

Knowledge (s)kills action — a shared agenda for comparative research on and with the police

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The value and meaning of knowledge for policing

Some three years ago now, I joined the Police Academy of the Netherlands to further develop its knowledge and research function. Crucial questions for me were: What is the relationship between the police and knowledge? What are effective research strategies in the police world? How can we improve our knowledge about the police as a frontline organisation?

First of all, in essence, the police are a knowledge organisation. Police officers are continually occupied collecting, arranging and assessing knowledge, whether it is related to the investigation of a crime scene, taking a statement or bringing to light fraudulent financial transactions. It's a question of looking for reliable knowledge, aimed at establishing the truth. This must ultimately be able to stand the test of public and legal scrutiny. In this sense, police work has a lot in common with empirical scientific research. A detective is a researcher. At the same time, there is a rather ambiguous relationship with knowledge in the police world. As police organisation, you need knowledge if you are to take action and be successful. But knowledge certainly does not always make it easier to act. Knowledge is certainly not always practical. It can also lead to more doubts, to more uncertainty, to the enforced acceptance of multiplicity and ambiguity. It has been said that 'knowledge kills action' (Flyvbjerg, 1998) and this statement clarifies why the relationship between the police and knowledge must be a complicated one.

So what is to be done? In my experience as researcher, I have rediscovered the meaning of action and interaction studies in recent years (Kensen and Tops, 2005). This research takes place very close to the real world. You put yourself in the shoes of those you are studying, empathising with their questions and problems. A certain level of engagement is appropriate, without becoming totally involved. The impact of the researcher on what happens is not eliminated as much as possible, rather made firm and explicit. The researcher talks back and advises, and not only at the end of the study in the form of a report, but during the research process. In my experience, this not only increases the practical, but also the theoretical significance of the study. Nothing is perhaps as practical as a good theory, as the saying goes, but nor is anything as theoretical as a good practice (Zouridis, 2003). These are observations which coincide with current opinions on the character of knowledge and knowledge production (Leijnse, 2002). Knowledge is seen here less and less as a 'stock quantity', as a commodity you can acquire and store and then distribute or apply in bits. Instead, knowledge is a 'flow quantity', which forms in processes in which production, distribution and application take place simultaneously. Knowledge forms primarily in learning processes and in practical activities. As a result, the age-old distinction between fundamental and applied knowledge becomes blurred.

In this approach, tacit knowledge is very important, the unexpressed knowledge that is present in skilled and professional action, whilst the actor is unaware of it or unable to describe it accurately. In a recent study,

conducted in the Netherlands, it turned out that, in contrast to common belief, police officers on the ground often have a relatively high capacity to learn (Beerepoot et al., 2007). At least, people say that they learn a lot informally, but we still know little about exactly what and how. When reading this report, I was constantly reminded of the famous case from the management literature about the maintenance engineers at Rank Xerox. Every morning, they sat together for half an hour drinking coffee, before they set off to the different firms to check the copiers. In an attempt by the management to increase efficiency, the half hour for coffee was scrapped and the engineers went straight off to their clients. In this way, it turned out that the board had managed to destroy the most important collective learning opportunity in the organisation. Whilst enjoying a cup of coffee, football was not the only topic of conversation, but also experiences and questions relating to work (Seely Brown and Solomon Gray, 1995). I suspect that we should also be looking for such moments in the police. That is not a haphazard affair. The briefings and debriefings, for example, by no means always qualify as a true exchange of experience. Apparently, you have to go further and deeper into the police organisation. Observe precisely what police officers do, rather than what we think they do. It is very important to unveil this secret of police learning, both theoretically and practically; it increases our insight into how the police functions as a frontline organisation and it helps us to improve its quality in practical terms.

This research can only be made successful if the police officers on the ground are also convinced of its usefulness. Interaction studies can then be an extremely useful research strategy. It is a line of research that we have to develop further within the police in the coming years. However, I do not wish to be at all dogmatic or narrow-minded on this point. Different types of research must be able to coexist, side by side. A few years ago, I looked into what kind of knowledge people operating in cities need, for the Dutch Knowledge Centre for Larger Towns and Cities (KCGS, 2002). We arrived at three types. First of all, inspiring and interpretive stories about what is involved in the reality of urban trends. Anecdotes help you to gain insight and to know how to relate to it; stories, which also supply the language and the terms that make this possible and which provide the inspiration for change and innovation. Secondly, figures and time sequences;

presenting factual material in a clear and orderly manner, so that it becomes obvious in which area of development we find ourselves and what, if anything, is unusual about it — facts and figures, knowing what's going on and being able to draw conclusions from this. Thirdly, recognisable theories in the form of reflection on all the assumptions and starting points which are at the root of everyday operations. Did we base our action on the right assumptions? Did we overlook important things? Are we up to date in our analyses? Did we make the right connections? The international dimension is also important here.

