

# **Policing research and the rise of the ‘evidence-base’: police officer and staff understandings of research, its implementation and ‘what works’**

## **Abstract**

Despite the pitfalls identified in previous critiques of the evidence-based practice (EBP) movement in education, health, medicine and social care, recent years have witnessed its spread to the realm of policing. This paper considers the rise of evidence-based policy and practice as a dominant discourse in policing in the UK, and the implications this has for social scientists conducting research in this area, and for police officers and staff. Social scientists conducting research with police must consider organisational factors impacting upon police work, as well as the wider political agendas which constrain it – in this case, the ways in which the adoption of evidence-based policing and the related ‘gold standard’ used to evaluate research act as a ‘technology of power’ (Foucault, 1988) to shape the nature of policing/research. The discussion draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with police officers and staff from police forces in England.

## **Keywords**

evidence-base; implementation; knowledge; policing; social research; technologies of power; ‘what works’

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**Introduction**

Recent years have witnessed an increased emphasis on an evidence-base and ‘what works’ agenda in policing in the United Kingdom. This coincides with the wider policy rhetoric of the need to professionalise policing; financial cuts to policing post-2008 recession; and the changing nature of crime (such as the increase in online crimes, the threat of terrorism, and the investigation of ‘hidden’ crimes such as historical investigations of child abuse). The focus on evidence-based policing has implications not only for academics but also for police officers and staff. There has been an extensive critique of the evidence-based movement in medicine, social care, management and education (Hammersley, 2013; Pearson, 2010; Webb, 2001), and although we briefly rehearse these debates below, we are concerned herein with the ways in which despite this critique in other contexts, evidence-based practice (henceforth abbreviated to EBP) has spread to the realm of policing. We are interested in how social scientific policing research is being shaped in the context of evidence-based policing, and the potential exclusion of decades of seminal social scientific research on policing, and collaborative work between police and academics. This is due to the ways in which the adoption of evidence-based policing and the related ‘gold standard’ used to evaluate research (such as those measurable on the Maryland Scale) act as a ‘technology of power’ (Foucault, 1988) to draw boundaries (Gieryn,

1983; Styhre, 2011) around which methodologies and forms of knowledge are legitimate and useful for policing.

We explore the above by focusing on police officer and staff understandings of evidence-based policing and research, and how it can be implemented in practice. As has been well rehearsed in scholarly writings, much research appears to have little or no impact on practice (Tilley, 2009; Fyfe and Wilson, 2012), and one reason highlighted for this is the gap between the worlds of researchers and practitioners (Chakraborti, 2015; Perry et al. 2015). Garland argues that issues encountered when academics and practitioners attempt to work together ‘stem from the different occupational cultures across the two spheres, which can generate varying expectations, values, and practices’ (2015: 1). In this paper we draw on fifteen semi-structured interviews with officers and staff from police forces in England, in addition to our own observations and experiences during knowledge transfer work. We begin by outlining policing research in the social sciences. We then discuss the evidence-based practice movement and its spread to policing. Finally, we focus on officer and staff views of research and its implementation. We conclude by summarising the implications the rise of evidence-based policing has for officers, staff, and social scientists conducting policing research.

### **Policing research and the social sciences**

The social sciences have a legacy of seminal studies of policing including ethnographies from academics (Banton, 1964; Manning, 1977; Bittner, 1967; Fielding, 1995) and insider police researchers (Holdaway, 1983). Reiner (2010) categorises five stages of policing research in the UK which include: ‘consensus’ in

the 1960s, where studies were celebratory of policing; ‘controversy’ in the 1970s where studies were critical of policing; ‘conflict’ literature emerging at the end of the 1970s; a ‘contradictory’ stage in the late 1980s involving a new realism; and a fifth stage of crime control. The traditional relationship between academics and police has been described as consisting of ‘two worlds’ engaging in a ‘dialogue of the deaf’ (Bradley and Nixon, 2009: 423); a mutual misunderstanding which impacts negatively on police-academic relationships. Reflecting on the formation of the International Network for Hate Crime Studies (INHS), Perry et al. (2015) also point out that researchers, practitioners and policy makers have tended to work in silos, with little communication across the sectors. Recent publications from academics (Fleming, 2012; Wood et al. 2008; Fyfe and Wilson, 2012) and police (Wilkinson, 2010) have focused on how to build effective collaborations between police and academics, for instance highlighting the benefits to be gleaned from participatory action research (Wood et al. 2008).

