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From a ‘dialogue of the deaf’ to a ‘dialogue of listening’: towards a new methodology of policing research and practice

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Introduction

We celebrate this, the 10th Anniversary of Police Research and Practice, with a Special Issue that does what this remarkable journal has been doing since its inception. Accordingly, we bring together commentaries that reflect upon the state of police (and policing) across the globe and upon associated forms of policing scholarship.

Given constraints of space we are only able to take a selective – albeit a discriminating – peek at the present range of policing scholarship and practice. In doing so, we offer contributions from Africa, Australia, South and Central America, China, Europe, and the USA. It is an honor for us, as guest editors, to bring together these thoughtful contributions as a way of celebrating this special anniversary and, of course, the vital work that its editors and Editorial Board have done over the past decade.

We begin with an insightful review of the nature of the relationship between policing research and practice by Christine Nixon, arguably one of the most exciting and innovative contemporary police executives, and David Bradley, who has for a very long time been challenging police and scholars to engage with one another. They conclude that irrespective of whether policing scholars have adopted a critical or an intentionally supportive role of their research, their engagement with police has been very much a ‘Dialogue of the Deaf.’

This situation, they argue, is not one that we should be willing to accept either as scholars or as policing practitioners – and they make clear that it is certainly not a situation that the Victoria Police has been willing to accept. They describe the Victoria Police as an organization that has decided to take full advantage of what the academic world has to offer policing; and write of its intention to ‘put greater emphasis on the role of robust theory and evidence’ in formulating policy and operational practices.

As a way out of the dialogue of the deaf, especially in relation to the intentionally supportive rather than critical research tradition, Bradley and Nixon argue for a new methodology of engagement between researchers and police practitioners – a methodology that is built on establishing ‘long-term partnerships between police and academics.’

It is precisely such partnerships that Bradley and Nixon have been actively developing in the state of Victoria. What they have sought to accomplish is nothing short of ‘full collaborative partnerships’ between police and researchers ‘throughout the whole process of knowledge generation, validation, diffusion, and use.’

In the 20 partnerships that the Victoria Police has established with university-based researchers the aim has not simply been the production of suitable research products, but the invention of a new methodology for scholarly/practitioner relations. What they have sought to accomplish is not simply a continuation of the existing trajectories of policing research and practice but a reconfiguration of the connection between the two: a reconfiguration that reflects the values of this journal as it enters its second decade.
In the second paper, Peter Neyroud, a renowned British Chief Constable, now Chief Executive of the recently established National Police Improvement Agency (NPIA), shifts our focus from Australia to Britain – a terrain where much research and thinking along the lines that Bradley and Nixon identify has taken place. Neyroud looks at how the National Improvement Strategy for Policing (NISP) is developing and in the course of doing so explores how research is being used to design, define, monitor, and develop its strategic interventions. In order to do this, he draws upon a number of case studies to explore both evidence-based policing and the policy process around policing in England and Wales.

The paper begins by reviewing 20 years of what the author terms ‘frenetic activity’ in respect of police reform; first under the Thatcher administrations (where emphasis was placed on efficiency mechanisms, performance by objectives, and enhanced scrutiny of the service); next under the Major government (which sought to reform pay, rank structure, and accountability); and finally under New Labour (with the tightening of target-driven regimes, the introduction of the Police Standards Unit, and pressures for workforce and leadership reform). This third phase culminated in a number of organizational reforms including the establishment of both the NPIA and the Serious and Organised Crime Agency.

However, it is another reform arising during this third period – the aborted proposal to merge 43 local police forces into a smaller number (11 or 12) of regional ones – which forms the basis of Neyroud’s first case study. The failure of this proposal, he suggests, was inextricably linked to the lack of any ‘significant attempt to start with a debate about the evidence and the extent to which all three actors [Chief Constables, the Home Office, and police authorities] agreed with it.’ The absence of any mechanism to allow ‘key policy actors to explore areas of agreement and disagreement, potential solutions, and the management of the process’ contributed, first, to each of these taking entrenched positions; then to wider interest groups, concerned about central, regional, and local governance issues, being sucked into the ensuing policy vacuum. Three years later there remains profound uncertainty about what the evidence on mergers, such as it was, actually demonstrated: ‘whether it is mergers, collaborations, or the status quo.’

