwise developed into actual confrontation. In this respect, the study would have benefitted from data from fans involved that in this case we were largely unable to obtain. To address these limitations it is necessary to extend the research beyond a single case to examine similar events involving PLT deployment and if possible to contrast these with similar events where PLTs were not deployed. It would also be useful to examine PLT deployments at other stadiums and in different force jurisdictions. Given these limitations we will avoid making specific recommendations about the precise tactical deployment of PLTs until further research evidence is available.

However, it is not the intention with this study to provide a deep theoretical analysis of the nature or origins of football 'hooliganism' or to provide a comprehensive test of specific model of policing. Rather the aim was to engage PAR as a framework for stimulating a process of change through empowering operational practitioners to engage in the research, implementation and analytical processes surrounding those reforms. The goal within this was to create an opportunity for knowledge co-production exploring analytically the extension of 'liaison based public order policing' (*Citation removed to protect the integrity of the review process*) into the context of football. We have done this to identify the potential benefits and pitfalls of promoting evidence and theory led approaches to the challenging task of reducing the level of police deployment and expenditure in the football context. We would contend that in this respect the study has been valuable and therefore provides an important first step toward advancing understanding of the benefits of both PLTs and PAR in this area of policing.

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