Police research in context

A lot of police research has been conducted in the past decades, by many different researchers in many different countries. We certainly not start from scratch. But where exactly do we stand in police research? Historical comparative research on police research has been done in recent years and I would like to mention two thorough studies: *Insights on police* by Paul Ponsaers and colleagues (2009) and *Perspectives of Police Science in Europe*, by del Barrio Romero and colleagues (2007). This latter study was actually commissioned by CEPOL. These two studies give an important insight into the field of police research. Several conclusions may be drawn from this.

- 1) Thematic diversity is enormous. One way to look at it would be to state that it is rich and diverse. Another way is to describe the field as lacking in focus and cohesion.
- 2) This lack of focus and cohesion is not only visible using an international perspective, but even within a country the field of police research is 'split'; there is diversion on topics and communities.
- 3) Between countries this effect is even more pronounced, there is little international cooperation.
- 4) Due to all the effects mentioned before, comparative research has only been done sporadically.
- 5) More focus and cohesion can be reached by collaboratively working on a research agenda.
- 6) Another topic concerns the difficult field of practically orientated research. I will explain more about this subject later on.
- 7) Police and research do not naturally 'bond'. The police is characterised by a reactive and practically

orientated culture, which has only relatively recently opened itself up to more knowledge-based approaches and reflective processes. Police research is now becoming ever more 'normal' and accepted. But what effects does this 'scientification' ultimately have on policing and the police organisation?

Strategic questions for police research

Before I go into the research topics themselves, I would like to point out three important issues we have to deal with in police research. These issues concern 'knowledge kills action', the political dilemma of 'intelligent police' and the development of Pasteur's Quadrant.

Strategic issue: knowledge (s)kills action

It was Nietzsche who said 'knowledge kills action'. Merely having a lot of potentially conflicting knowledge may ultimately destroy swift handling and action. This seems to be a dilemma, especially for the police organisation, which traditionally is known for its action-orientated culture. Policemen and women are action-orientated, they are usually not trained to be very reflective. The ambition is to go from 'knowledge kills action' to 'knowledge skills action'. Only one has letter changed in spelling, but it makes a huge difference to the meaning. How do we get from 'kills' to 'skills'? This does not seem to be a trivial question. To begin with, it is important to acknowledge the plurality of the term 'knowledge'. Tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge are two completely different types of knowledge that need to be distinguished. Learning how to quickly disarm a robber is mainly tacit or procedural knowledge; remembering what went right and wrong when one first disarmed a robber concerns explicit knowledge. Both types of knowledge are indispensable for good police practice.

Knowledge perhaps kills action when the two are not combined properly. An example: a team of police officers had to do their annual training. They were briefed that a certain suspect should be arrested. When they walked round the building, someone tried to attack the team, a person who did not match the description of the suspect. They just let him go and were a bit shocked, overwhelmed. They had stopped to think about the instructions and description, without turning to their skills of arresting a suspicious person. Police work indeed is dynamic in this sense: sometimes procedures and

reflexes are in order, sometimes deliberate thinking is appropriate. Police officers need to be able to constantly switch between these modes.

Strategic issue: the politician's dilemma

Another strategic issue concerns what I call the intelligent police dilemma for politics. A knowledge-based police is also an intelligent police. Does politics really want the police to be smart? In essence, the police constitute a potential dangerous force. How dangerous does politics consider the police to be when the police are actually doing an intelligent job? What happens if the police actually question certain ideas or actions? How reliable do politicians consider the police to be, when they have a sharp and professional opinion of their own? On the other hand: what is more dangerous in our complex society: a police that is intelligent, or a police that is not? Related to this question one might ask whether politics knows how to manage the police as an intelligent power.