By contrast, Neyroud’s second case study (‘from policy with evidence to practice’) involved the creation of a national approach to neighborhood policing and was, he suggests, ‘strongly underpinned by an evidence-based approach.’ Central to this initiative was the marrying of evidence from three sources: Chicago and the COPS program; UK academic research on ‘signal crimes’; and ACPO’s (Association of Chief Police Officers) analysis of the ‘reassurance gap’ (i.e., the conjunction of falling levels of recorded crime with rising levels of public insecurity). In practice, Neighbourhood Policing evolved out of a series of pathfinder pilot projects
supported by a small group of Chief Constables, which then evolved into a national program underpinned by research.

Neyroud’s third case study (‘putting evidence in the lead’) concerns the development of the NPIA itself. The NPIA was established in 2007 as an agency responsible for all the major national operational services, such as the Police National Computer and for a national portfolio of programs. As such, it constitutes the ‘single national source of good practice advice’ in respect of policing in England and Wales. In its first two years the NPIA has undertaken a comprehensive ‘mapping’ of its portfolio. This exercise revealed that much of the portfolio was short term, due to the absence of any ‘overall improvement strategy against which to measure progress, make judgments between the relative merits of different approaches, or to prioritize the efforts at evaluation.’ The principal aim of the NISP is to ‘establish a framework for taking that longer view over a 10-year strategy for policing improvement.’ Neyroud adds that a major task for the NPIA is to develop both its own capability to provide evidence to inform policy and the ability of the academic and professional think tanks to feed into and support this capability in the future. In other words, to support the same ‘dialogue of listening’ suggested by Bradley and Nixon’s analysis.

In our third paper we turn from Britain to what might be thought of as the heartland of the linkage between policing and research – namely, the USA. We are taken there by a policing scholar who has truly become an institution in his own right – Peter Manning. We could have no better guide than Manning to lead us through this complex American terrain.

Manning’s guided tour deals with an issue that lies at the very heart of the relationship between research and police practice, namely, the police’s use of crime statistics to rationalize, justify, and account for their actions. In examining this matter, he explores how and in what ways crime data are organizational accomplishments intended to present an image of the organization, and its activities, to outsiders. Crime statistics, for Manning, constitute a carefully constructed and very limited window through which researchers (and others) are invited to scrutinize the activities of police. His paper explores the nature of this window and the distorting glass through which the spectators are encouraged to look. One result of this process is to render policing what Manning terms ‘a self-audited practice.’

In order to justify this claim, Manning points to the constructed nature of the inputs that researchers and other outside observers construe as empirical data. Manning encapsulates the construction process in two statements. In the first he draws attention to what, in other contexts, might be termed ‘creative accounting’:

The tricks of the trade, writing practices, as in all occupations, involve what to leave
in and what to leave out when creating a written record of decision-making. These are learned practices, sanctioned within the local culture and rewarded by status honor among one’s peers.

In the second, he emphasizes the selective nature of the accounting process itself:

The question of what police do, how well, why, and when cannot be answered by what they choose to record and account for. They have no responsibility to record all that is seen, said, heard, or smelt.

An interesting feature of this paper is Manning’s analysis of the way in which ‘evidence’ is collected, packaged, and used. This, he argues, is mediated by the occupational culture of police – a culture that is perhaps best understood by what the author refers to as a ‘poetics’ of evidence and analysis. This is – and has long been – the de facto world of the ‘cop on the beat.’ It is a poetics that certainly produces ‘knowledge,’ albeit a very different ‘knowledge’ from the evidence-based scientific knowledge that has come to be celebrated as the proper grounds upon which to shape practice.

