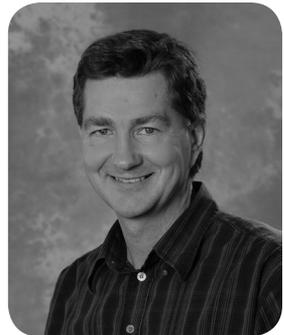


THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN COMPLAINT REDUCTION

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Complaints against the police are a key performance indicator in modern policing, representing an index of community satisfaction and confidence, as well as police performance standards. Both are crucial to law enforcement organizations, which rely on the co-operation of the public to undertake many of their duties. Despite this importance, complaint numbers are generally high (as many as one for every two officers per year in some cases, Prenzler, 2009). Further, complaints likely represent only the ‘tip of the iceberg’ of problematic interactions between police and members of the public, with many potential complainants unwilling to make an official complaint, and many more serious corrupt or unethical police activities unlikely to even involve a potential complainant (for example, where the member of the public is complicit in the act, such as offering a bribe to an officer). Thus, recorded complaint numbers may actually indicate potentially more serious or widespread issues.

Complaints are, therefore, important for police agencies to address. Some argue that high complaint numbers show community confidence in the



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complaints system and that a focus on complaint reduction can lead to methods of 'fixing' the system, such as ignoring complainants, covering up incidents, or misclassifying complaints to demonstrate a reduction (Porter, Prenzler & Fleming, 2011). However, complaint reduction initiatives, if committed to with care and accountability, can lead to improved services, improved employee behaviour, and improved community relations.

This article outlines the role of research in supporting police complaint reduction, in particular, the role of research in providing an evidence-base for complaint reduction strategies is outlined with reference to three main areas: understanding causes of complaints, identifying specific problems and testing solutions. It is important that complaint reduction strategies are tailored to local conditions, rather than promoting a 'one size fits all' approach. Opportunities for partnerships between external (independent) researchers and law enforcement agencies can strengthen both the research and subsequent implementation of reform efforts/ interventions that are theoretically sound, evidence-based, and targeted to the needs of the organization and its constituency.

Understanding the Causes of Complaints

Academic research is most often associated with theory construction or testing, in order to understand and explain phenomena. Explanations of the causes of, for example, police complaints or misconduct, are vital to understanding the range of issues that might need to be addressed in order to respond effectively and reduce such incidents. As Porter, (2005) notes, "theory is of particular use for underpinning initiatives for targeted investigation and prevention of corruption".

In terms of complaint reduction, the theories of most relevance will be those that explain the underlying causes of the complaints. This could be explaining why people complain, or why they have something to complain about. While the former may have some interesting questions in its own right, the main focus of utility to law enforcement agencies will be on aspects of their organization that they can control in order to reduce the likelihood of getting complaints. These aspects will relate to their organizational systems and procedures, and their employees who act within these systems. Elements of the organization and the individual interact to produce behaviour of officers at the frontline, dealing with members of the public.

Historically, theories of misconduct have focussed on individual officers as 'bad apples' who engage in misconduct due to their own circumstances, personalities or proclivities, regardless of the wider systems. Such theories recognize that certain personal attributes may not be suited to police work and be more likely to lead to misconduct and complaints. Consequently, recruitment tests and screening tools have been designed to maximize the potential of recruits to be successful officers and weed out any potential 'troublemakers'.

In contrast to individual theories, social theories recognize the impact of social influences on the individual once in the job, particularly the impact of culture as well as direct experiences of leadership and role models, especially in socializing

new officers into the job (Chan, 2003). Chappell and Piquero (2004) showed that officers' ethical attitudes were likely to be influenced by those of their peers, and Crank (1998), Skolnick (2002) and others have highlighted the strong influence of police organizational culture on attitudes and behaviour, particularly turning a blind eye to misconduct. Related to social theories are organizational systems theories of misconduct, which recognize that misconduct can be systemic; that is, misconduct can be facilitated by the organizational systems, particularly those that lack accountability or encourage corner cutting or rule-breaking (Porter, 2005).

With these theories in mind, one can begin to understand the origins of misconduct and design interventions to target causal influences. An example of how interventions can draw upon psychological theory and theories of misconduct can be found in modern complaint profiling and management models of discipline, where a theory of social learning can be traced through components of individual, social and organizational theories of misconduct to address misconduct and poor performance. Theories of leadership broadly delineate two forms of influence: 'transactional' (the power to reward and punish) and 'transformational' (the power to transform ideas and beliefs) (see Judge & Piccolo, 2004). In relation to the former, Komacki (1998) discusses the idea of 'operant' leadership where leaders use reward and punishment to instil learning in subordinates through principles of operant conditioning. These principles are that behaviour must be monitored, and feedback given for performance. Learning occurs where monitoring is fair and consistent and consequences are based upon performance. While reward and punishment can be effective for achieving desired behaviour, transformational leadership is viewed as more effective, since changing an individual's beliefs will change their behaviour even when they are not subject to direct monitoring. Transformational leaders emphasise trust, commitment and purpose, and promote feelings of individualised encouragement and development, providing inspirational motivation to followers.

