To begin with, I already had some genuine theoretical, moral and political concerns over issues related to the enterprise of policing well before I embarked on investigating police response to domestic violence. To me, police work, policing and policemen are not something totally divorced from my biography, and some of my earlier encounters with the police, which had been most unpleasant, could be traced to my juvenile years when I ran foul of the law on several occasions. I was 17 then. Despite the ‘not so good’ treatment accorded to me for being in their ‘wrong’ books, I, quite strangely, found the police practical, realistic, competent, humorous, ‘macho’ and easy-going, and developed a certain affinity with the officers. I was particularly ‘attracted’ to one who later became a very good friend, especially after learning that I had done well enough in the Cambridge examinations held that year to qualify for a junior college. Over the years, I found myself turning towards an academic interest in the police and began to appreciate the police as a social group in their everyday handling of the practical realities that came with their job. It was sparked by the intellectual empathy which sociology advocated, particularly in sociology of deviance, to see cops, like the deviants and other clients they encountered, as being fundamentally benign human beings. They, however, were sometimes driven to drift into undesirable, yet arguably necessary, ‘functional’ behaviour because of the structural pressures of the social system in which they operated. In other words, I learnt that all policemen, to borrow the description from David Matza (1964, 1969), ‘were human actors whose subjectivities were to be appreciated, not corrected’. I never knew then that this understanding of the police would later come to dominate and characterise my theoretical reformulation of the concept of police subculture.

Increasingly, my ‘fieldwork’ with the police intensified during my undergraduate years and I was exposed to various aspects of police work, including police training, investigations, interrogations, and the policing of ‘community events’ like Thaipusam, Fire-walking and Chingay. The fruit of my amateurish activities and a lot of ‘leg work’—a
familiar term used by detectives to describe investigative work—came when I was invited by the Singapore Police Force to present a joint paper on the policing of Indian gangs in Singapore (Narayanan 1993) at a seminar organised by the National University of Singapore. Many of my peers came to me afterwards and remarked that I ‘looked’ like an officer myself, especially sitting next to a Superintendent of Police. I was even more pleased when a few of the police officers attending the seminar came up to me assuming that I must have been an officer myself before joining the University, as this implied to me that my accounts of police work and culture had some sense of authenticity, or that I had displayed to them a cult of a ‘working personality’ (Skolnick 1966). Totally inspired (and finances permitting), I was determined to become a criminologist.

I left for Brunel University in the UK in the autumn of 1993 to pursue a Masters degree in criminal justice. Studying criminology in Britain was totally illuminating, especially during the period in which the academic discourse on policing was markedly polarised, politically and analytically. The police were either paragons or pigs; defenders of civilisation or the jack-booted repressive arm of the state, depending on which side of the political/philosophical spectrum one came from. For intellectual and moral reasons, I found such representation of the police theoretically and morally deficient, and was drawn to try and bridge this increasingly gaping chasm. In general political terms, I was inclined towards the left, and shared the many criticisms that were being advanced about the police, especially their use of ‘reasonable force’ in the conduct of investigations. At the same time, I felt that these activities of the police were vitiated by an utopian standpoint about what was possible, perhaps strengthened by a conceptualisation of the police, for example in Singapore, as ‘friends in blue’ (Quah & Quah 1987). To me, the police were necessarily ‘dirty’ workers, in Everett Hughes’ phrase (Hughes 1961), doing the tragically inescapable job of managing, often coercively, the symptoms of deeper social conflicts and malaise (Reiner 1998). They were a necessary evil in any complex society experiencing change. This sense of the police as Janus-faced was pithily captured in the title of an article I read by Otwin Marenin, that the police dealt with both ‘[p]arking tickets and class repression’ (Marenin 1983). Both accounts of the police role in modern society as a good tragic hero and as wielders of the State’s monopoly of legitimate force were encapsulated in a passage from Weber, which ultimately appeared as the frontispiece to Robert Reiner’s Politics of the Police: ‘He who lets