

The legend of good cop/bad cop: Researchers study police work in South Africa

July 7 2010



Hot-spots: This is an aerial representation of respondents' understanding of the sources of criminal danger in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. Credit: Darshan Vigneswaran

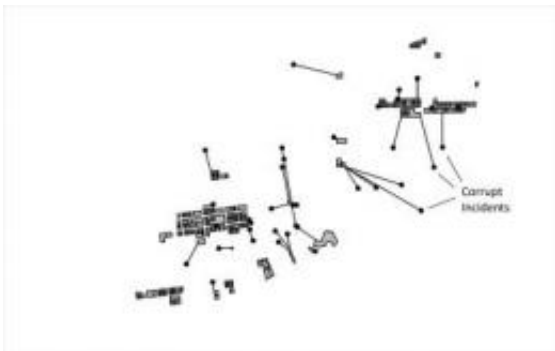
Corrupt, lazy, ignorant and too cowardly to chase criminals - these are among some of the most negative terms to have been applied to the police in South Africa, particularly by their fellow citizens. What truth these perceptions hold and other problems faced by the South African Police Service (SAPS) is the subject of research by political scientist Darshan Vigneswaran from the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Gottingen. He worked with fellow scientist Julia Hornberger on the project "Beyond 'Good Cop'/'Bad Cop': Understanding Informality and Police Corruption in South Africa". They

and their team spent six months shadowing South African police officers on duty, documenting their behaviour on the job. Their findings are suggestive of a brand new strategy in the battle against police corruption on the Cape.

"There are not just 'bad cops' who break the rules and 'good cops' who do everything by the book," says Vigneswaran, summarising one of the key findings of the report he and his team produced on the police force in South Africa. Australian by birth, Vigneswaran is a post-doctoral student at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and [Ethnic Diversity](#) in Göttingen and a senior research scientist in the Forced Migration Studies Programme at the University of Witwatersrand (WITS) in Johannesburg, where the Good Cop/Bad Cop project originated. The team spent six months shadowing officers of the SAPS on the beat in various suburbs and townships, and were most interested in situations where the [police officers](#) were surreptitiously given, or demanded, money, food or other items. Their final report demonstrates that small-scale corruption in the South African police force is anything but the exception. It is an everyday occurrence in many police stations and is tacitly condoned by most of those involved, according to the researchers.

The reports illustrate that it is commonplace for police officers to go about their private business while on duty, for example to go for lunch or go shopping. The different forms of contact they have with the people in their district are correspondingly varied - as are the opportunities to obtain personal gain in the line of duty. As the researchers observed, township residents often give the officers food and drink - such as chilled lemonade or fruit as they pass a store or street stand on patrol. These gifts should not be seen directly as bribes, say the researchers, putting the behaviour into perspective. The exchanges often take place on more of an interpersonal level, serving primarily as a kind of social glue to cement the relationship between the traders and the police

officers, says Vigneswaran's team member, Sian Ófaoláin, in her report, which examines the special dynamics of the police officers' relationships on their beat. During her research, she witnessed a situation where the owner of a beer shop crossed the road and went into another store to intentionally buy a police officer a banana. The interaction was friendly and did not initially give the impression that the benevolent donor expected anything from the officer in return for his gift. "On the other hand, this action, taking place as it did in a region where criminal activity often goes hand in hand with alcohol consumption, may well have involved an ulterior motive," she points out.



Reporting of incidents of corrupt activity in an inner city area of Johannesburg. The dots represent incidents where either a corrupt exchange was observed (witnessed by researcher or related to interviewer by "suspect") or where there were other indications that a corrupt exchange had occurred (such as when an official invited a member of the public to enter a patrol vehicle before allowing them to continue, or when an individual placed an object on the ground which an officer subsequently picked up). The lines represent the closest distance between these events and a commercially zoned building. These maps were used to gauge whether the officers were more or less likely to participate in corrupt behavior "in public," i.e. commercial areas that are frequented by large numbers of pedestrians. Credit: Darshan Vigneswaran

In another situation, the young researcher observed actions that were far more borderline. "The officers drove by the house of an obviously wealthy man and sounded the car's horn," begins her report. "A neighbour went in to bring out the homeowner, who handed the police officers 40 of the 80 rand in his wallet - for cold drinks." As they drove off, the officers were visibly pleased. "They were proud that such an apparently powerful man had, in making this donation, acknowledged their role as authorities in the district," wrote Ófaoláin, describing her impressions. The same social ambivalence was present in this situation. On the one hand, there were echoes of corruption - in this case even more obvious than in the other example. However, it also served to reaffirm an existing social relationship between police officers and residents, especially given the fact that the generous man did not expect any favours at that specific time.

Her fellow team members reported many similar cases, some of which overstepped the boundaries of corruption even more patently than the lemonade donation or the gift of a banana. They often took place in implicit understanding between the police and the persons concerned - such as the officers who confiscated alcohol, which is banned in public places, from the occupants of a car and agreed not to give them a fine in return, or the street vendors selling bootleg merchandise who got off scot free after giving the officers a music CD. For the most part, Vigneswaran and his fellow researchers almost always came across the same phenotypes of the "little sister" of large-scale corruption: demands for kickbacks, bribes to speed up official processes, obtaining personal gain in return for offering exemption from prosecution, and extortion.

Even though such events usually take place in tacit understanding between civilians and the police, they still frequently get out into the public domain. Time and again the media carry reports of spectacular cases of corruption, too. Vigneswaran says that authorities and politicians can do little to counter the negative image of the police that

such cases demonstrate. Many officers do attempt to defend their professional honour; however, their attempts are fairly inefficient because all they do is hold up to the public an equally simplistic picture of the hard-working, thoroughly honest, brave ‘good cop’ to match the mean caricature of the ‘bad cop’. "This kind of good cop/bad cop debate is pointless," says the [political scientist](#). "If there's any hope of us being able to develop a framework of suitable policy and programmes for the SAPS, we need a nuanced picture and understanding of police culture and practice," he says, explaining what he sees as the only sensible approach to realigning the strategy.

In Vigneswaran's opinion, the simple good cop/bad cop cliché does not in any way explain why police officers display ethically and morally questionable behaviour. Nor does it give any indication of the broader context in which the illegal borderline activities take place. All it does is shift the problem to the individual level - which means that conventional policies, procedures and mechanisms will continue to be used to eliminate such bad behaviour, instead of examining the organisation as such. "If we assume that corruption or other misconduct emanates less from ‘black sheep’ and has more to do with the structural framework, cultures and social dynamics of the South African police force as such, we cannot help but conclude that the present policy is unsuitable for coming to grips with the problem." By documenting what really happens during a police officer's day, Vigneswaran and his fellow scientists hope to produce sound facts as the foundation for a meaningful debate on the work and culture of the police in South Africa, thereby offering a tool that can be used to fight the ubiquitous corruption on the beat.

Provided by Max-Planck-Gesellschaft

Citation: The legend of good cop/bad cop: Researchers study police work in South Africa (2010, July 7) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-07-legend-good-copbad-cop->

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