The above studies have been foundational in paving the way for future social scientific studies of policing (and more generally in criminological research). However it has also been claimed that the impact of previous studies on policing practice has been minimal (Fyfe and Wilson, 2012) and that policies and practices in policing ‘could be substantially improved by more systematic attention to evidence about the effects of what is delivered [and]... better use might be made of past research’ (Tilley, 2009: 135). This ‘implementation gap’ is highlighted by Chakraborti (2015: 6) who argues that: ‘Good practice needs to be informed by good policy, which in turn needs to be informed by good scholarship’.

Others such as Punch (2010: 158-59) draw attention to the wider political influences which bear down on police and academics: 'The problem is not between policing and academia, as was often the case in the past. Rather it is one of short-sighted, populist-oriented governments who want the police organization to be a servile agency that is institutionally deaf'. Manning (2005) provides a useful overview of the history and development of policing research from a sociology of knowledge perspective. He highlights the current emphasis on research in policing which is '...radically dependent on funding, features trivial research often supported by soft money, and is ready and eager to atheoretically study any current fashionable question without theorizing it' (Manning, 2005: 39). For Manning (2005), much of this work acts as a 'mirror' reflecting the interests of governments. It is with an awareness of the 'realpolitik' that we consider the spread of the evidence-based movement to the realm of policing.

### **The evidence-based practice movement**

From the early 1990s the EBP movement has gained momentum in the UK (Dixon-Woods et al. 2006), including in the areas of medicine (where it originated (see Cochrane, 1972)), education, management and social care. It has been defined as 'laying down general principles, based on evidence, to reinforce guidance and methods in practice' (Avby et al. 2014: 1367). The 'epistemological assumption behind evidence-based practice is more or less positivistic... and the vision is to produce scientific evidence that provides universal truths' (Petersen and Olsson, 2015: 1582). The most controversial issue in EBP is the 'focus on evidence of effectiveness' with the 'gold-standard' of randomised control trials (RCTs) and systematic reviews privileging quantitative methods at the expense of qualitative

and/or observational approaches (Pearson, 2010: 489). This means that: ‘The potential of qualitative research to help decision and policy-making... remains largely untapped’ (Veltri et al. 2014: 2). Recent work has also drawn attention to practice-related issues (Avby et al. 2014), particularly the need to pay more attention to how individual practitioners can be helped to use evidence-based knowledge in their everyday work-lives (Gray et al. 2015; Pope et al. 2011). Avby et al. (2014) found in relation to social workers, for example, that the qualitatively different ways in which they understood EBP could be and categorized as: ‘fragmented’, ‘discursive’, ‘instrumental’, ‘multifaceted’ and ‘critical’.

When discussing EBP it is important to distinguish between practitioners’ ‘espoused theories’ and ‘theories-in-use’ (Argyris and Schon, 1974). The former consists of the world view and values which individuals assume their behaviour is based on, while the latter are those implied by their behaviour, underpinned by ‘mental maps’ in use in order to take action. For Curnock and Hardiker (1979: 160-61) ‘practice theories’ act as ‘maps to guide [practitioners] on their journeys, which speed their progress and help them to avoid the vicissitudes of unmapped territory’. A profession’s ‘practice theory’ is implicit in what its workers do. It is based not only on experience, but on ‘imagination, intuition and curiosity’ and combines ‘sensual perception, cognitive comprehension and affective experience’ (Curnock and Hardiker, 1979: 9). It is carried around in the heads of practitioners ‘providing them with a framework by which they can filter a mass of data’ (Curnock and Hardiker, 1979: 6). In contrast, ‘theories of practice’ are more explicit theories referring to ‘knowledge which is available in a fairly unmodified form’ from various sciences/disciplines (Curnock and

Hardiker, 1979: 7). These distinctions raise the questions of how research evidence is used in relation to the ‘practice theories’ of officers, and how it can be implemented.

### **The rise of evidence-based policing and ‘what works’**

Over the past decade the evidence-based movement has spread to policing and criminal justice. This is illustrated in its importation from the United States in the work of Sherman (2003). Sherman (2013: 377) defines evidence-based policing as: ‘a method of making decisions about “what works” in policing: which practices and strategies accomplish police missions most cost-effectively...’ EBP is predominantly focused on the question of ‘what works’: ‘what interventions or strategies should be used to meet specified policy goals and identified client needs’ (Nutley et al. 2003: 128). ‘Robust’ or ‘good’ evidence is assessed on a five-point scale, based on neo-positivist quality assurance frameworks like the Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods. This scale ranges from statements about ‘what works’ at the top, through ‘what’s promising’, to what is seen to have ‘possible impact’. Systematic reviews demonstrate ‘what works’ and thus are placed the top, followed by RCTs (College of Policing, undated). Police resources are guided by ‘targeting, testing and tracking’, involving the use of statistical evidence to proactively guide and manage police resources (Sherman, 2013: 3).

