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Policing and research: two cultures separated by an almost-common language

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The recent paper 'Ending the "Dialogue of the Deaf": Evidence and Policing Policies and Practices, an Australian Case Study' (Bradley & Nixon, 2009) provides a vivid depiction of the gulf between research *on* the police and research *with* the police. The dialogue of the deaf metaphor is an apt one; perhaps equally useful is Kipling's fable about the blind men and the elephant. Police and researchers each define the whole in terms of the part accessible to them, but the endeavor is larger than the sum of those parts.

This paper asserts two primary points. The first is that the main obstacle to effective police–researcher collaboration is radically different conceptions of what constitutes 'evidence of effectiveness.' Tradition distorts reform into existing practice; research results must speak in the language that the police understand if they are to be adopted. The second is that policing and research are both defined and enabled by external sovereigns, and the police–research relationship must be understood in the context of larger forces that impinge on both elements.

'Best practices' are postulated but rarely enacted in any but episodic fashion. Politically, the tendency to reduce complex research findings to something that fits a bumper sticker (e.g., 'Nothing works') eviscerates meaningful second-level investigation. This constitutes a major reason for Bradley and Nixon's observation that the **critical research tradition** 'manages to find fault with rather than celebrate the role and activities of the public police.' It also explains the gap between the findings of the **policy research tradition** and actual police practice.

Evidence

The observation 'despite its volume, and despite the police openness to research policy, police research has not led to "widespread operational changes even when it has been accepted as true"' (Bradley & Nixon, citing Bayley, 1998, p. 5) presents a challenge. It is probably not that 'the police are open to policy research,' but rather that progressive police *administrators* are open to such research. Researchers benefited from traditional command-and-control structures to implement their hypotheses in police departments. Under those conditions, research is imposed: most officers are draftees, assigned to implement innovations contrary to their cognitive framework and moral center. Their response mirrors their attitude toward changes in operations imposed by new commanders, politicians, or moral

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entrepreneurs: 'this, too, shall pass.' And it usually does, removing any incentive to invest in change.

The police are not monolithic. Reuss-Ianni (1983) noted the division between 'street cops and management cops,' though street cops usually describe the distinction as between 'real cops' and 'politicians.' US police agencies vary in their public presentation and operations according to the expectations of the taxpayers in their jurisdiction. Within organizations, shifts and platoons and special units can differ radically in their approach to The Job, depending upon personalities of formal and informal leaders, and the demands of the position.

Some new techniques have been incorporated quietly into practice, because practitioners recognize their merits. Such adoptions are not formally announced, rarely taking root under the flashy, hyphenated name of their experimental prototypes. The differences between what is needed to demonstrate the effectiveness of a technique with scientific rigor, and the actual application of that technique within the situational exigencies (Bittner, 1970) of real-world operational conditions remains a perceptual gap.

Street officers exist in an immediate, rapidly changing world. Researchers are trained to look at events over time, to eliminate threats to validity arising from seasonality, 'flare-up' events, and others. That timeframe lies outside the cognitive map of a police officer's world, and is difficult to incorporate into administrative viewpoints. Though administrators think in terms of annual budgets and deployments, the long-term view is obscured by the demands of external sovereigns. Flare-ups require immediate responses to retain political support and public legitimacy; when resources are scarce, resources are drawn from 'non-essential' functions like externally driven research.

A canon of social science is that as long as the numbers are big enough, any error – or variance – will be equally distributed across control and treatment groups. That is anathema in the police world, where 'error' is individualistic, representing both physical and litigational danger to the individual officer.

Academic research turns people into abstractions ('subjects') whose individual traits are further abstracted into 'variables' with only mathe-magical integration. The immediacy of personality is extremely acute in the police world: personality factors signify situational danger just as behavioral cues do.

Police learn in trickle-stream fashion, not in the batch-data mode of researchers. Police are not deductive thinkers seeking evidence of the validity of a grand theory, but inductive thinkers, sorting and adding the cumulative weight of experience. For an officer, a single incident is enough to validate the effectiveness of a particular course of action.

Incidents providing contrary evidence do not negate the validity of the first experience, but instead demand alternative theoretical explanation. Such explanations are often morally rather than scientifically derived, though there is good reason to believe that police process a panoply of visual and verbal cues just below the conscious level, *a procedure that social scientists might recognize as assessing evidence*.