Irrespective of the role evidence-based knowledge has come to play, Manning reminds us that craft-knowledge remains firmly embedded as a primary source of police practice. It is the contest between ‘science’ and ‘craft’ that today underpins so much of the discussion about, and tension arising from, policing research and practice. Manning reminds us as we ponder on this science–craft dichotomy that: ‘Poetry communicates by what is omitted as well as what is said. It is a kind of metonymic metaphor.’ Of course, many of these insights are not new, Manning himself referencing Garfinkel’s long-established ethnomethodological research (1967) on the reflexive and self-referential character of members’ accounts. Yet, important discoveries need to be rediscovered. In that regard, Manning’s paper resonates with significant recent research, such as Steinberg’s ethnography of South African police (2008), a study which confirms Manning’s claim that ‘what policing does and produces is drama.’

This is a rich and nuanced paper. It reminds us, above all else, that if we are to understand the relationship between police research and practice we need to take account (literally) of what Garfinkel (1967) termed the ‘documentary’ – and what we might nowadays call the ‘discursive’ – character of organizational data.

In our fourth paper Hugo Frühling provides a comprehensive review of research on police reform in Latin America during the last two decades. The issue of police reform is, of course, inextricably linked to the dynamics of Latin American politics. Academics concerned with the consolidation of the democratic system in Latin America have focused on policing because,
as Frühling points out:

... a democratic police is essential for reducing levels of criminal violence and because a police that is respectful of civil rights is required in order to reduce expressions of state violence.

It is for reasons such as these that an unusual amount of research has been carried out monitoring the impact and efficacy of police reform initiatives. Yet, despite these initiatives, the author suggests that ‘most studies consulted for this paper conclude that the results have either been limited or nonexistent.’ There are a number of reasons for this limited success. Some of them are political. For example, there is a tendency for governments under pressure to abandon long-term policies of reform and replace them with short-term ones of expediency. As Frühling puts it:

... the levels of violence that provoke demands for reform in the first place also usually increase pressure to implement tough law-and-order policies, creating a climate in which human rights violations are tolerated or even condoned, thus reversing many of the reforms put in place.

Other reasons are organizational; for example, the existence of police forces that are not sufficiently integrated to be able to sustain reform efforts.
A further obstacle concerns the relatively cool relations pertaining between researchers and police – the latter being reluctant to draw upon the products of the former for purposes of policy formulation. Frühling suggests that this may be due to two factors: that most research is critical of the police; and that police have little interest in discussing democratic policing, being more preoccupied with questions of police operational efficacy. The first of these explains, in part, the reluctance of many police organizations to allow researchers the access necessary for the pursuit of their research. This is particularly apparent when researchers seek to study the dynamics of police misconduct, internal controls, and accountability systems. Frühling mentions various examples where the need for such research is pressing but where access is restricted.

For example,

We know very little about the training of special forces within the police responsible for maintaining order during public demonstrations. Field research on police–citizen contacts would provide useful information on the situational dynamics that lead to police violence.

As regards the second issue – the limited amount of research undertaken on police
operational efficacy – there is some evidence that this may be changing, with research in the last few years having

... shifted from an emphasis on democratic policing to a more criminological effort focused on the analysis of police operations, looking at ‘what works and what doesn’t’ in reducing crime.

However, as Frühling points out, there is an implicit ‘trade-off’ in adopting this line of research: one which neglects the study of uncomfortable subjects – such as the militarized and hierarchical structure of Latin American police forces and the relationship between the police and the private security industry – for more conservative forms of scholarship.

Frühling closes his analysis by raising a crucial point about the relationship between research and practice: namely, that knowledge and practice may be unduly influenced by particular discursive agendas. The role of the Anglo-American policing model in sanctioning the export of Western forms of community policing to non-Western jurisdictions is by now well known (Brogden & Nijhar, 2005; Brogden & Shearing, 1993). Significantly, it is that same Anglo-American paradigm that dominates Latin American research agendas,

... the subject matter, approaches, and even methodologies used by Latin American police experts follow[ing] research trends in the USA and the UK.

While this is not surprising, given the sheer quantitative output of Anglo-American research, Frühling rightly points out that Latin American police regulations, militarized structures, styles of training, and ideologies are much more closely related to the police forces of Continental Europe than to those of Britain and the USA. This poses two important issues for readers of this journal: why and how dominant paradigms continue to be exported to locations in which they are often manifestly ill-suited; and how the utilization of alternative paradigms might offer new insights into policing possibilities in those jurisdictions.

