Building Sustainable Police-Academic Partnerships in the Context of Evidence Based Policing: The Importance of Narrative and Voice

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Outline

• Experiences and research on building police-academic partnerships

• Background to the study

• Findings:
  1. Internal organisational and cultural drivers and barriers
  2. In-house research by analysts and police officers
  3. Evaluation

The study

- Aimed to build university/academic and police partnerships with a focus on research, knowledge transfer, enterprise and CPD.
- Social sciences but with cross-disciplinary links.
- 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with police officers, staff and key stakeholders across various forces in England.
- Observations at key meetings and events.
- Access via key stakeholders – ‘purposive’ and ‘snowball sampling’.
- Identities of police forces and individual officers / staff are anonymised.
Research questions

- How are different kinds of ‘knowledge’ and ‘research’ understood by different kinds of practitioner in police organisations?
- How do they think such knowledge(s) might usefully be drawn upon to improve practice?
- What ‘work’ are these constructions performing?
- What might the facilitators and challenges be to effective ‘knowledge transfer/exchange’ and collaborative research/knowledge production?
Co-production and police-academic partnerships

“Perhaps work in partnership … You’re an academic, you know how to crunch through all this, you might come up with some hypotheses yourself. I’m a practitioner but with a certain amount of academic background, so I can understand where you’re coming from – let’s work together to get a better … understanding of how we ended up with the outcome.”

(Interviewee 7, Acting Chief Inspector)

• Drivers and barriers at various levels: interpersonal, organizational, political.

• ‘Invisibility’ of the procedural effort required by both academics and police to develop collaborations successfully (Bartkowiak-Theron, 2011).

• But various police-academic partnerships are bridging gap between the ‘two worlds’ and addressing the ‘dialogue of the deaf’ (Bradley and Nixon, 2009).

• However – risk that academic research is conflated with commissioning / consultancy work and that academics do not anticipate the intricacies of police cultures and organizations.
Financial constraints

“Austerity’s a huge driver for it. I think the days of us identifying a problem, throwing loads of resources at it… those days are gone.”

(Interviewee 7, Temporary Chief Inspector)
Policing ‘more intelligently’

“We have to think much more about what we do than perhaps we had to in the past and find different ways of dealing with things...when it comes to modern technology, because the cutting edge of technology is not going to be police officers who’ve sat at home and taught themselves and picked it up as they’ve gone along.”

(Interviewee 3, Inspector)
Future scanning

“Where we’re making major policy decisions or investment decisions, we should be doing that on the basis of evidence … it isn’t something that happens with any degree of consistency or robustness … where are our biggest cases of concern, what should our priorities be; looking at the underlying causes of those issues; getting the right people together to plan an approach, to tackle that problem at its root cause.”

(Interviewee 2, police staff)
Professional expertise

“Perhaps work in partnership to say, ‘You’re an academic, you know how to crunch through all this, you might come up with some hypotheses yourself. I’m a practitioner but with a certain amount of academic background, so I can understand where you’re coming from – let’s work together to get a better, or a greater understanding of how we ended up with the outcome’.”

(Interviewee 7, Temporary Chief Inspector)
Barriers: unreflective ‘on-the-spot’ decision making

“Officers, especially at the senior ranks, it’s all ‘implemental’ … part of it may be a bit of bravado. They’re expected to show leadership and they confuse leadership with making a snap decision… And I think that the higher up that you go, they never really leave that behind.”

(Interviewee 1, police staff)
Barriers: lack of strategic thinking

“All you’ve done is create a process and you haven’t actually done the decision-making bit. That’s the bit that you should have focused on, to get better decisions made, and then put the structure in to help those decisions be delivered and monitored…we don’t sort of think strategically how we need to put in place-, what’s the direction of travel, what milestones we’re going to meet, what’s the critical path, what do we need to change?”