Sherman (2003: 10) calls for social science to become more ‘experimental’, as, when used properly, experimental methods can ‘control bias better than observational methods’. He argues for greater education of the consumers of social science research in order to defend against ‘misleading evidence of all kinds’ (2003: 6). However, as Tilley (2009: 143) points out, the understanding of evidence-based policing espoused

in the work of Sherman and others, ‘risk(s) stifling heterodox alternative methodologies rooted in critiques of the RCT’. Evidence-based policing faces the same issue, including that of effectiveness (Pearson, 2010) identified in previous critiques of EBP. This raises the question of why EBP has also spread so readily to policing.

The growth of the evidence-based policing movement in the UK coincides with financial cuts to policing post-2008 recession. The years following the Conservative-Liberal coalition government formation in 2010 witnessed substantial cuts to police forces across England and Wales as a means of reducing the fiscal deficit. From 2010-11 to 2015-16 there was a 25 per cent real-terms reduction in central government funding to Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs),<sup>1</sup> and from March 2010 and September 2014 there was a reduction of 36,672 in police workforce personnel (excluding special constables<sup>2</sup>) (National Audit Office, 2015: 4). In his discussion of a ‘narrower policing’, Millie (2013: 155) argues that if handled well, the financial cuts could be an opportunity to ‘reassess what state police ought to be doing’, which goes beyond just ‘crime fighting’ to include a ‘mix of crime control, social service and order maintenance functions’. During the same period, as Myers and Spraitz (2011: 136) note in relation to criminal justice in the USA, ‘accountability’ has ‘emerged hand in hand with evidence-based policy and practice, with policy makers and the general public seeking greater information on whether public monies are being well spent’.

In the UK, the push to professionalise policing<sup>3</sup> is reflected in the creation of the College of Policing in 2012, a professional policing body which has a ‘mandate to set



standards in professional development, including codes of practice and regulations, to ensure consistency across the 43 forces in England and Wales' (College of Policing, 2015). It promotes an evidence-based approach for instance via the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction (WWCCR). The WWCCR consists of an academic partnership consortium established in 2013, including University College London (UCL), the Institute of Education (IoE), the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Birkbeck College, and Cardiff, Dundee, Surrey and Southampton universities. It also includes the work of those cited here as critics (i.e. Tilley, 2009). There is an emphasis on police officers not only having access to the latest research evidence and collaborating with academics to build an evidence-base around identified research priorities, but also acquiring the skills to undertake their own research and evaluations.

The WWCCR's focus on evidence-based policing has implications for the co-construction of knowledge and understandings of what constitutes research by officers and researchers. It also impacts on how police understand and practice evidence-based policing, and which forms of academic research, methodologies and knowledge will be viewed as il/legitimate or useful for informing policing. As Berger and Luckmann (1966: 111) write: 'Legitimation "explains" the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings. Legitimation justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives'.

Much of the aforementioned critique of EBP also applies to the evidence-based movement in policing. For instance it privileges a particular kind of 'research evidence' above the knowledge of practitioners, while also making 'assumptions

about the nature of professional practice and about the “transmission” of evidence to practitioners’ (Hammersley, 2013: 16). Bullock and Tilley (2009) highlight barriers to the implementation of evidence as including: difficulties in discerning what counts as ‘evidence’ of effective practice; the availability of evidence; and organizational constraints, such as ideological battles and conflicting interests. Denzin et al.’s observation of the movement also applies, in that it rests on a false premise ‘that quantitative measures, in contrast to qualitative materials, are to be preferred because they are more transparent and more objective’ (2006: 772). We can see this claim implicit in Sherman’s (2003) assertion that an ‘experimental approach’ produced by positivist methods can help to avoid bias. The danger in relation to policing research is that ‘experimental’ methods are not only seen as ‘objective’ but also as politically ‘neutral’ and that what is presented as ‘objective’ research fails to acknowledge the power dynamics at play between police and government and the public(s) they serve (Hope, 2009).

