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Police as critical consumers of research

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Plan

Before I start I want to note that whilst I will be talking specifically about policing today, as this is the area with which I am most familiar, I'd encourage you to consider whether my comments apply across emergency service groups.

This presentation falls under the broad rubric of *police as critical consumers of research*, but what does that mean? To my mind, a critical consumer of research, is an individual who is an actively engaged user of research, and can sort the wheat from the chaff in the body of knowledge. I envisage an individual who is not passive in their consumption – but able to make some cognitively active judgements about the quality of research, its limitations, and applicability (Herrington, 2011).

I think when it comes to police, those of us that call ourselves criminologists tend to conclude that police are at best unenthusiastic about such active engagement with the research, and at worst stubbornly ignorant of it. In this session I want to explore whether police can be critical consumers of research, by first setting out why I think we tend to conclude that there is a disconnect, make some comments about whether this is still the case, and then underline why emergency service librarians such as yourselves are pivotal in moving individual police and the policing profession as a whole, forward.

Police as unenthusiastic consumers of research?

Police research often receives bad press from police practitioners. Academics who do police research are often regarded as being overly critical or as eternal pessimists able to find a cloud, or a criticism, to surround any silver lining (Boba, 2010; Laycock, 2001; Cordner and White 2010). In short, there is a perception among many working *in* policing that academics writing *about* policing are in some way out to 'get the police' (Van Maanen, 1978). Add to this the apparent peculiarities of the academic profession - being as it is, as interested in ideas and concepts as in practical upshots -



and it is little wonder that the average police officer feels there is little to be gained from engaging with the academic literature, let alone with the academics themselves!

As professional researchers, librarians and academics alike understand that research is a fundamental building block in knowledge generation, and knowledge - alongside experience - is a building block for professional practice (Hughes and Heycox, 2011). We 'get' that it is, in short, useful.

We 'get' that research can help inform a practitioner's day-to-day duties, with the benefit that knowledge and understanding produced through research has methodological rigour, is based on evidence or sound theoretical reasoning, which means it is set apart from *opinion* on crime and policing as circulated by politicians, journalists, and advocacy groups of all persuasions (Loader and Sparks 2010). But how do we sell the importance of research and an associated enthusiasm for getting elbow deep in research, to police and emergency services personnel who are busy fighting literal and well as metaphorical fires.

In looking for our answer I think there is a need to first understand the root cause of the apparent disconnect.

Hurdles inhibiting police engagement with the research literature can be usefully summarised under two headings:

- Problems with the body of knowledge, and
- Difficulties faced by the individual practitioner

I'll deal with the body of knowledge first.

Academia is a broad church, and academics interested in policing and involved in police research are drawn from all denominations, including criminology, sociology, psychology, social anthropology, law, political science and even geography. Each of the disciplines has its own way of viewing the world. Different philosophical predispositions affect the types of policing issues that researchers are interested in, and the ways in which they seek to conduct their research. This is an important consideration for the police practitioner seeking to engage with and make sense of the research literature as a critical consumer. For example, it pays to understand that:



- The psychologist will be most interested in the individual police officer (or offender, or victim, or community member) and the internal cognitions and decisions making processes taken by them.
- The sociologist will be more interested in the role of police in society, what it represents, how its processes are governed, and how it impacts on social control.

Whilst all methodologically rigorous or theoretically grounded interpretations can be regarded as academically valid, some may be of more *practical value* to the practitioner than others. The task for the interested practitioner is to navigate through the quagmire of academic commentary to locate high quality research of practical benefit. To this end, they often need our help.

Identifying useful research is pretty easy for you and I, who have an understanding of research methodology, and a broad conceptualisation of the ways in which the research literature can be stratified according to predisposition, methodological approach, theoretical paradigm. This is less easy for police and other practitioners, who may have little experience of academic research, and little scaffolded or structured experience of engaging with the literature base. Without understanding the rules of the game, it can be difficult to understand where to start, and difficult to make sense of the ways in which seemingly similar research can seem to come to startling different conclusions. That – as we know – is one of the beauties of research. But for a practitioner looking for a solution to a practical problem, it can be frustrating and disenfranchising.

A huge amount has been written about policing and is held in our libraries, it is perhaps surprising that police and academics do not have closer relations. Herein lays the crux of a third hurdle facing practitioners – understanding what is that academics are going on about and the relevance of it to their practice. Scholarly nomenclature can be exclusionary for the uninitiated. Certainly there is a trend in many peer review journals towards the use of accessible language, which assists. And across the social sciences we are blessed with considerable research being undertaken in the qualitative tradition, which can be easier than statistically-laden articles to get one's head around. But the language of academic research - academic-ese - can hide further the practical benefits of the work for the practitioner.