(Interviewee 1, police staff)
Barriers: space for learning and reflection

“It’s going to require some deliberation about interpreting the results, some deliberation about how best to implement those results or change the organization – everything will be rushed through … and it will likely fail … research can only inform your thinking as to what is probably a good thing to do or what you may need to consider. They will probably not view it like that.”

(Interviewee 1, police staff)

When you do read an application form for a job, it’s always: ‘Did this – and it was excellent! First time!’ and you know, ‘Look at all my fantastic results!’ There is no: ‘I set off, and I did this, and it didn’t quite achieve what I wanted it to achieve, so I went back and had a look, tweaked it, and then it still wasn’t quite right, tweaked it again and I think I’ve got a good product here – and this is the learning’. We don’t value learning.”

(Interviewee 5, Inspector)
Barriers: strategic priorities

“We’ve got a Police and Crime Plan which has just been re-written ready for the new financial year and that has all sorts of pillars to it…We have our strategic priorities…so they would be our top two at the moment…So there will be things that the force are saying ‘These are our most important things’ and if it doesn’t hit those – I mean there is a certain amount of hierarchy to those – so what you want to be aiming it at are the ones that we’re saying are the highest risk and if it’s not really in there…we’ll park that.”

(Interviewee 7, Temporary Chief Inspector)

“Even though the Home Office removed it, the PCCs still came at us with targets…it’s very much an administrative process without understanding, actually, a lot of the variables that’s going to have an effect on this are outside the individual’s control – although we’ll still hold those (people) to account.”

(Interviewee 2, police staff)
Concluding thoughts 1

- Police-academic partnerships interesting politically, institutionally and at the individual level.

- Institutionally – as police forces attempt to rationalise their service delivery in response to austerity-driven cuts in public funding.

- The knowledge needs of policing are much broader than ‘what works’.

- Dominance of this model risks missing out on knowledge exchange and research collaboration in areas of academic expertise that do not exclusively use these methods and in areas of policing where there is a concern to ‘unpack the box’ of interventions.

- To understand why initiatives work (or do not), using theories of human behaviour and qualitative methods to counterbalance the empiricism of pure experimentation.
  - I.e. gaining a better understanding of the causes of crime to inform crime prevention initiatives.
  - Tracking victims’ and witnesses’ journeys through the criminal justice system in order to understand their experiences and improve services.
Concluding thoughts 2

- Tensions between ‘public pressures for short-term funded research’ and ‘theoretically grounded scholarship’ of a slower, more reflective nature (Manning, 2005: 23).

- Mapping academic expertise onto forces’ strategic priorities:
  - Questions about how well articulated these are by forces and how stable they are?
  - Academics may find that strategic priorities differ according to whom they ask in the force, or that they are aiming at a constantly moving target, particularly given external influences.

- Challenges to both sides not only in terms of time needed to build effective relationships but a high degree of skill in terms of organisational analysis and interpersonal interaction.

- ‘Patch mentality’ (Fleming, 2010) in police organisations, whereby police operating in silos also compete for resources:
  - Barrier to research - competitiveness around performance management targets and scarce resources.
The McDonaldization of police-academic partnerships

- Impeding the development of police–academic partnerships.

- Increasing risk presented by the ‘McDonaldisation’ of police–academic partnerships themselves, if careful attention is not paid to how the identification and prioritisation of research, its conduct, and aspects of evaluation are managed and supported in practice.

- Partnership working is problematic due to the ‘invisibility’ of the procedural effort required by both academics and police to develop these collaborations successfully.

- The quantification of research ‘outcomes’, ‘performances’ and ‘successes’, as attested to here, leaves inadequate space for learning and/or reflecting on what does not work.

- Organisational culture still in thrall to ‘McDonaldisation’, with Home Office targets replaced by PCC-imposed targets.

- EBP also presents significant barrier as partnerships require forces to be outward facing, to be able to engage in longer-term thinking, and to be allowed to take the kind of risks inherent in genuine learning.
References


Thank you!

Any questions?

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