In addition, evidence-based policing via promotion of a ‘hierarchy of evidence’ risks creating a dominant discourse which discounts those aspects of social scientific research which police officers and staff may require. Relying exclusively on RCTs excludes not only observational field research but, for example, mixed method research designs, cross-sectional surveys, systematic interviews, social network analysis, and simulations. The view is also encountered in the ‘hierarchical pyramid of evidence’ that any two studies conducted in the same time period cannot be fully ‘independent’ and therefore must be excluded from meta-analysis (Ho et al. 2008). When challenged, those having that narrow a construction of evidence-based policing tend to round on the ‘low standards’ in the field (see for instance Lum et al. 2011). In

consequence, EBP risks discounting aspects of social scientific research which, as we shall see, some officers and staff might find useful in practice.

## **Methods**

Our examination of these issues is based on fifteen semi-structured interviews conducted during a one-year funded Enterprise Project Grant<sup>4</sup> which focused on developing partnerships and conducting knowledge transfer with police forces in England. This involved the Senior Research Associate spending seven months seconded to a police force in the Midlands of England, while conducting networking and other collaborative activities across two additional forces which covered both urban and rural areas. We also liaised with stakeholders including victims' support organisations, Magistrates' Courts staff, the College of Policing, and academics across the region engaged in policing research.

The interviews formed a small piece of qualitative research into police officers' perspectives of research and evidence-based policing. They were conducted with officers and staff who either had key in-force roles in relation to the utilisation of research evidence or who had experience of undertaking research and/or collaborating professionally with academics. Interviewees were recruited with the assistance of a key gatekeeper (Chief Inspector) who provided a list of those fitting the above criteria. The fact that the Senior Research Associate had a hot desk at three different police stations also led other officers and staff to volunteer to participate. The interviews constitute a 'purposive sample' insofar as this 'signifies that one sees sampling as a series of strategic choices about with whom, where, and how one does one's research' (Palys, 2008: 697). They were selected to represent a mixture of roles,

including officers with operational (Sergeant) and managerial (Inspectors and Chief Inspectors) responsibilities, and staff with policy-related and analytical responsibilities. They were selected purposively in relation to their having experience of conducting research (e.g. 'in-force'; on secondment to the College of Policing; as part of an external formal qualification; as part of their official responsibilities; in collaboration with academics/other partners). An interview guide was developed and the interviews (each lasting one-hour in duration) were recorded and transcribed by the Research Associate. Interview data was analysed using 'thematic analysis' which allowed us to identify key themes and patterns emerging from the transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and to take account of unanticipated themes.

The perspectives herein are also based on data collected via our own observations during the setting-up and reviewing of our collaboration(s). This included observations and notes taken during meetings; at police research fairs; and from informal conversations with a variety of police personnel including from probationary Constable level to Assistant Chief Constable level. We also observed and shadowed officers on response, in a custody suite and in a control room.

In relation to ethics, the identities of the forces, police officers and staff in question have been fully anonymised, as has any descriptive information that might result in identification of the police forces or participants. The project did not entail any element of assessment of the practices or policies of forces, officers or staff. It received institutional ethical approval and adhered to the British Sociological Association's 'Statement of Ethical Practice' (2002).

We encountered issues in relation to access, ethics and intellectual freedom, reflected upon in detail elsewhere (Lumsden, forthcoming) which meant we had to make compromises with key participants. Bureaucratic protocols and incorrect form filling by police personnel resulted in access to computing facilities which the Senior Research Associate had enjoyed for some months being permanently withdrawn without notice in the middle of setting up appointments. In addition, as the interviewees were initially selected and suggested by the key gatekeeper who believed they would have useful perspectives on research and evidence-based policing, we had to be careful (by conducting interviews at times and in locations which would preserve their anonymity) not to disclose the identities of those we had selected. Given the nature of organisational and inter-personal politics and relationships, a later request by a member of staff to access a list of our interviewees was declined, as we did not want (sensitive) data to be traceable to individuals.