Personality has a mirror image. For all that police officers claim that 'We are not social workers with guns,' they are. Most police work does not involve *administering the sacrament of arrest*, but is accomplished through person-to-person persuasion. The police officer is at his or her best when working with people as a person, not as an Agent of the State. However, the window of opportunity for that person-to-person contact may be created by an arrest, after which the officer steps out of the Agent of the State role. The tension between those roles places a premium on the officer's ability to be an accurate diagnostician, recognizing when persuasion will be effective, and choosing the right words to make it work.

External sovereigns

The public's expectations of the police are shaped by fiction, moral entrepreneurs, and direct and vicarious experiences. State- and national-level politicians promulgate and reshape the codes police enforce. Local politicians control budgets, shaping local ethos and capacities. Prosecutors judge arrests in terms of both strength of evidence and scarce resources. Scientists develop and marketers promote the tools of enforcement, influencing public perceptions and police demands. Courts determine the means by which police are permitted to enforce the laws. And academic researchers provide many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse, claiming it is wisdom about the effectiveness of police operational practices.

Researchers are external sovereigns with the power to impose something stupid on police practice. Researchers themselves answer to other sovereigns, however: the prevailing ethos of their various disciplines (currently the 'gold standard' of randomized, controlled experiments), institutional human subjects review, peer review, and organizational demands. Most important are the external funding decisions of the National Institute of Justice, their state-level equivalents, foundations, and others. Public funding, in turn, depends upon political winds of outrage, interest, and chance.

Bradley and Nixon's critique of university-based research fails to recognize the limits created by federal funding mandates, at least within the USA. 'Innovation' research has a two-year funding arc, with relatively rare extensions for further development. Replication is a stepchild, left to forage for its own funding sources. Even tepid results are elevated to the status of 'best practice' because of the political realities of funded research: for legislative moneys to flow, positive results must be obtained, decreed, and well publicized. And the field is still in the early stages of learning how to do effective research in a turbulent, multi-faceted field environment.

Evidence vs. practice

Tradition endures even in the face of evidence … any evidence. Major experiments in deterrent patrol and the handling of domestic violence illustrate the gaps.

Police patrol and deterrence

The Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment (Kelling, Pate, Dieckman, & Brown, 1974) and the Minneapolis Hot Spots of Crime Experiment (Sherman & Weisburd, 1995) provided contrary evidence of the deterrent power of police presence. Kansas City 'proved' – with the available science of the day – that the presence of the police had no discernible impact on crime or citizens' perception of safety. Yet routine deterrent patrol continued as it had always been conducted.

Two decades later, the Hot Spots experiment revisited deterrence, concentrating police presence in smaller areas where crime was documented to be a persistent problem. Hot Spots demonstrated conclusively that proper allocation of patrol resources reduced crime and disorder both when the police were there, and when they were not. Despite findings that strongly supported the police view that 'more cops equal fewer crimes,' the hot spots approach was never adopted. Routine deterrent patrol continues as the standard police deployment, unchanged even in Minneapolis. The term 'hot spots' survives in a diagnostic role, but generally refers to short-term flare-ups of crime problems that are addressed by a traditional crackdown operation (Sherman, 1990), not the persistent crime concentrations that determined the Minneapolis Hot Spots.

One Minneapolis Hot Spot assigned to police patrol was an intersection along Plymouth Avenue on the North Side, essentially open space used for open-air drug dealing. No buildings occupied the corner lot on any of the four sides. The Hot Spots strategy required a police presence within the defined hot spot area for a total of three hours a day (90 minutes within each of two defined timeframes). The results were predictable. As soon as it became evident that the police were paying attention to the intersection, the drug dealers moved to the intersection at the far end of the side street, effectively taunting the cops tethered to the Hot Spot intersection.[1]

That intersection became the poster child for Hot Spots, a cartoon version of the concept deployed to denigrate and eviscerate the formal justification for the strategy. Atypical of Hot Spots geography, it embodied the cognitive chasm between the police and the researchers. Hot Spots as an experiment was anchored in a theory of crime and place; the police officers were working from their traditional view of crime as the activity of criminals, in which a static 'place' was irrelevant.