Porter (2005) discusses Komacki's (1998) operant leadership approach and how it relates to the police discipline system. Recent changes to police discipline systems, including a focus on procedural fairness and performance management, coupled with early intervention systems, form a package that may hit the mark regarding both transactional and transformational leadership.

An Early Intervention System (EIS) monitors individual officers through a number of individual-based indicators, and flags officers where potential problems arise. Through local management models, interventions are then designed to be remedial rather than punishing, providing officers with opportunities to put right their mistakes through counselling and training. Identification of individuals is 'fair' and consistent, as it is based on standard indicators. Procedural fairness can also be implemented—giving the officer a chance to explain and discuss their behaviour with their supervisor—with outcomes in the interests of the officer, consistent between officers and commensurate with the behaviour. While punishment can be administered if necessary, the focus on remedial responses assumes that the

officer will behave correctly once counselled – thus, the system aims to help officers understand and internalise values/rules, rather than just punish when rules are broken.

Identifying Problems

It was noted above that a one-size fits all strategy to complaint reduction may not be helpful. While some problems and systems may be universal, agencies may encounter specific problems that need tailored solutions. Rather than waiting for problems to escalate and scandal to break, data-driven research can help to uncover potential problems, such as high numbers of excessive force complaints.

Porter (2005) supports the role of external reviews of corruption and misconduct by independent experts such as psychologists, who have a variety of research methods available to them for researching both the prevalence and nature of corruption and misconduct. Porter mentions the work of Klockars, Ivkovic, Harver and Haberfeld (2000) in surveying attitudes towards corruption and misconduct using scenarios. This work has been replicated in a number of countries (Klockars, Ivkovic & Haberfeld, 2004) showing diversity in police tolerance for certain (hypothetical) behaviour by colleagues. In Australia, the Crime and Misconduct Commission (oversight agency to the Queensland Police Service), has adopted similar methods to monitor QPS recruits to show changes in the ethical attitudes of recruitment cohorts over time (CMC, 2010).

Another innovative approach to assessing misconduct problems in law enforcement agencies has been offered by the Australian Police Integrity Commission (oversight agency of the New South Wales Police Force). Project Manta (Gorta, 2011) conducted research on work units to identify the potential misconduct risks associated with different workplaces (including duties and environment) and how these are managed. This work drew an analogy to an Occupational Health and Safety approach to proactively manage misconduct risk. These risks can inform the systems that should be in place in order to respond or prevent misconduct. Indeed, one way to assess potential misconduct problems is to assess the systems that are in place and identify any gaps. For example, Porter & Prenzler (2012) conducted a systematic examination of each jurisdiction around Australia in respect of the integrity systems in place to prevent or respond to misconduct. They found large variation in the utilisation of certain more sophisticated integrity strategies, such as advanced surveillance capabilities or computer-based early intervention systems, which could indicate potential problems or risks.

In the US, a problem of escalating use of force incidents and complaints in Portland, Oregon, was addressed in the mid-2000s by forming a Force Task Force, consisting of representatives of the Police Bureau, the Independent Police Review Division of the City Audit Bureau, and a volunteer-based Citizen Review Committee. The independent Police Assessment Resource Centre (PARC) was also engaged to assist with the issue of police shootings. A range of measures was used to diagnose

the problems and redesign use of force policies and procedures.

Researching ‘What Works’ in Complaint Reduction

Research has been instrumental not only in showing that complaint reduction is possible, but also informing us of some of the avenues for this success. The predominant themes in this research suggest that interventions targeting individuals and their performance (e.g. EIS, training), to equip officers to perform their duties, coupled with levels of accountability at both the individual and organizational level (e.g. reporting systems and oversight models), have been successful in reducing complaints against law enforcement agencies.

For example, Prenzler and Porter (In Preparation) review a number of case studies where use of force complaints have been reduced, as well as associated injuries and deaths, through such methods. This included the Portland case referred to above. That study showed that the introduction of use of force reports, improvements in training and supervision, and the introduction of an early intervention system, resulted in reduced complaints of excessive force and reductions in officer involved shootings.

Porter, Prenzler and Fleming (2011), worked with Tasmania Police in Australia to retrospectively research the reduction in complaints experienced over the preceding decade. Through a combination of complaints data and interviews with key personnel and external stakeholders, they uncovered several intervention strategies that likely impacted the reduction. These included a more stringent recruit screening test, improved training in ethics, and improved training in operational skills and tactics (use of force). Complaint profiling and management action (Early Intervention) also seemed to impact complaints, particularly multiple complaints and complaints of assault. Porter, et al. (2011) showed that it was unlikely that the reduction had caused displacement, or reflected improper practices of the police complaints handling system or crime operations.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined some of the main areas where research can aid in understanding and promoting complaint reduction in law enforcement agencies. Through partnerships between researchers and police agencies, a variety of methods can be utilised to identify problems, their causes and potential solutions. Research can also test the outcomes associated with implementing new initiatives. Such research work adds to the evidence-base that can inform police practices and policies, increasing efficiency of resource utilisation. Police have a wealth of information available to researchers, and researchers provide methodological integrity and independence. Partnerships in a shared research agenda have positive outcomes for both sides, with value-added outcomes and a shared stake in reform.

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