From Latin America we move across the Atlantic to Africa. If Latin America constitutes a complex and diverse social terrain this is no less true of Africa. Yet, as Alemika points, out there are family resemblances that cut across differences. It is these similarities that he chooses to make the focus of his attention.

Alemika paints a picture of police across Africa that resonates with what Frühling has to say about Latin America. In the first line of his abstract he writes that ‘[p]olice practices in most African countries are inappropriate and fall short of the norms of democratic policing and international human rights provisions.’ The explanation he gives for this occurs in the first
Policing reflects the contradictions within society ... The primary function of police is to preserve the dominant political and socio-economic values of the society, which are often enshrined in laws.

In saying this Alemika draws upon a well-established tradition of policing scholarship (Hay, 1975; Storch, 1975, 1976) that has recently been taken up, within a neo-Foucaultian context, by scholars such as Dubber and Valverde (2006, 2008).

In exploring these themes Alemika invites us to consider African policing as having two major strands – ‘regime protection and reactive policing’: global strands which remind one of Brodeur’s distinction between high and low policing (1983). Like Frühling, Alemika sees politics as a fundamental factor shaping African policing. ‘African rulers,’ he writes, ‘by amplifying ethnic, religious, and other sentiments, manipulate the police to defend parochial and primordial interests.’ This statement is reminiscent of much that has been written on police elsewhere: for example, early twentieth-century American policing; in Canada, especially in relation to the early years of the Royal Canadian Mountain Police and Eastern Canada; and of course Australia, both with respect to policing of indigenous populations and in relation to Australia’s history as a place where ‘criminals’ from Britain were transported. Overall, then, there continues to be much about African policing that resonates with its colonial past. As Alemika, citing Onoge, notes, police were

... one of the primary instruments deployed by the [colonial] state to ensure an authoritarian containment of social disorder.

Given its recent colonial past, ‘governmentality’ programs, based on the principle that ‘what is to be governed also governs itself’ (O’Malley, 2009, p. 126) have come late to Africa: and then only to those locations most directly subject to neo-liberal regimes of governance. To apply a Foucaultian metaphor to the African context: throughout most of Africa the king’s head is still very much on his shoulders, never having been cut off. It is thus not surprising that, as with Latin America (and in many parts of the global north), police are viewed by citizens as corrupt figures who cannot be trusted.

One issue addressed by Alemika, that is given little attention in the earlier works he cites, is non-state policing. In Africa, as in many other parts of the world – including all the areas covered by this Special Issue – non-state policing constitutes an overwhelming proportion of the policing terrain. For Alemika, policing generally, and African policing in particular, cannot be understood unless its plural or nodal features are fully recognized and explored. These
Nodal features include the widely recognized presence of private security as an essential part of the policing mix in countries across Africa. But for Alemika, what is perhaps more important in an African context is the ‘resurgence of informal policing systems.’ For him, this means that:

In African societies, communal or self-policing involves different groups and actors using different methods and processes to guarantee safety and preserve community cohesion.

For Alemika, African policing is essentially nodal – ‘Policing in Africa has always been undertaken by different agencies, including kinship and community-based groups.’ Indeed, as Bruce Baker’s important work on sub-state policing in Africa demonstrates (2007), that continent provides a model terrain for exploring the dynamics of nodal policing and nodal governance both historically and contemporaneously. As regards the role of research in shaping African policing, Alemika’s conclusion is unequivocal: African rulers and policy-makers place little value on evidence or ‘facts’ in decision-making because there is little planning prior to decision-making and where there is planning, it is hardly systematically implemented.