These difficulties with the body of knowledge, and the relationship between academics and practitioners was humorously captured in a 1986 fictional conversation between academics and



police. Called the *dialogue of the deaf* it illustrates how each side finds it difficult to see the others' point of view.

Dialogue of the Deaf

<i>Academic:</i>	<i>Why do the police ignore research findings?</i>
<i>Police:</i>	<i>Why don't researchers produce useable knowledge?</i>
<i>Academic:</i>	<i>Why do the police always reject any study that is critical of what they do?</i>
<i>Police:</i>	<i>Why do researchers always show the police in a bad light?</i>
<i>Academic:</i>	<i>Why don't police officers even read research reports?</i>
<i>Police:</i>	<i>Why can't researchers write in plain English?</i>
<i>Academic:</i>	<i>Why are the police so bloody defensive?</i>
<i>Police:</i>	<i>Why are researchers so bloody virtuous?</i>
<i>Academic:</i>	<i>Why are the police unwilling to examine their own organisational performance?</i>
<i>Police:</i>	<i>Why are researchers unwilling to produce information that a practical person exercising power can use to change a limited aspect of the organisation instead of theoretical and explanatory structures of no use to the problem-solver?</i>
<i>Academic:</i>	<i>Why do the police insist that they know better, when the researchers are the experts in knowledge construction?</i>
<i>Police:</i>	<i>Why do researchers write recipes when they can't even cook?</i>
<i>(Adapted from MacDonald, 1986, cited in Bradley and Nixon: 427)</i>	

Challenges Facing the Individual

Let us consider now the other set of hurdles facing police and inhibiting, perhaps, their being critical consumers of research – those relating to the individual.



In my opinion, police and emergency service workers are an interesting, and actively hands on, bunch. And most police and emergency service training undertaken by practitioners plays to the *experiential* strengths of this group – where there is an opportunity to learn on one’s feet. By contrast, engagement in reading research literature is - if nothing else - a vicarious experience, where one *reads* about the experiences of others. It’s debatable whether this plays well to this group’s hands-on strengths.

Time is a perennial problem, and like many of us, police practitioners are time poor, but and unlike you or I who have the luxury of being surrounded by books all day, practitioners tend to be racing from one emergency to another, with little time to reflect, let alone ponder, on how their work relates to the broader body of knowledge. At the end of a 12 hour shift, having spent time away from their families, picking up a journal article for fun could understandably be the last thing on their mind.

And of course given the nuances of the body of knowledge as I’ve already spoken about, simply knowing where to start, or where to turn for advice, can be a challenge in itself.

But, are police unenthusiastic consumers of research?

But I ask the question again, are police and their other emergency service colleagues really unenthusiastic about research? On balance, and drawing on my own experience, I would contend that they are not. Police certainly have a natural inquisitiveness, and are heavily predisposed towards the need for evidenced based practice and policy, so the problem comes, in my opinion, from them being able to access the literature in the first place – for all of the issues that I’ve outlined already.

This is in part mitigated with the increase in tertiary qualifications required and being offered as part of recruitment and professional development, and as a result, by the police being more familiar with research literature in general, and the nuances of the body of knowledge – in all its complicated and contradictory glory. This involvement in tertiary education is itself a reflection of broader social trends towards higher education, of course, but also reflects the broader push in policing towards professionalization, which is itself a driver for the development of, and reference to, a body of knowledge on policing.



The best evidence for policing wanting to actively engage with the research literature, and linked heavily to the other points raised, is - I believe - what we might call the *democratisation of knowledge generation*. By which I mean that responsibility for building the body of knowledge has shifted from being the sole reserve of “expert” academics in their ivory towers, to recognising the role of practitioners in generating knowledge, and undertaking their own research, arguably in part to fill a perceived gap. We see this with the rise of neo-academic institutions such as the AIPM, where practitioners and traditional academics work together to undertake and share research and conduct post graduate education; and in the development of a range of professional doctorates, wherein assessment recognises the importance of practitioners in undertaking research that contributes to practice.

So...

So all in all I think we’ve moved on from a place where police and other emergency service personnel had to be dragged kicking and screaming into a library, to a place where the emerging professions understand the value of research to their practice, even if there are residual difficulties in making sense of the enormous edifice.

The pivotal role of librarians

...which of course is where you (i.e. ALIES librarians) come in. I sincerely think that the role of police and emergency service librarians should not be underestimated. Working in fields where professionalization is a central concern, librarians have a role to play as both guides and translators of the existing body of research for practitioners.

