

The Police and the Public: Risk as Preoccupation

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Despite wide differences in social context, global similarities between police institutions can be very informative: the often-cited centrality of risk, specifically career risk, as a preoccupation of police officers is particularly salient in this regard. The core activities of police law enforcement and casework rely on a bureaucratic and formal structure but necessarily entail a high degree of discretion and leeway in their application. This is the case anywhere in the world, but acquires additional resonance in postcolonial and transitional societies and polities, where formal law is complemented by plentiful informal accountabilities, and where particularist imperatives inflect many social interactions and encounters with the state and its institutions. Taking particularism to include social class and stratification as well as the more commonly cited identity-particularisms of ethnicity and religion, we can examine how applying the law comes to involve a wide array of 'external' considerations. Furthermore law enforcement, as a sensitive activity, must often be implemented with due consideration of the possibility that actions can backfire and ricochet - via informal accountabilities - back into the realm of the formal, in the form of official punishments such as disciplinary action as well as meaningful 'pseudo-punishments' such as transfers. This paper examines the relationship between the dual formal and informal logics of the policing 'job' and thereby, how career risk (in addition to physical risk and danger) becomes an overriding concern of the police officer in the Nigerian context.