

Ian Hesketh

Lancaster University Management School and College of Policing

United Kingdom

i.hesketh@lancaster.ac.uk

+44 (0)7778 208675

Les Graham

Durham University Business School, Durham University

United Kingdom

L.N.Graham@durham.ac.uk

+44 (0) 191 3845341

THEORY OR NOT THEORY? THAT IS THE QUESTION

Abstract

While there is a growing recognition of the importance of evidence-based policing (EBP) (Neyroud, Ferreira & Vera, 2015), a fundamental disconnect still exists between science and policing organisations (Weisburd & Neyroud, 2011). Achieving strong collaborative relationships between researchers and police practitioners is not straightforward (Fyfe & Wilson, 2012) and widespread obstacles exist (Bullock & Tilley, 2009). Moreover, despite the identification of the need for the advancement of science in policing as being essential for the achievement of legitimacy and the ability to cope with recessionary budget pressures, the social sciences have been largely neglected (Weisburd & Neyroud, 2011) and EBP research has focused mainly on crime control (Punch, 2015). In this paper we present our reflections and learning from working in a collaborative research partnership between an academic institution and police forces, investigating the impact of workplace factors on police officer and staff attitudes, perceptions and behaviours.

Keywords: evidence-based policing, wellbeing, partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

Police interest in using evidence has grown rapidly in the past decade (Sherman, 2013). In 1999 the UK Home Office committed more than £250 million to the Crime Reduction Programme that had the objective of generating evidence-based policy (Hope, 2004). There are clear signs within the policy context and academic literature that evidence-based approaches in management are becoming increasingly used and influential, as noted by Morrell “*the momentum behind the evidence-based school is considerable and shows no sign of diminishing.*” (2008: 630).

It is widely reported that police organisations are continuing to face high levels of challenge, largely due to the reduction in resources available to them and the burgeoning amount of emerging crime, witnessing both new crimes, and old crimes committed in new ways. As noted by Hesketh and Cooper (2017) the UK police are adapting to new challenges, pressures, technologies and opportunities, set against a backdrop of radical reform. In England and Wales police forces have had to restructure and reduce their number of resources (HMIC, 2014a). Since 2010 funding from central government to police services in England and Wales has been reduced by £1.7 billion, or 19 percent (HMIC, 2015). This in turn has led to a growing concern about some of the possible consequences, such as increased levels of absence and burnout in police officers (see for example: BBC, 2016), as well as changes in police officer attitudes. There are also some indications of an increasing level of incivility towards the public and of concerns about reduced empathy with victims of crime. “*Too often, victim contact is viewed by officers as just another bureaucratic (our emphasis) requirement*” (HMIC, 2014b: 50-52).

What we may be witnessing is an overstretched workforce that increasingly ‘*complies*’ with policing initiatives, rather than being committed to these initiatives and fully engaging with practices? What we explore and report on in this paper is how we garner evidence of

sufficient quality, validity and reliability that it can be used to inform practical strategies to militate these issues, despite the prevailing leadership culture. As noted by the UK police inspectorate, “*Chief Officers have more to do in creating an ethical culture in their force.*” (HMIC, 2014: 87). At the same time as reduced resources, the police profession is coming under increasing pressure to ensure that all officers and staff act with integrity. These serious concerns merit rigorous research to deepen understanding of causal relationships, and for the development and provision of recommendations for improvement. The three main foci of this collaborative research project are to investigate how leadership, management practices and culture affect: wellbeing, engagement, integrity and ethical behaviour.

THE USE OF THEORY

Less than one percent of HR managers read academic literature regularly, and consultants who advise them are unlikely to do so either (Rynes, Brown & Colbert, 2002). This suggests that managers’ knowledge and understanding of theory and evidence can be quite limited. In sharp contrast to this Chief Constable Sara Thornton (2015), the head of the UK National Police Chiefs’ Council notes that: “*...police leaders need to not only have knowledge of the evidence, but also to achieve a deep understanding of the underlying logic so that they can apply it into their daily decision-making.*”

Our central proposition is that the adoption of an evidence-based management (EBM) model will reduce ‘research-practice gaps,’ congruent with the work of Denise Rousseau (2006). Evidence-based management means managerial decisions and organisational practices informed by the best available scientific evidence (Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007). Given the powerful impact policing leaders’ decisions and behaviours have on their organisations, individuals and the public, we argue that competence in decision-making is a critical factor for organisational success. In support, Briner, Denyer and Rousseau (2009) propose that

evidence-based management is about making decisions through the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of four sources of information:

1. Practitioner expertise and judgment
2. Evidence from the local context
3. A critical evaluation of the best available research evidence
4. The perspectives of those people who might be affected by the decision

Punch (2015) posits, in relation to the use of theory in practice, that there are three factors worthy of mention. Firstly, there is occasionally a degree of professional friction when proponents of evidence-based research and evidence-based practice claim primacy for these as ‘real science,’ and appear to define fundamental and qualitative work as somehow inferior. In return there is a concern among others that evidence-based practice is in danger of being co-opted by the crime control lobby, with the skewing of research funding exclusively towards crime control. This study relates to research of, and in, the policing population rather than criminality. We argue that investment in the policing workforce would have a significant impact on criminality (in a non-statistical way!). The argument being that an engaged workforce, with meaning, purpose, and high levels of psychological wellbeing will be more focussed on their role of policing (Hesketh & Cooper, 2016). Thirdly, Punch suggests it is questionable if the typical police organisation and occupational culture is readily open to research findings and the implementation of EBP. Much of policing is highly contextual, incident driven and geared to the ‘here and now’, with an antipathy even to research and with a negative stereotype of academics. Fyfe (2015) notes the research-practice gap, and the friction that can sometimes exist between police officers, researchers and police officers doing research. This is supported by Weisburd and Neyroud, (2011: 2) who note: “*there is still a fundamental disconnect between science and policing*”. They also contend that a radical reformation of the role of science in policing will be necessary if policing is to

become an arena of evidence-based policies. They claim that the advancement of science in policing is essential if police are to retain public support and legitimacy, cope with recessionary budget reductions, and if the policing industry is to alleviate the problems that research has to become a part of the policing task.