Arrest for domestic violence

The impetus for assessing the effectiveness of arrest for domestic violence was the product of social pressures, as the women's movement asserted their demands for equal treatment under the law. Legislatures responded to political pressure, giving police the power to make arrests for a specific misdemeanor that had not occurred in their presence – a power the police had not sought, at least not for that particular problem.[2]

In scientific terms, the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment (hereafter MDVE) (Sherman & Berk, 1984) was designed to determine the relative effectiveness of three common police techniques for handling misdemeanor-level domestic violence incidents: arrest, counseling (or cautioning) at the scene, and separating the participants for the night. In the political arena, it was a test of whether the police diagnosis or the women's movement's diagnosis was more correct. Both views were normative, derived from different experiences and orientations.

The police view was predicated upon the lack of follow-up by victims. Police expected arrest to be the first step of separation and divorce. The fact that women stayed with their abusers, failed to appear in court, and even came to the police station asking that charges be dropped was proof that arrest and prosecution was not a viable response to the problem. Though police socialization overtly fostered this perception, individual officers' personal and collective experiences with the universe of domestic violence incidents reported to the police validated its general dimensions.

Women's advocates proceeded from a subset of that universe: women who had made the decision to leave their abuser, but received no help from the police in doing so. The feminist interpretation was that male police officers were vested in male-dominant explanations of violence, and otherwise were hostile to the needs of real victims. The police viewpoint failed to take into account multiple hurdles faced by victims of domestic violence: emotional and financial dependence, the need for childcare in order to pursue the many steps (and multiple court appearances) required by the formal process of prosecution, limited transportation options, and many others.

These different viewpoints stemmed from different sources of evidence – one broad, the other narrow. Though each side now recognizes the legitimacy of the other's position, the difficulties of distinguishing at the time of initial police contact which group a victim will be in remain.

After publication of the MDVE's findings, NIJ funded the six-site Spousal Abuse Replication Project (SARP) to replicate the Minneapolis findings.[3] The mixed results from the SARP sites ultimately produced a split verdict (Sherman, 1992). Contrary results were obtained with different collection instruments (official reports or witness interviews), an outstanding issue that has yet to be resolved. Unanticipated results at individual sites may have greater applicability, but have not been fully explored: the 'backfire effect' of greater violence among unemployed men who were arrested in Milwaukee (Sherman, 1992) and the greater deterrence achieved in Omaha by issuing a warrant for domestic batterers who fled the scene before the police arrived (Dunford, Huizinga, & Elliot, 1990).

Arrests are not aspirins

Arrests are not aspirin, as Bradley and Nixon note, but that statement is equally true of any police tactic. Police research should develop both diagnostic and tactical skills to improve police effectiveness. The professional police model rested its claims on the 'intuitive grasp of situational exigencies,' but those assessments were larded with unrecognized inherited social prejudices.

The critical tradition focused on the practitioners of street medicine (which is not the same as 'street justice'), not their patients. People who are arrested are very much like the people to whom aspirins are given. Enough respond positively to aspirin to make it the resort of first choice. Some require stronger painkillers, especially for migraine headaches and injuries. A few may be suffering from undiagnosed conditions for which aspirin is totally inappropriate, and may even be counterproductive (the 'backfire effect'). And many patients will respond equally well to placebos: prior to the MDVE, most police treatments of domestic violence were the placebos of separation and warning.

Arrest for domestic violence treats two patients – the victim and the batterer. It is an entry point to an array of secondary treatments that would not be sought voluntarily by either party. In that respect, involuntary commitment for mental health reasons might be a better analogy for the arrest than aspirin (and shares the vulnerabilities of the mental health commitment in terms of effectiveness and long-term follow-up). Neither the police nor their academic partners have looked beyond the administration of the aspirin treatment, nor attempted to overcome the maze of legal and privacy issues that inhibit further inquiries. Yet that is exactly what the police–research partnership must do, in conjunction with a network of other partners, in order to make research more productive.

Evidence-based policing

The current trend toward 'evidence-based policing' (EBP) follows the example of the medical profession. It is reasonable to reexamine beliefs that pass for knowledge, because beliefs are based upon the science available at the time of discovery or development. Occasionally, new tools reveal inconsistencies, facts unsupported by the dominant paradigm. Sometimes further research accounts for the seeming anomalies; sometimes the anomalies persist; on rare occasions, the cumulative weight of anomalies leads to a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1970). However, scientists and police approach evidence from radically different starting points.

