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# Porous Passivity:

## How German police officers reflect their organisation's learning processes during the pandemic

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#### Abstract

The paper is based on interviews that have been conducted in autumn 2020 with 28 police officers in different positions who work for the Länder Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia. They have been interviewed for a project that aims at understanding the forms of knowledge that are being activated in the police profession. The interviewees have been asked – inter alia - what kind of learning processes they were seeing within the police that might have been impacted by the pandemic. The answers they have been given hint a lot at the “porous passivity” that the psychologist Stephan Grünewald has found to be the answer of the general German public towards the measures taken against the corona-virus. We found there to be five different aspects that the answers of the interviewees can be ordered into: 1.) one is the impression that police work does not change much due to the pandemic. 2.) but police officers miss being with their colleagues a lot, 3.) many say that the contact between the general public and the police has become more difficult a) because of the mask that makes mimicking and understanding the other more complex and b) because people might think it to be too difficult to get into contact with the police. 4.) protection against invisible threats such as viruses and bacteria has been an issue before corona so officers are happy that finally these concerns are being taken seriously, 5.) the maybe most interesting answers concern the impression of at least some officers that corona is something that comes from “above” (in the hierarchical sense) and that they have to deal with it even though they regard the real danger to be much smaller than assumed by the political class.

In short, the police officers we talked to do not seem to see much learning during the pandemic, but they miss being police officer “out there on the street” they are and are not really sure if the pandemic is at all *that* dangerous.

**Keywords:** organisational learning, police, corona, bureaucracy

Trainee police officers have a lot to learn. Curricula in most of the German police academies are quite similar. Those curricula address numerous topics, encompassing social sciences (ethics, sociology, psychology, intercultural competence), law (penal, traffic, civil service), and so called “police subjects” (forensic science, tactics, traffic management). In addition, to their theoretical studies, students also receive training in a variety of practical topics, ranging from specific situational scenarios, to communication workshops, to shooting, to crowd control. The students also receive on-the-job training as part of their degree programme. The question is: what else will students have to learn once the police has learnt its lesson on the practical impact of pandemics?

French social anthropologist Frédéric Keck (2021) is a keen observer of “pandemic lookouts” in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, who have been watching for signs for a new kind of virus since at least 2005. In 2020, their fears became reality, in the form of Covid-19. “The modern state,” Keck argues (in Fabius 2021, p. 26.-29), “is built on prevention by evaluating the distribution of risks in a population.” The possibility of a virus that crosses the species barrier and thus changes form is not integrated in the philosophy of modern states. Covid-19 thus puts the known political order into question. Modern states, according to Keck, are based far more on the pastoral virtues of administration than on the cynegetic-type of observation upon which hunter-gatherer societies relied. But it is no longer possible to domesticate illnesses and to separate ‘nature’ from ‘culture’ *stricto sensu*. The idea of the state itself will thus have to change and become far more inclusive than modern states have been before (Latour 1997).

The Corona crisis has indeed proven to be a test for police, as well as political, structures around the globe. If Frédéric Keck is right, policing future societies will require new curricula in police academies and training colleges.

The following reflection look at the lessons learned so far. It is based on interviews conducted in Autumn 2020 with 28 police officers in different positions who work for the German *Länder* Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia. Some of these officers are in training, some teach in police academies, and others work in front-line positions or in management. They were interviewed for a project that aims to understand police organisational memory in general and learning pro-

cesses particularly, and the different forms of knowledge that are activated in the police profession.

The interviews revealed five themes with respect to the Corona pandemic:

First, the need for personal protective equipment as a barrier against invisible threats such as viruses and bacteria, were an issue even before Corona. Officers are happy that their concerns are finally being taken seriously. For example:

*“I washed my hands very often, even before Corona. You do not want to touch someone who has lived on the streets and who has not taken a shower in weeks. But when help is needed, well: we do it anyway. And this is why I think that officers are in fact happy that they now get a certain protection and that they are given masks and disinfectant and so on.”*

Second, police officers greatly miss being with their colleagues, as they regard their job to be a very social one. Being close to each other in fact seems to be part of the police culture, which is based very much on oral traditions (Grutzpalk & Hoppe 2018, p. 13-22). Police culture also seems to be very reluctant to accept individualism and is based on work being performed in groups rather than by individuals. As one respondent put it,

*“I think that all of them are looking forward when finally, they can cooperate with others. I think that most of them are rather social beings and they want to work with other teams too.”*

Third, many were concerned that contact between the general public and the police has become more difficult during the pandemic. This is not only because wearing a mask hinders interpersonal communication, but also because people might be reluctant to contact the police in the first place. One officer responded that he did not wear a mask on duty, as he finds it obstructs his performance, to the point of not being able to do his job properly. Another officer put it like this:

*“This is particularly true for small stations where elderly people come by, because maybe they have lost their keys or the wheelbarrow is not in the garden anymore. And maybe with all the Corona restrictions they do not come anymore.”*

Fourth, responses suggested that for at least some officers, the dangers of the pandemic were being overblown. Such officers had the impression that anti-Corona measures were being imposed from above (in the hierarchical sense) and that the real danger was much lower than assumed by the political class. One respondent referred to a certain dissonance as a result.

*"I think that it is difficult for many colleagues to perform their duties well because maybe they have a totally different idea about how things should be done. And when you have to take action against people who do not follow the Corona-regulations but within yourself you think: 'what is this nonsense about?' than I think it is difficult that these two poles are united within you."*

Fifth, there seems to be a certain reluctance amongst police officers to learn from the crisis. Some say that this is also due to structural issues, as police work is still mainly paper-based and as social structures rely very much on personal contact and connections. One respondent sums up his experience thus:

*"I think that actually police have not learned much during the Corona-crisis. I think that everybody continues as they have done before, maybe with a thinner programme and just the way things fit more or less."*

This final theme fits well with the practice of 'muddling through', which Astrid Jacobsen (2001) has found to be to be part of policing rationality.

The themes that emerged during our research strongly suggest "porous passivity" in the police. The German psychologist Stephan Grünewald (2021) has found this to be the general response of the German public to measures taken against the Corona virus. In policing, this porous passivity might have to do with power structures. That is, police are in a position that might include the "ability to afford not to learn," which Karl W. Deutsch (1966) has described as being one of the general aspects of power. When viewed through this lens, learning processes might yet remain to appear. Perhaps they are more latent and more invisible than one might think. The whole Cepol-Conference „*Pandemic Effects on Law Enforcement Training & Practice* " has in fact shown that there are changes taking place, mainly on the technical side of policing.

We would not go so far as to conclude that the police in Germany are not learning much during the pandemic. However, we assume that most of the learning processes are going to pass silently, and might not even be recognised as such.

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