Van Dijk, Hoogewoning and Punch (2015) maintain that ‘what works’ is clearly important and police should pursue that forcefully in order to support practitioners. They also stress that ‘what matters’ always supersedes this. A CEPOL study of police research in European police agencies found that only 5 out of 30 countries showed a “high” value accorded to police science research. In contrast, in nearly half the countries, research was seen as being of “low” value. The CEPOL study categorized low value through two characteristics: little or no demand from police for research, and police training being conducted without reference to scientific or academic knowledge (Hanak & Hofinger, 2005). Even police practitioners who are committed to using scientific evidence recognize that the present state of practice makes a sophisticated use of science difficult in many police agencies (Neyroud, 2008; Weatheritt, 1986).

RESEARCHING THE POLICE

The Durham University (UK) research collaboration project has expanded rapidly, from an established relationship between social science researchers and a single police force, encompassing a further twenty-two forces, and all this in less than three years. Rousseau (2006) suggests that the adoption of an evidence-based management (EBM) model will reduce ‘research-practice gaps.’ We review our success in the adoption of an EBM approach in this collaborative work and provide an evaluation of the importance of identified factors.

Given the powerful impact policing leaders’ decisions and behaviours have on their organisations, individuals and the public, decision-making competence is a critical factor for

organisational success. We also review our attempts to encourage evidence-based education (Rousseau & McCathy, 2007) to develop operational managers into competent practitioners who are able to effectively use research evidence and translate it into workplace practices that solve organisational problems.

COLLABORATION

In order to facilitate the research we formed a collaborative research venture with over half of the forces in the UK, to establish what the state of play is with these critical aspects of policing. Achieving strong collaborative relationships between researchers and police practitioners is not straightforward (Fyfe & Wilson, 2012). To overcome this we have adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach (Kendon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007), which is defined as collaborative research, education and action used to gather information to use for change on social issues. It involves people who are concerned about or affected by an issue, taking a leading role in working together to produce and share knowledge and understanding on how to make improvements. The overall aim is that the research findings can be translated into actions, interventions and policy, which result in benefits and changes for all of those involved in policing; including the public. We hasten to add this includes police staff as well as police officers, and the wider policing family and the nuances that brings. Successful PAR involves long-term partnerships based on a common set of values. The benefits for the public, as previously touched upon, include the identification of human factors that can improve service delivery behaviours. They can also lead to the early identification of problems that present the risk of service failure, or sub-optimal working. We envisage future police inspections in the UK will feature a variety of contemporary people issues for commentary and assessment. Our simple proposition can be summed up as the way people are treated by the organisation, and the environment in which they work affects their attitudes, perceptions, behaviours and service delivery. As with all other walks of life, and an

acknowledgement to the great poet Maya Angelou, people will always remember how they were made to feel.

AMBITION

Our research aims to develop reliable key measures in each participating force that can be tracked longitudinally to assess whether improvements are achieved and are sustainable. It is also our aim to develop predictive models that will identify factors that are having the greatest impact on focal measures, and be able to recommend priorities for action to forces in which these emerge. Finally, the research aims to establish a selection of measures that allow interested forces to compare themselves over time and test interventions for workplace improvements in terms of workplace wellbeing, (for example Resilience Training Efficacy Hesketh, Cooper & Ivy, 2015).

Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) emphasise the importance of collecting and analysing internal organisational evidence and paying less attention to the role of external research and systematic reviews of the literature in prior research. In our experience in working with forces on this collaborative research it is not sufficient even to show evidence from research in similar forces, however it is necessary to conduct research in the context of the home force to replicate the findings before acceptance is achieved.

Rousseau (2006) argues for the importance of social networks for the adoption of evidence-based practices. Our experience is that through conferences and a number of small briefing workshops a very strong network has been developed that effectively transfers and shares knowledge and ideas. We also note the increasing use of social media, such as Twitter within these conferences, to communicate content to a wider, and perhaps global, audience.

CONCLUSIONS

Punch (2015) posits that it is questionable whether the typical police organisation and its occupational culture are open to the research findings of EBR and EBP. We have argued in this paper that the adoption of an EBM philosophy, coupled with a PAR approach, gains the attention of interested practitioners within police forces, who then work with academic partners to conduct research focussed on the issues that are important to them. Their involvement in the process of conducting the research in their home force on issues they are motivated to solve encourages them to appreciate the importance and gain understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and the research findings. Rousseau (2006) identifies the importance on learning how to translate research findings into solutions. Through the adoption of the EBM philosophy and focussing on the importance of using practitioner expertise and judgment and their knowledge of the local context to interpret the research findings we believe we have overcome two challenges. Firstly, helping the practitioners to achieve a critical evaluation of the research evidence, and secondly, the translation of research findings into actions, policy and interventions to solve the key problems and challenges the organisations face.

We hope to have provided some thoughts and evidence to answer the question posed by Sherman (2013) as to whether research can improve democratic policing.

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