Strategic issue: Pasteur's Quadrant

In general there are three ideal types of relationship between theory and practice (Stokes, 1997). 1. All theory, no practice (Bohr). 2. All practice, no theory (Edison). 3. Practice and theory combined (Pasteur). We hold the following view on police research: it should contribute to the scientific base, or in other words it should help develop theory. At the same time, society should benefit from the knowledge that is produced. It should help develop police practice. This combination of practical orientation and theoretical rigour is Pasteur's quadrant. This type of research is also called use-inspired basic research. It bridges the gap between basic and applied research, which is a tough field. For example, it asks for a specific type of methodology. Together with a number of universities of applied sciences, the Police Academy of the Netherlands is working on this specific topic.

Research topics for discussion

The Dutch police are working on a strategic agenda. Strategic topics for the coming years will at least entail the following subjects: performance, positioning, and authority and force. The research will be conducted with a predominant focus on related subjects. I will go into more detail in the following paragraphs. The research

topics are associated with actual questions and remarks made by police officers of all ranks.

Performance

A lot of research questions can be classified as related to police performance. The first question to raise is: how do we judge performance? When can we say the police are doing a good job? This is a complex question, which has been simplified too much in recent years by means of measurable performance indicators. And although research has shown that the effects of this simplification have not been disastrous, there is by no means an enduring foundation for adequate judgement of police performance. How can we judge police performance? I will discuss a couple of important factors. First of all, this has to do with the complex relationship between objective data or information and subjective feelings and experiences. In objective terms, the level of violence in society has decreased in the past century. However, both collective and individual sensitivity for violence seem to have increased. Second, there is a civilian need that does not match the ever-increasing rational, functional and technology-driven 'modern' type of safety and security. This need concerns confidence, trust and feelings of safety. The systemic approach of security problems will never give an answer to these needs. Civilians worry about values and norms and this sheds a different light on police performance. We need to investigate what type of measures this yields in terms of efficiency, effect, integrity and legitimacy. Despite subjective feelings and experiences, there are some difficult problems for the police that directly relate to its performance. For instance, only about 20 % of Dutch crime is actually solved. This does not help build confidence and trust in the police. Another issue concerns the quality of information exchange, both within the police organisation and between the police and partner organisations. An example is complaints about the poor quality of official police reports. It should be possible to organise an improvement here.

Positioning

Safety and security are by no means exclusive police tasks. On the contrary, the police increasingly cooperate with partners; a phenomenon which has been labelled 'policing without the police'. This means the police need to think about its position within the policing field. The police have an important function within many networks and police roles sometimes differ: from

signalling and advising to organising connections by programme management. Sometimes the police have a leading role, sometimes a role in the background. It is necessary for the police to choose a strategic position: be flexible and keep track of relevant partners, intervene where necessary, by signalling and advising or more actively on account of core police tasks. However, choosing a position requires good insight in the core being or soul of the police. The unique information position that the police has in society is an important aspect, but also the right to use force.

Authority and force

Our societies are changing significantly. There is growing differentiation and pluralism, due to migration, globalisation and strong economical fluctuations. An unbearable pluralism seems to be developing, which is perceived as a threat, especially for people with low education and underdeveloped social capital. For them, populist politics offer a way out, which seems to make the world less complex and more bearable. This development yields tension, and the police are in the middle of it. Especially the police's authority should not be questioned, but this increasingly does seem to be the case. This has partly to do with the behaviour of individual police officers. They sometimes do not show professional discipline and superiority, which needs to be trained and coached. But it is also related to the way in which people see the police. Often the police are considered to be one of the rescue organisations (together with the fire brigade and ambulance service). Giving help to those in need is indeed an important part of policing, but the police are in the first place an organisation which helps create a recognisable and accepted societal order. This is and will remain an essential task of the police, especially in times of (financial) insecurity, political changes and societal dissatisfaction. This task also asks for authority and distance. The police are not always your best friend. Relationships with civilians need to be open, but not symmetrical. One of the questions is whether the police are still able to responsibly use force in situations that require this force.

Round up

In brief, police research is characterised by a tension between knowledge kills action and knowledge skills action. The big challenge is to keep balance. Classic dilemmas concerning research and science

are inevitably touched upon when it comes to police research: the relationship with power and authority, the relationship with practice and the design of the research itself. This is important not only with respect

to the themes and research content, but also for the development of proper scientific research.

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