

Recovering police legitimacy: A radical framework

Research examining police legitimacy and its relation to the characteristics of policing as a practice.

Key details

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Police region	North West
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	November 2016

Research context

The framework for recovering police legitimacy is established by meeting two objectives:

- determining the different levels at which legitimacy is undermined
- determining the different ways in which legitimacy is undermined at each of those levels

The starting point for the first objective is MacIntyre's (2007) critique of modernity, which distinguishes between practices as complex, coherent and cooperative human activities and institutions as structures of power and status that sustain practices. Policing is a practice whose purpose is public protection and an institution whose purpose is to sustain that practice.

MacIntyre's theory is extended to include a third level at which police legitimacy can be undermined, the systemic context of policing. The systemic context includes both the juridical context, that is, the criminal justice system within which the institution and the practice of policing are situated, and the political context within which justice is administered. The value of this three-

tiered approach to the crisis of police legitimacy is in drawing attention to the corresponding significance of all of the levels, which has been overlooked in most of the literature.

The starting point for the second objective is the development of an analytic tool that can determine the different ways in which legitimacy is undermined at each level. This tool is the set of characteristics of the practice of policing and it is effective across all three levels because the characteristics are themselves emergent from the tensions among those three levels. These characteristics are heroic struggle, edgework, absolute sacrifice and worldmaking and they can either contribute to or detract from public protection, depending on how individual police officers respond to them (McGregor 2021c). The characteristics provide an analytic tool that is applied to three case studies, revealing the different ways in which legitimacy is undermined at each of the three levels.

Research methodology

The methodology is completely original, combines autoethnography and case studies and is based on previously published research. The findings from the author's previously published autoethnography are expanded and developed into a method of autoethnographic analysis, drawing on research on the value of autoethnography as a policing research method (McGregor 2023). This analysis is applied to critical case studies, defined by Flyvbjerg (2001) as studies that have strategic significance to the problem, are narrative in form and include thick descriptions that reveal the full extent of the complexity of social reality.

The author's previously published criminology of narrative fiction demonstrated how complex narrative fictions can provide knowledge of the reality they represent and how the creation of narrative fiction can itself be a criminological enterprise (McGregor 2021a, McGregor 2021b). All three critical case studies are complex serial fictions:

- HBO's True Detective, a television series about three sets of murder investigations in the US from 1980 to 2015
- David Peace's Red-Riding Quartet, four novels about the murders of seventeen women and girls in the UK from 1969 to 1983
- James Ellroy's unfinished alternative history, nine novels about police and political corruption in the US from 1941 to 1972

They have been selected for the way in which their disparate spatiotemporal locations and systemic content provide convergent knowledge of the relationships among the characteristics of the practice of policing, public protection and police legitimacy.

Summary of findings

This project was completed in May 2025.

McGregor R. (2024). [Recovering Police Legitimacy: A Radical Framework](#). Abingdon: Routledge.

[Access this book via the National Police Library](#) (membership required – open to serving UK police officers and staff).

References

Flyvbjerg B. (2001). 'Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again'. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacIntyre A (2007). 'After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory'. Third edition. London: Duckworth Books.

McGregor R. (2021a). 'A Criminology of Narrative Fiction'. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

McGregor R. (2021b). 'James Ellroy's critical criminology: Crimes of the powerful in the underworld USA trilogy'. *Critical Criminology: An International Journal*, volume 29, issue 2, pages 349–365.

McGregor R. (2021c). 'Four characteristics of policing as a practice'. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, volume 15, issue 3, pages 1842–1853.

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