So what can librarians do?

Beyond the excellent work already being undertaken in police and emergency service libraries, I think there are three key areas where a pivotal role can be played by the librarian and can make a real difference to these emerging professions.

First I would suggest working with educators – that is, those who are tasked with supporting professionalization at the other end, and responsible for teaching and facilitating the learning of practitioners in policing and emergency services. I would suggest that insofar as it is practicably possible, librarians should advertise their considerable skill sets to educators, and work with them to develop assignments and other learning activities that get students into the library, and elbow deep in the literature.



This is particularly important when we consider tertiary level study in these fields, a key requirement of the Australian Qualifications Framework is that students should be able to search, review, analyse and synthesise the literature. And most tertiary level organisations like their students to graduate with a range of life-long learning skills, which includes the ability to search and synthesise from the body of knowledge. It is therefore important that they are able to practice this in a scaffolded environment as part of their professional development, and this is where educators and librarians can work together to come up with ways in which this desired outcome might be most effectively achieved. To say the same thing in a slightly different way, don't assume that your academic staff understand the skills that you have, and the support you can offer. Most academic staff are time poor, and many of us have enjoyed the 'sink or swim' experience of university libraries such that a library dedicated to our own field of study, and a team of enthusiastic and helpful librarians may be more than we know what to do with. Help educate us to maximise our use of your skills.

Second I would call on librarians to help publicise emerging literature. Oftentimes educators are so caught up in the teaching that they are not as across the emerging literature as they might be. I'm sure many of you already circulate links to various new papers and books amongst your academic staff and student groups. At the AIPM our excellent librarians put together a blog, which is an alert to those of us with little time to search the literature of the new and interesting papers. On a personal level I find this invaluable.

But I also often wonder whether there is another step we can take together, which is to summarise the papers and highlight the implications for the profession. This moves the librarian from being an indexer of material, to being somewhat of a subject matter expert, and may not be where you want to go. But through collaboration with academic staff and experts we can take this emerging literature from being 'nice to know' to having an impact.

At least I would encourage librarians to think further about how the impact of various pieces of research work can be teased out and disseminated as well as the paper itself.

Third I'm interested in the huge amount of grey literature that is available – and in our professions in particular. With police doing ad hoc internal studies that may never see the light of day, or work being done by senior police as part of tertiary level profession development that may result in significant changes in policy and practice in one organisation or another. There is plenty of



knowledge that ES librarians in particular may know about, which might otherwise be lost. So I would encourage librarians to think about how this material may be captured and shared. ANZPAA offers one example of how this might be done, wherein they have developed an online repository of grey literature incorporating work in progress and jurisdictional findings. You can access it at <http://www.anzpaa.org.au/anzpire>

An example from the AIPM

Before concluding I want to give a brief example of a way in which we have attempted to get police more engaged in the research literature at the AIPM. It involves the capstone piece of work that we ask police leaders to do as part of their Graduate Diploma in Executive Leadership. In this they are asked to conduct a strategic policy review, which involves them identifying an area where their jurisdiction is facing a problem – alcohol related violence, for example - and asks them to develop a strategic policy, implementation plan, and evaluation approach. One of the things that we ask them to do is undertake a systematic review of the literature, and identify the evidence base for “what works” in their chosen field. I know Eke Woldring will be speaking about systematic reviews tomorrow, so without stealing any of her thunder this is an area where librarian skills and advice is sorely needed. Once students have identified what works in relation to a given problem by systematically reviewing the research that has gone before, they are in a better position to develop good evidence based policy, and to understand how that policy can itself be evaluated to ensure that it is meeting their jurisdictional needs. I’m pretty sure (although we are in the process of undertaking an evaluation to test his hypothesis) that this project develops lifelong learning skills, and provides a template for students to undertake other systematic reviews and to develop evidence based policy across time and place.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have discussed the uneasy relationship that policing has with academia and research, and the usefulness or otherwise of much of the body of knowledge in informing practice, and the possibility of an associated apathy when it comes to engaging with the literature. I have balanced this by noting that alongside professionalization, police practitioners are increasingly engaged in tertiary study, that police organisations are conducting their own research, and that a demonstrable evidence base for policy and practice is demanded of jurisdictions by governments and the public.



Unless police practitioners understand research, and have scaffolded opportunities to explore research, it is difficult to become a consummate consumer and/or to see the value that it can bring to an organisation. To my mind, ALIES librarians are pivotal to achieving this end, and as such are central to the continuing professionalization of policing and other emergency services.

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