

Louise - Presentation

Louise Westmarland:

Hello. Well my name's Dr Louise Westmarland. I'm Senior Lecturer in Criminology in the Faculty of Social Sciences here at the Open University.

I just want to tell you a little bit about some research that I've been doing recently and also a bit of history about some of the things that I've done in the past.

So my current research is all about murder investigations and how detectives go about their work and how they investigate the actual killing, they find the body and actually follow up the investigation and find out "who done it" as it were. Which all sounds incredibly exciting and wonderful and cutting edge but in actual fact means a lot of hanging around may be for days and days with the police when nothing actually happens.

So one of the things I did was I went off to Washington DC for three months, kindly paid for by the Faculty of Social Sciences and our research school, our research centre here the International Centre for Comparative Criminological Research. And I went to Washington DC for three months. I managed to get myself in to a situation where I could follow the local homicide squad around for nights, days, weeks and so on.

And what happened was they just sort of said, yeah come along with us if you want to come and see what happens. They kind of check out that you're not going to be worried by the viewing of a dead body and I kind of had to reassure them, yes I've done a lot of work with the police over in the UK previously.

So what happened was that basically the first night we were there they were shouting, oh yes there's been a murder, quick get in the car. I was really amazed, we actually shot off in these cars to downtown DC to find a guy who'd been, sadly a young black guy, who'd been shot and was lying there in a pool of blood on the street. But what was amazing was that the speed they were trying to get there. So my experience of British policing, if there was a murder, it's not really an emergency. I mean the dead body isn't going to go anywhere it's just lying there.

So the first night I was there was a complete puzzlement. Why have we gone at, you know, 90 miles an hour to get to a dead body. Well it turns out that they want to get there very quickly because they want to see who's there. In fact DC detectives, DC homicide detectives are going to have a really serious problem about trying to find witnesses. I mean the paper I've published from this study is called Snitches Get Stitches. And that's the basic premise that the detectives are working on in the sense that if they don't get to the scene really quickly and grab anybody who's around whilst the shock is still fresh and everybody is still, oh my God what's happened here, the chances of finding a witness later on are going to be about zero.

So what I learnt from that study in America was that really in different countries in the world this thing called police ethics and integrity which is a big issue in the UK at the moment. There's been a lot of scandals lately. You'd have heard of Plebgate, the whole series of scandals involving the police. What I really learnt from that American study was that in different countries in the world different standards of ethics and morals and professional integrity varies greatly. So the detectives in America would have a suspect in the cell and they'd walk in and say, right we know you did it. So the guy would be like, what's happening here. And they would come out with a big long sheet of numbers and they'd say, what we have here is all of your cell phone calls for the last 24 hours and we can see that you actually called this guy who's just been shot. So we know that it was you. So of course people would say, oh yeah OK and they would confess.

So afterwards I would say to them that wasn't really ethical was it? Don't you have any rules? Because this was a complete fiction. I mean, you know, they didn't know the cell phones. There's no way you can get cell phone calls within 24 hours of a murder or even less. So I would say to the American detectives, well how does that work then? Don't you have any ethical codes or anything? And they would say, ethical codes, human rights, these guys lost all of their human rights when they did that crime. I said, well you don't actually know it's them at this stage, you know. So the comparison between what they were doing and what would happen in a British police station was vastly different. And that led me to think about policing ethics and integrity in the UK situation.

And since then, since I came back from the States I've really been working fairly continuously on the way that codes of ethics work in the UK and how police officers conduct homicide investigations and other work here. So to that end in the sort of beginning of 2013 we published a study on Police Ethics and Integrity. And that was done with Mike Rowe Northumbria University and some other colleagues here at the Open University.

And we sent out a couple of thousand questionnaires to various police forces across the country and received about 500 replies. And the replies were all about what police officers would do in certain scenarios. So we asked them things like, a colleague of yours goes to a jewellery burglary, a jeweller shop burglary and in the shop everything's smashed, all the cases are broken, some things have been taken, some things are still lying about. A colleague picks up a very, very valuable watch which is just lying on the floor which could have been taken by the burglars, puts it in his pocket and goes away. What would you do?

The whole study is not about what people actually do but it's about whether anybody would say anything if they saw this happening as it were.

We also asked them, what would you do if you were out on patrol with a colleague and you catch a couple of car thieves who have been running away, once you've managed to

catch them your colleague gives them a couple of whacks in the stomach to sort of say that's for running away sort of thing. Now again it's not about whether you've done that or whether you've seen it, it's whether you would report that once you had seen it.