## **The rise of evidence-based policing and its implementation**

### ***Understandings of evidence-based policing***

Understandings of evidence-based policing varied between interviewees, although most recognised the link to the Maryland Scale and the form of evidence-based policing espoused by the College of Policing:

It is a way of saying, ok, here's a hypothesis, here's a theory, let's try that, and actually let's put some science behind it, so in the future if somebody has a similar problem, they can look at it and go, 'Actually, on the Maryland scale... that looks like a good piece of work'. (Interviewee 7, Temporary Chief Inspector)

The politicisation of policing via the introduction of PCCs was cited as a potential driver for evidence-based policing. However, rather than PCCs using research to analyse social problems and leaving the police to deliver a service on the basis of such analysis, they were seen to be setting targets which forces were expected to meet:

We're a bit more politically exposed now having a PCC – there's an expectation, somebody who's an elected politician that's making promises, that should have a greater grasp of the evidence on social problems... – that's transferred over to the police where it's actually supposed to be delivered... the problem is that PCCs [are] still trying to set targets. (Interviewee 1, police staff)

Ironically, despite the use of research evidence by PCCs which reflects the 'politicisation of research', there was a perceived lack of strategic thinking in terms of priority setting and planning in relation to how desired change might be achieved. Instead, 'cure-all' initiatives took precedence:

We don't... think strategically about how we're going to make this happen... what we need to put in place, what's the direction of travel, what milestones we're going to meet, what's the critical path, what do we need to change...? We look for everything as cure-all-ills. (Interviewee 1, police staff)

The tendency for officers to highlight the ways in which evidence-based policing could help improve performance and targets illustrates a phenomenon which Denzin

et al. (2006: 772) refer to: 'a statistical normality that tends to relegate diversity, variation, difference and other indicators of cultural richness to non-normality and/or pathology'. This includes ignoring 'contexts of experience', turning 'subjects into numbers', and turning 'social inquiry into the handmaiden of a technocratic, globalising managerialism' (Denzin et al. 2006: 772). It also ignores the 'practical wisdom' or 'value-based knowledge' that is 'applicable to local situations' (Petersen and Olsson, 2015: 1583).

There was evidence that the dominant model of EBP had penetrated. However officers and staff also explained that other forms of research would be useful to them. They were often not aware that these alternative methods did not fit the hierarchy of evidence linked to EBP. When asked what kind of research his force tended to focus on, this police officer explained that there was a lack of qualitative studies that would be beneficial for gaining insight into experiences:

I think that's a bit of a gap.... We... focus on the quantitative side of stuff and the number crunching and surveys... We don't tend to focus on the narrative and the rich source of data that we can get from talking to people and finding out people's experiences and perceptions. And for me, that's just as valuable.  
(Interviewee 8, Inspector)

This need to include qualitative evidence as opposed to just focusing on figures and targets was also highlighted by Interviewee 10 (Temporary Chief Inspector):

The more qualitative-type stuff is probably what really needs looking at first thing in the morning. Not ‘it went up by two and how many people have you sent out to stand somewhere visible?’

Therefore, despite the College of Policing focus on a ‘hierarchy of methods’ (including primarily RCTs and systematic reviews) many officers and staff valued qualitative research (and/or mixed method studies). We also encountered this view at a continued professional development event we organised for police officers in early 2015, which focused on the experiences of victims. During a sand-pit activity areas for further investigation that were identified to us by officers included gaining a better understanding of the causes of crime to inform crime prevention initiatives, and tracking victims’ and witnesses’ journeys through the criminal justice system in order to understand their experiences and improve services. Here, specific attention was given to the collection of victims’ narratives.

As noted earlier, evidence-based policing can be said to privilege certain methodologies (such as RCTs and systematic reviews), disciplines (such as crime science<sup>5</sup>), and ways of conceptualising research and of ‘knowing’/knowledge production compatible with an ‘experimental’ approach. This ‘boundary work’ is an important means of drawing a demarcation line between what counts as ‘science’ and ‘non-science’ (Gieryn, 1983). As Styhre (2011: 25-26) writes:

In this boundary work, various resources are mobilized, including political contracts, institutions, scientific and practical evidence, forms of storytelling and anecdotes, and so forth. The immediate effect of successful boundary



work is that certain knowledge claims and accompanying demands for authority, prerogatives and privileges are excluded and rendered illegitimate.

This may disadvantage academics wishing to conduct research with police from particular branches of the social sciences, arts and humanities. This includes those conducting qualitative research, since these methods of knowledge production are not compatible with the EBP on RCTs and systematic reviews (apart from studies which recognise the added value of qualitative methods for RCTs (see O’Cathain et al. 2014)), as evidence of ‘what works’ in practice. However, it is important to note that qualitative research has been accommodated in EBP to an extent. In the Campbell and Cochrane Collaborations<sup>6</sup> ‘there is evidence of a softening of approach, particularly regarding the inclusion of non-experimental epidemiological studies’ (Dixon-Woods et al. 2006: 31), and also in the inclusion of the tick box quality assurance checklists for qualitative research such as the Spencer et al. framework for assessing research evidence prepared for the Cabinet Office (2003).