In social science, the gravitational pull is toward measurement. Definition and measurement are vital to replication. Proponents couch the issue in terms of 'Measuring What Matters'; contrarians retort that 'what can be measured matters,' to the exclusion of important variables not captured in standard data sets. There is a tendency to exclude outliers in

favor of measures of central tendency, and a constant struggle between Type 1 or Type 2 error as the more damaging for policy.

The 'evidence' in policing – experience – is a composite image from a series of redacted events, with potentially important details ('variables') censored. The components of experience are emotionally validated and enhanced, not verified by replication. Outliers are not discarded, and often are elevated to iconic status, a mirror image of the ecological fallacy. Neither Type 1 nor Type 2 error exist, as Type 1 equivalents are built into the moral fabric of the police world by the external sovereigns of prosecutors and courts.

Evidence-based policing should make better diagnosticians of the police, at all levels. At the present time, patrol officers are physicians working in a free clinic, meeting individual patients on a case-by-case basis, deciding treatment on a slender handful of visible symptoms. Police administrators are the equivalent of county health officials, responsible for assuring basic health services while analyzing trends, responding to epidemiological flare-ups, and trying to craft and deploy as many preventive schemes as possible with scarce resources.

Inevitably research will be critical. If the treatment is not being applied as specified, we cannot expect positive results. If the tests are being manipulated – and both the police and the researchers may be at fault – marketing overwhelms science. If research results are cherry-picked for publication (a factor that falls squarely on the shoulders of the academic community, with analogs to drug trials of the pharmaceutical industry), practitioners receive a distorted view of the effectiveness of the techniques tested.

Toward a way forward

A number of steps can be taken to realign the research endeavor and set both partners on a more productive path. They are easier to describe than to implement, and predictable as well as unforeseen obstacles must be overcome.

First, establish the research agenda with the police, and pursue research meaningful to the police as well as that which is theory driven. Researchers should ask the police (at all levels, from street cop to agency head) what sort of information they need to make better operational decisions. Bradley and Nixon (2009) identify a host of research projects underway in Australia. At first blush, their bullet points read more like a list of police topics than a research agenda, but identifiable research components are embedded in each. As broad as the topics are, each represents something the police field needs to know more about in order to be effective.

Second, there must be an overt recognition that some police policy initiatives are initiated on an intuitive basis – 'because it makes sense.' The role of research will be to help refine operational practice rather than to prove or disprove a particular hypothesis. 'Failed to reject the null hypothesis' is meaningless in the police world. The success of operational research of this type depends upon a joint ability to identify or create sources of information specific and relevant to the operation, tactic, or approach under study. It will be labor-intensive, frustrating, and demanding: ongoing development should be anticipated, so the current standard one-year timetable must be set aside at need.

Actively incorporating the police in the crafting of the research is a necessary third step. (This has been done in some places, but it does not yet rise to the level of Industry Standard.) Initially, the effort will have the same pungent ambience that the first police–community meetings did. Frank and open exchanges of views are a vital step to forging a common vocabulary, and common expectations. Police will need to accommodate the need for standardized practice; researchers will need to realize that 'standard practice' is a range of actions, not an aspirin tablet.

Steps two and three will inevitably move police research away from the gold standard of research. Practitioners and their academic allies must mount a political initiative to insure that practice-relevant research is acknowledged by the academic establishment, and incorporated into tenure and promotion systems. Corporate research entities will most likely adapt much more swiftly than academia, but academic institutions throughout the nation can be integral to timely replication.

Replication must be built in to any original research design. If the police are sponsoring research rather than merely allowing it, then the current pattern of a one- or two-city initial site can be bypassed. Strictly speaking, this step would not be 'replication' in its traditional sense, but contemporary research conducted semi-autonomously in multiple settings. (This is more of a problem in America than in Australia or the UK, whose large regional police forces under unified command can easily conduct research across broader locales.)