It is not, as Alemika points out, that there is no significant body of research and scholarship that focuses on African policing. The problem is that ‘the rulers in Africa see researchers as investigating their decisions with a view to bringing them to ridicule.’ Once again, then, a dialogue of the deaf has to be overcome if research and practice are to be brought into conjunction with one another. Yet, this aspiration continues to face significant obstacles, not least the negative effects donors and donor-funded projects continue to have in African, Latin American, and other locations. Woven throughout Alemika’s thoughtful analysis is the question of definition – what is policing? Alemika, in contrast to the authors who have gone before him, wants to widen the definition of policing not only beyond the police but beyond the auspices and providers that are typically associated with policing even in broad nodal and plural conceptions. He, however, is critical of too wide a definitional embrace. ‘In what senses,’ he asks, ‘are the political party militia groups (thugs) policing groups, especially in the context of a democratic society?’ In considering this issue he argues that ‘[t]he critical questions are: policing what, where, for what, and in whose interests?’ In these few words he sets out a framework for an African research agenda. In our final paper Kam C. Wong examines the historical development and current status of police scholarship in China, together with the emerging issues arising from it. This area of study has been relatively neglected in that country, only recently beginning to take off with the establishment of public security studies as an academic discipline.
Wong begins by reviewing the development of police studies in China since 1908. Echoing Alemika’s point about the need to address key conceptual questions, he notes that one of the problems with establishing public security studies as a theoretical object has been ‘the lack of clearly defined and commonly agreed upon concepts used in research and study.’ Interestingly, he also points out that Western nations have no corresponding field of study called public order studies, a topic which, in China, overlaps with, but remains distinct from, police science. He goes on to point out that ‘contentious and perennial debate over some of the most basic ideas and fundamental concepts ... including the differences between public security studies and police studies; national security and both social order and public safety’ has persisted in China into the 2000s. Related to this are a number of unresolved methodological issues about how best to pursue empirical investigations and about how the scope and structure of police research should be delimited.

During the course of his paper, Wong undertakes a fascinating discussion of the linguistic roots of the concept ‘zhi-an’ (public order). Essentially ‘zhi-an’ refers to being in a state of safety or security, though the concept ‘zhi’ also carries with it connotations of good and effective governance. In the Chinese context, good governance has been associated historically with the state’s responsibility for maintaining public order and safety (‘zhi-an’) through regulation, administration, and control. This state-centered concept of governance is well-captured in Wong’s statement that ‘The study of Public Order Studies is thus the study of how to enforce the law and maintain order, to safeguard the public from crime and disorder.’

Later on in the paper, Wong carries out a detailed review of the structure and components of Public Order Studies as a field of research and as an education discipline; then reviews some of the more controversial debates, problems, and issues arising from it. He concludes by identifying some recurring problems that have to be addressed for Public Order Studies to grow and prosper as an academic discipline. Amongst the main obstacles he cites are the failure to take account of previous research and a corresponding lack of accumulation of research knowledge; the prevalence of ‘opinionated and normative’ studies over ‘substantiated and descriptive’ ones; and a lack of analytical thinking – as Wong puts it, police studies ‘is very much a classroom affair and contemplative exercise’ – compounded by a paucity of good theoretical and empirical research.

Most strikingly, Wong’s final observation – concerning the fact that ‘Western police research, both theory and findings might not be applicable to an understanding of China without major distortions’ – resonates with Frühling’s earlier comments about the impact of Anglo-American police models on South and Central America. In that context, those who call for the indigenization of police studies in China want research that can ‘reflect and reinforce local
history, society, and culture’ and focus on ‘specific Chinese questions and issues.’ At the very least, Wong suggests, such locally informed research would ‘critically analyze foreign research before applying it to China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau.’ Notwithstanding that fact, Wong suggests that the Western model – with its universalistic emphasis on human rights and its scientistic focus on quantitative methodology – appears to be gaining control.

What cuts across these papers is a concern with bridging the deeply rooted tensions that continue to exist between scholarship and practice within policing across the globe. Each of our authors is united in calling for a new relationship that moves beyond a ‘dialogue of the deaf’ to a ‘dialogue of listening’ built on mutual respect that is committed to exploring better ways of governing security (both more effective and more legitimate) that understand the dangers of drawing on ‘best practice’ in one context and then application across contexts. Context, these papers argue, matters. What is required, they all agree, is a focus on ‘best thinking,’ produced through a new methodology of policing research and practice, such as that envisaged by Bradley and Nixon.

References