### ***Implementing research evidence***

Attempts to implement research evidence could either emerge from external (academic) research or internally from officers or staff conducting ‘in-house’ research or evaluations. Instances of officers conducting their own research and overseeing the implementation of findings indicate the importance of distinguishing between ‘research into practice’ which involves ‘evidence external to the world of practitioners’ and ‘research in practice, where evidence generation and professional practice enjoy much more intimate involvement’ (Nutley et al. 2003: 132). This is a key development in the College of Policing’s promotion of research – that officers are

trained to conduct their own research and make use of research evidence - and is what the WWCCR, as the main current example of officially funded evidence-based policing, has struggled to deal with:

I did the research primarily in my own time and then I gave the project in.... to the Head of Custody... It outlined what I saw the problems to be, the advantages of smaller suites, the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) recommendations and what I thought could be done and then I left that with them... It was implemented so it must have been right. (Interviewee 3, Inspector)

The issue here for the WWCCR is that many of the research projects conducted by officers will involve methods which do not fit the 'hierarchy of evidence' espoused by the College of Policing, and therefore valuable 'on the job' research which is combined with practitioner knowledge will not be included as evidence of 'what works' in practice. They may also still (as the above quote demonstrates) be implemented within individual police forces. A Temporary Chief Inspector also highlighted the challenge of implementing evidence in relation to work conducted in-force on Integrated Offender Management (IOM):

At times it's harder to sell it in force than it is outside the force because there's a mind-set of 'catch and convict'... that is quite a strong cultural background that we've got... would it not be more useful for us to be involved in the process of looking at why somebody does this, and then... can we tackle that? (Interviewee 7, Temporary Chief Inspector)

This highlights that, just as academically produced research is not homogenous in terms of discipline, department, methodology, and theory, the drivers and obstacles to the utilisation of in-force research/evidence will not be the same across the board. They will be differentiated according to the area of policing that the officer is working in – for instance crime prevention, neighbourhood policing, public protection, forensics, response and so on. We still tend to regard police organisations as solidary and common-purposed (e.g. ‘catch and convict’), whereas the above extract demonstrates that police organisations should instead be viewed as quasi-entrepreneurial markets/frameworks with a range of actors, some pursuing agendas that are a long way from traditional ‘reactive’ law enforcement.

A further theme in interviews was that police lacked the requisite skills to evaluate interventions and critically appraise evidence (see Pope et al. 2011):

Not setting specific aims and objectives at the beginning of projects... So... when we come to evaluate, what are we evaluating? There’s a number of times I get, ‘Will you look at this and see if it worked? What does *worked* mean?’ (Interviewee 4, police staff)

If evaluation emerged as a key issue, demonstrating the ‘legitimacy’ of evidence to a range of social actors in the organisation (as a pre-requisite of implementation) was also seen as a challenge. Once again, the codified approach taken to the development of the WWCCR Toolkit acts as a technology of control over which types and forms of research are deemed legitimate for inclusion. For example, this includes the

development of 'EMMIE', a visualization tool and coding scheme based on previous scales developed to 'assess the probity, coverage and utility of evidence both in health and criminal justice' which 'draws on the principles of realist synthesis and review' (Johnson et al. 2015: 459).

Interviewees noted that research evidence was not always made available to the right people within the organisation. The below reference to the failure to implement research findings from a study on officers' health and well-being highlighted the lack of organisational planning around workforce changes that constituted an 'inhospitable' environment for implementation:

It...recommended that we set in motion some risk reduction activities focused around three or four specific areas that are highlighted in the report...because we don't have a... clear plan that they can articulate and tell people. So underlying that psychosocial research about stress – you've actually got some major organisational issues... but if you look at the recommendations in the report, we've not addressed any of them. (Interviewee 2, police staff)

Therefore obstacles are encountered within the organisation in terms of a clear strategic direction from 'above' in terms of leadership, management, and also communication of plans to key individuals within the organisation (Garland, 2015). In implementation we must acknowledge 'who' needs the intervention. The evaluation of interventions prior to their implementation is patchy and inconsistent both within and across police organisations (Bullock and Tilley, 2009). This mirrors the findings in Gray et al.'s (2015: 668) survey of social workers' experiences of EBP where