Police sponsorship can arise through the agency of national police organizations (IACP, NSA, Major City Chiefs, PERF), national associations (e.g., SROs, Tactical Officers, White-Collar Crime Investigators), or on an ad hoc regional basis. In the short term, this will involve many 're-inventing the wheel' meetings between researchers and new groups of practitioner sponsors. Both evaluation methods and practice have to bend, but at certain points each must forego flexibility to preserve the core mission. Many intermediate points exist between academia's gold standard and the bottom line of practitioner self-evaluation. ('We like it. It worked for us.') Developing usable adaptations that meet both the letter and spirit of reliability and validity will be a continuing challenge.

Multi-site projects can encounter issues of definition anchored in variation of local culture and local practice. Central control of the tested variables will be less applicable under a multi-site model, and evaluations must be capable of taking into account variability of practices in different settings. That is one of the elements much easier to say in a sentence than to do in the field. A new set of evaluation tools will be needed.

The reward system of academia links tenure and promotion to external funding and publications in first-tier journals. Replication studies are published, but are scattered across an ever-expanding universe of lower-ranked journals. The academic focus places a premium on methodology and statistical analysis, written in a language inaccessible to most practitioners but demanded by academic peer review. Incorporating publication in editor-reviewed practitioner outlets ('impact publishing,' for lack of an honest term) needs to be incorporated into the academic reward system, or the new partnership faces failure-to-thrive starvation over time. An article in *Police Chief* or the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* will never carry the same clout as one in *Criminology*, *American Sociological Review*, or *Justice Quarterly*, but it will be read by far more people, and conceivably will have greater impact. Academics worthy of the name should be able to publish in both venues. Some institutions of higher learning already acknowledge the scholarship of engagement; some never will. Between those two poles is fertile ground for expansion of the partnership.

Funding is the most predictable obstacle. The police are never paid for their participation in research, so there will be no change in that status quo, but academics are accustomed to summer money for research, buy-outs of school year classes, and other perks. Their host institutions expect the indirect benefits built into federal research grants. Those will not be available except in the rarest of instances in this scheme.

Where labor is needed, student internships (or some hybrid form of learning – a field-work class in 'operational research methods' for example) will likely be the only alternative at first. Issues could arise in terms of insurance liabilities, and the 'going native' phenomenon among students who view the research as a gateway into their own career as a practitioner. Nevertheless, a properly crafted project on police operations has great potential

to lend depth of understanding to classroom-based instruction in research methods. If a side result is a new generation of practitioners more attuned to the value of research and ongoing evaluation, both fields will be the better for it. Police officers are information generators, information recorders, and information reporters. Currently they do so within specific, time- and goal-limited parameters, not for the creation of an institutional data set (craft knowledge still suffices). But one of the hallmarks of the classic professions has always been the development of new knowledge, and that link to true professional status might well be a selling point within the guild setting of police culture.

The final step toward long-term implementation is the most difficult to manage. The police remove their most effective ambassadors for change from the places they are needed most in order to effect change: the trenches. The normal career trajectory of promotions, retirements, and job changes take some. Individual career preferences remove others, and assignment to innovative ghettoes kills the rest. Whatever new partnership actually arises will not replace the normative 'learn from the experienced cop' ethos of the police culture. The existing 'train the trainer' approach needs to be modified within police organizations to help with the transfer and continued application of the knowledge developed by a cooperative approach to operational research.

Notes

1. Operationally, the cops adapted: police presence in the Hot Spot very quickly became a 'phantom car' parked there for visual effect while the officers followed the market. Though technically a violation of expected behavior, the phantom car nevertheless fell within the operating parameters for Hot Spots with a different physical space (Buerger, Cohn, & Petrosino, 1995).
2. Traditional legal powers of the police authorized them to make arrests for any felony based upon probable cause, whether it occurred in their presence or not, and for any misdemeanor that occurred in their presence. Misdemeanor arrests for crimes not directly observed by the police could be made only with the authority of a warrant. The process of obtaining a warrant was extremely cumbersome for victims of domestic violence, who rarely took the initiative to do so (for reasons extensively documented in the domestic violence literature). In turn, lack of victim follow-up was one of the pieces of 'evidence' the police pointed to as justification for not making arrests.
3. The Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment had several unique facets that were interpreted as atypical. The sample size was relatively small (324 couples); sample mortality over the course of the experiment was relatively high; and the relatively homogeneous population of Minneapolis was thought to be unrepresentative of other major population centers.

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