Another scenario that we had was about drink driving. So we said, OK you're on patrol at 2 o'clock in the morning with a colleague. You come across a car that's crashed in to a ditch. And you go and have a look and when you have a look in the door you realise that it's someone who's drunk, so a drink driver. But it's also one of your police officer colleagues who was off duty. Your colleague says, we won't do anything about this, we'll just take this colleague back home and not say anything and pull the car out and so on and so forth. So in other words we'll cover up the drink driver.

So what we did was we asked the police officers how serious they thought each of these scenarios were. There was about eleven or twelve of them in total. And the watch, the theft of the watch, there was a theft of a wallet, anything to do with theft and money was considered incredibly serious, you know, 100% serious, 100% well 99.9% would always report that. And they thought colleagues would always report that.

When we got down the scale rather to things like what we were calling the excessive use of force which was the stomach punching, may be about 55% of the people said that they would report it. Despite the fact that they said they thought it was very serious. So sort of 80 or 90% said, oh yes very serious. And then we said, so would you report it? Oh well only about 50 or 60% would.

Now when we got down to the drink driving that was quite interesting because again people said, oh yes very serious. Drink driving is a very serious crime, very dangerous, bla di bla. Would you report it? Well may be, may be not.

And there was a section at the end of the questionnaire where police officers could fill out a sort of a free text part and make comments about the questionnaire and so on. And what we found in that section was a lot of the comments about the drink driver. And the comments were, well may be this person's going through a divorce, may be it was the first time they'd been drink driving, may be it was an alcoholic problem that needed help. So they wouldn't necessarily say it needed punishment. What it said was, you know, it might need help.

Now what conclusions did we draw from all of this? I think it's very interesting that the police are looking, in this country particularly, are looking at police ethics and integrity as a legal issue. Now you might say, well they would wouldn't they because police officers are working within the law and that's their defining principle. But I think as outsiders, as critical friends as you might call us, we might say, well actually you talk about social harm, the harmfulness of things, if someone had a pre-existing condition and a police officer did a couple of thumps on someone's stomach the Ian Tomlinson

case showed that just a small push with someone with a pre-existing condition that could be sadly, that could result in their death.

And similarly with the drink driving case, you know, as a citizen I'd prefer that people weren't driving around drunk clearly. We don't want police officers who are stealing money and stealing watches but on the other hand the level of social harm, if you said to me what would you rather have, somebody driving towards you who's drunk or some police officer taking a watch that the insurance company is probably going to pay for anyway, may be the outside world, the general public might look at those ethical concerns differently.

So the research has sort of ended up really with a report and a lot of feedback to the police in various different areas. And we've had a lot of positive feedback and we're hoping to take it forward. In terms of the link with homicide, just to bring it back to the beginning again, I'm now doing some work on homicides in this country. And I'm currently investigating two recent murders and I've also investigated one previously. And the reason that I'm doing this is that I'm now a domestic homicide investigator.

So this is a system that's been set up by the Home Office whereby when someone is killed in a domestic situation, and that can be anything from a partner, ex-partner, member of the family. In general terms it's women who have been murdered by their male partners or ex-partners. And because two women per week on average are in that situation sadly, being murdered by their partners or ex-partners, the Home Office has set up a system whereby all of these homicide investigations will be re-investigated by an independent Chair. And I'm an accredited independent Chair.

So I get to go and investigate this by talking to the police officers, talking to the family. And the whole idea is to look at what could have been done differently. Not to save that person's life but may be in the future if similar circumstances arose would that same outcome happen. And so it's a really sad but interesting role and a very important one as well for the family and for society as a whole. Because what we're hoping is that at end of, say two or three years, we'll have a large amount of data that we can say, OK we've now looked at may be a couple of hundred domestic homicides and we can start to draw some conclusions about what we could do to stop them happening.

So although we might think that domestic homicide and police ethics and integrity are quite different and diverse topics to research in fact what I'm finding is in my homicide investigations that ethical concerns come very high on the list of things that I'm having to investigate. Because the way that you treat a domestic call as a police officer may have serious repercussions on what's going to happen later. In other words if just a domestic isn't treated seriously at the first call it could go on later to turn out later to be a domestic homicide. And very sadly someone's going to lose their life.