‘implementation was contingent on organisational culture and resources to support EBP, especially quality of supervision; knowledge and ability of practitioners, particularly skills in locating and critically appraising evidence, and attitudes to EBP; and the research environment’.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The above interviews provide a glimpse into officer and staff understandings of evidence-based policing and its implementation. We recognise that we are building on earlier critiques of the evidence-based movement in contexts such as medicine, education, and social care, rather than offering a novel critique. What is unique, however, is the illumination of the context in which the rise in EBP has taken place within UK policing, including its importation from North America as a crime and policing ‘tool’ (Sherman, 2013). One manifestation of EBP as a dominant discourse (Foucault, 1981[1970]) by government and policy-makers is the establishment of the College of Policing as a professional body. Evidence-based approaches are ‘likely to gain even more salience in organizations... where fiscal and resource crises are forcing human resource rationalizations, ever new restructuring strategies and increased monitoring of accountability through quality audits and control mechanisms’ (Webb, 2001: 58). This is the case with police forces in the UK, which have faced extensive financial cuts and restructuring since the 2008 recession. The political system is pulling for a particular construction of evidence-based policing and it is a central policy-maker’s construction. The resources being made available (or not) mean that, like some of the in-house police research described to us, it may well be ‘doomed to succeed’ - but this does not mean that it will have much effect on the ground.

We wish to draw attention to the risk posed to researchers entering the field of the 'loss' of decades of seminal policing research if its utility for informing policing and criminal justice is to be judged using the 'gold standard' criteria defined by the evidence-based movement more broadly and the College of Policing more specifically. Included here is the legacy of seminal studies of policing, often involving ethnographies of police culture (e.g. Banton, 1964; Manning, 1977; Fielding, 1995; Holdaway, 1983), which shed valuable insight on this social world. As Denzin et al. (2006: 770) note:

Born out of a 'methodological fundamentalism' that returns to a much discredited model of empirical inquiry in which 'only randomized experiments produce truth'... such regulatory activities raise fundamental, philosophical epistemological, political and pedagogical issues for scholarship and freedom of speech in the academy.

The fact that earlier critiques have failed to halt this latest manifestation of what might be called the 'EBP industry' and its associated infrastructure and networks demands further academic reflection and critical debate amongst police and academics alike.

EBP presents police with only a partial glimpse of the available research that has potential use in the policing context. It is at odds with practitioner-based theories presenting problems for how this 'evidence' can be transferred into practice (Bullock and Tilley, 2009). Interviewees often viewed research which would not fit the College

of Policing 'what works' criteria as of benefit to them, and thus questions are raised as to the varying ways that officers and staff of different levels understand and conceptualise 'academic research', and how their 'practice theories' (Curnock and Hardiker, 1979) and professional judgements are utilised alongside or in addition to research.

There was a gap between interviewees' 'espoused theories' (which in some instances could be traced as originating from the College of Policing) and their 'practice theories' about what would 'work' for them in their jobs. Research would have to deliver in terms of improving efficiency, reducing demand and saving money. This goes some way towards confirming the reading of the spread of EBP to policing as explicable in terms of a top-down 'technology of power' (Foucault, 1988) aimed at providing smarter solutions that 'work' in relation to crime-reduction rather than a bottom-up response to what was seen by some staff and officers to 'work' at a strategic level and/or on the ground.

Interviewees also did not distinguish between 'academic research', 'consultancy research', 'in-house research', or 'evaluations', viewing them as 'research of sorts', which raises questions as to how these different forms of knowledge can/will be adopted by police. This also has implications for how, or if, there is willingness to implement findings from research in practice. As Nutley et al. (2003: 129) argue 'there is a need for far greater emphasis to be placed on know-about, know-how, know-who and know-why as opposed to the current emphasis on know-what'. Concerns about the usefulness of scholarship can also include 'the perception that academic theorizing is often too complex, too ethereal, and too detached from the

everyday realities confronting... [practitioners]' (Chakraborti, 2015: 4).

Police forces are also operating within the realm of private consultancy practices, including widget entrepreneurs (for instance SMEs targeting police and security applications for their kit), and quasi-internally generated initiatives of a semi-entrepreneurial nature such as those of offender profiling. These also impact on professional judgements and the implementation of findings. Many police officers viewed academic research as akin to the evaluations, research and other project work done by 'consultants', and were looking for 'quick fixes' to problems (see also Chakraborti, 2015; Garland, 2015). There is therefore a need to focus on evidence-based implementation in relation to both individual practitioner behaviour and organisational culture (Gray et al. 2015). It is clear that multiple and overlapping 'epistemic communities' exist within and across police forces and will 'interpret knowledge, its value and its potential uses in different ways' (Henry and MacKenzie, 2012: 320).

There are financial and organisational barriers to the implementation of research evidence (Bullock and Tilley, 2009), with interviewees highlighting the need for support from Chief Officers in order to effect implementation of recommendations. A further barrier was the tracking of the implementation process and methods of evaluation. This highlights the different levels of participation in a 'community of practice'. Wenger (1998: 8) argues that learning in organisations is 'an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organization knows what it knows and... becomes effective and valuable as an organization'. Interviews demonstrated that the evidence-based movement is implicated in a



professionalisation process, but that in organisational terms this has reached front-line officers in a fragmented and undigested form (although it is important to note that evidence-based policing is not uniformly adopted across all forces, and is related to the priorities of senior officers and staff).

The distinction between a 'reactive' culture in operational policing, and the opportunity for a more 'proactive' strategic approach by middle-management staff was also commented on by interviewees and demonstrated that 'policies, metrics, training programs, and system designs' are often at odds with the realities of work. There needs to be more consideration of how to 'make the job possible by inventing and maintaining ways of squaring institutional demands with the shifting reality of actual situations' (Wenger, 1998: 46). Research is required with regards to the process by which various social actors in the policing world are 'encouraged and enabled to take evidence into account' when making decisions (Nutley and Davies, 2000: 41).

The research community is also an important part of the story. Steinheider et al. (2012) surveyed academics and police practitioners to determine their philosophical viewpoints and perceptions of research, highlighting how each values different qualities in a partnership. Reflections on police-academic partnerships highlight the benefits to be had from participatory action approaches (Fleming, 2012), and Fox (2003: 82) draws attention to the need to 're-privilege the role of the "practitioner" in generating useful knowledge, without rejecting the skills and knowledge of the "academic" researcher'. There are now a number of large-scale regional police-academic collaborations across the UK and a comparative study of researchers' views and experiences of these would form a worthwhile focus for future study.

From the interviews we conducted with officers and staff, the wider rhetoric encountered about ‘what works’ in policing, and the ‘gold standard’ measurements for research espoused by the College of Policing and WWCCR, it is clear that the evidence-based policing movement risks de-legitimising forms of sociological and criminological research in/on crime, security and policing, which could benefit officers, police organisations and the wider public(s) impacted upon by the substantial police reforms currently in progress and in a ‘constant state of “becoming”’ (Nutley et al. 2003: 133). As Fyfe and Wilson (2012: 308) note there is ‘a need to engage with the full spectrum of knowledge requirements and embrace a degree of eclecticism in relation to theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches and types of empirical data’. The next few years will be crucial in terms of the publication of the first round of findings from the WWCCR funded work, and will present challenges for both academics and police in terms of how policing research in the social science field is understood, shaped, and defined, and how knowledge and recommendations are implemented in policing practice.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In 2010 the government changed how police forces in England and Wales are governed by introducing elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) in 41 of the 43 police forces. PCCs are responsible for setting out in an annual police and crime plan the objectives they will address, allocating the funds needed to achieve them, and holding police forces accountable on behalf of the electorate (National Audit Office, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The Special Constabulary is the UK's part-time police force. It consists of volunteer members of the public who have full police powers.

<sup>3</sup> We view the 'professionalisation' of policing as an ongoing and contested process, with police organisational, public and governmental debates and discourses centering on the negotiation, development and/or introduction of the eight characteristics identified by Rohl (1990) in his definition of a profession. These include: 1) operates as an organised body of knowledge; 2) involves a lengthy training or educational period; 3) operates so it serves its clients best; 4) operates autonomously and exercises control over members; 5) develops a community of practitioners via professional standards; 6) enforces a code of behaviour and ethics; 7) establishes uniform standards of practice; and 8) provides full professional mobility.

<sup>4</sup> Funded by an Enterprise Project Grant (via HEFCE).

<sup>5</sup> Crime science is a sub-field which emerged in the late 1990s / early 2000s and focuses on providing new ways to cut and prevent crime and increase security via multi-disciplinary research. The focus is on practical, experimental and evidence-based approaches. Two particular features include the focus on 'situational' methods for crime prevention, and an approach that is oriented towards policy utilisation

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(Hope, 2004). For example see the UCL Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science in the UK: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jdi>

<sup>6</sup> The Cochrane Collaboration was set up to collate and summarise evidence from clinical trials while the Campbell Collaboration focuses on the social, behavioural and educational arenas.

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