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# A brave police force deserves courageous academics

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## Science and policing in a fast-changing world

Science and policing used to be far apart. Policing was (and of course to a great extent still is) primarily about crime fighting and safer neighbourhoods, while academic research is about theoretically explaining things we do not yet understand. In the past, policing used to be only mildly interesting from an academic perspective: the police had some well-defined tasks (primarily enforcing the law) in a relatively stable world. However, technological and societal change has accelerated considerably in the second half of the twentieth century and this process does not seem to slow down, now or in the foreseeable future. If we compare the concerns and operations of police forces today with those just a decade ago, a totally new world of policing has emerged. The programme of this conference is a good indication, with issues like fundamental shifts in the function and organisation of policing, policing cyberspace, radicalisation, techno-policing, knowledge-led policing, private policing and dealing with diversity.

These issues have in common that dealing with them in an adequate fashion presupposes understanding technological and societal change. At the same time a police force is not a research institution and there is always an urgent need to act in the face of current societal problems. Hence, I would argue that an intimate relationship with the academic world is necessary for problem solving in a rapidly changing

world. We need to be aware of what is happening around us and we need to be innovative, while at the same time the pressure to achieve concrete results is rising. And — perhaps most importantly — we need to organise critical reflection on our ideas and operations to prevent us from taking a wrong turn and sticking to it for too long. In an information and network society a police force cannot wait for directions from others about what to do. We are supposed to know what is needed to realise the expectations that rest on our shoulders.

## Academic research and policing: history and current state of affairs

As a police officer I first learned to appreciate the value of academic research as a consequence of my relationship with the Technical University in Delft. This resulted in hiring a group of people who are untypical for the police force and who still play an important role in our force with regard to technological development and intelligence-led policing. Today, a lot of strange characters are contributing to security in the Amsterdam-Amstelland police force, and (senior) officers regard it as necessary and normal to constantly educate themselves in connection with various universities. Luckily, the love of the police for science was not a one-way street. Science and scientists also discovered policing as a worthwhile subject. Police science has developed into a mature field with a growing number of students and

valuable publications. And the Dutch police — the combined 25 Dutch regional police forces — has truly become a ‘reflective organisation’ with a common vision (published in 2005 under the title *The Police in Evolution*) and a shared strategy agenda containing the leading themes for policing for the years to come. The relationship between science and the police is also very visible at the level of the different police forces. To illustrate this point I will explain the way we organised this in the Amsterdam-Amstelland police force.

### Science in the Amsterdam-Amstelland police force

On a strategic level we constructed a ‘think tank’ with a direct functional relationship with the top echelons of the organisation. We named the think-tank the Agora, referring to the (market) places in the old Greek city-states where matters of public importance were discussed freely and critically. The Agora is explicitly meant to be a critical forum and is supposed to contradict especially the Chief Constable whenever necessary. As you will understand, contradicting me is never necessary, but putting all jokes aside I honestly would recommend every Chief Constable or senior manager in a police force to organise his or her own independent countervailing power. At the Agora different insights and actors come together, starting of course with relevant research outside or within the police force. The themes of the strategic agenda of the Dutch police play a prominent role in structuring and further developing knowledge at the Agora. In addition, there is a solid working relationship with the Bureau of Management Information and Research of our police force: data are used to turn our strategic (and operational) decisions into information-based decisions, and research is performed to ensure that it is also based on field knowledge. The Agora is also the connection to the national and international academic community and more specifically to our ‘joint ventures’ with universities.

### Three chairs and related research

First, we participate in a Chair at Leuven University (Flanders, Belgium) under the title *Knowledge discovery from databases Amsterdam-Amstelland police force*. As the title suggests, this concerns advanced data

mining technology in order to utilise our data more effectively. In general, police forces have an enormous amount of potentially very interesting data which are only used when needed to conduct our primary task. However, these data are hardly used to understand the phenomena we are dealing with, while — as I said earlier — understanding the world and its consequences for police strategy and operations is crucial.

Second, together with the city of Amsterdam we participate in a Chair of the VU University of Amsterdam under the title *Security and Citizenship*. The fact that we cooperate with the city of Amsterdam in this chair is very important. As you can imagine, both the city and the police force share the ambition of making the city a safer place to live in, but the organisational logic to do so can be different. Both parties agreed that by funding this Chair they seek to be enlightened by and confronted with insights that might not be very welcome from an organisational perspective, but that do contribute to the increase of social security.

### Example of valuable research

To give an example: in defining strategic priority objectives there is of course close cooperation between the police force and the administration. Data play an important role in this, and there is a combined committee where the data are analysed to facilitate the identification, selection and strategic formulation of priorities. Prior to this, we had the intuition that the analysis of the data amounted to looking towards the future in the rear-view mirror: using data about what has happened to set future priorities. The research group Security and Citizenship was asked to look at what was — as it were — behind the data: which mechanisms are at work? They came up with the idea not to analyse crime figures but to research crime-inducing factors. This led to a map of Amsterdam showing where to expect a future rise of crime and which factors might be responsible for fluctuations in crime and public order in different areas. Depending on which factors were important with regard to which issues and areas, recommendations for the strategy and operations of both the police force and the administration could be made. Because the Chair — although financed by the city and the police force — is independent, the results (some of which were not

supportive of the views of the police or the city) could be made public and attracted a lot of attention in the media. This makes it harder to ignore the results, also the results that might contradict current policy. Science can function as a necessary — although not always welcome — impulse for critical reflection.

Third, in collaboration with the Police Academy of The Netherlands we are now working on organising a third Chair with the assignment to determine what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for research to have an impact on day-to-day policing. We believe this necessitates the development of a specific methodology, a specific way of doing research. Although we have no doubts about the value of scientific research, a lot of research has no impact on policing, even in some cases where it is evident that it should have consequences for our operations. The aim of this third Chair is to further strengthen productive relations between the academic world and the police sector, especially with regard to concrete police operations.

### Blind spots and science: Juxta

Except for these structural relationships with science it is sometimes necessary to come up with derailing initiatives that make critical reflection unavoidable. One of these initiatives was meant to strengthen the countervailing power of the aforementioned Agora. We called it Juxta — derived from the word juxtaposition — and one of the participants has given a poster session on this conference today. We invited twelve young and bright academics to come and work for us over an eighteen-month period to show us our blind spots. We selected them from approximately three hundred candidates on the basis of a critical essay on the aforementioned vision document *The Police in Evolution*. We selected people with for the police unusual backgrounds, so no one had studied law, criminology or administrative science. Instead they specialised in anthropology, media, philosophy, artificial intelligence, Arabic language and culture, experimental psychology or art.

They had a very intensive introduction programme within the police force, they were confronted with all aspects of our organisation and work. They joined officers on the beat, participated in investigations and

talked to all sections of the organisation on all levels. We gave them the explicit assignment to contradict and surprise us, to show us where we were wrong, and to annoy us. And, they lived up to their promise! The sessions with the Juxtas — as we lovingly called them — were always intensive and I constantly had to fight the urge to defend myself. It led to new perspectives and in the end also to twelve thought-provoking end products, mainly in the form of publications but also other media.

Their influence did not stay limited to the top of the organisation. We made sure that everybody in the force knew what Juxta was about, and people in the force were very interested in the concept and of course in the insights of the Juxtas. Various Juxtas had considerable influence on diverse issues such as neighbourhood policing, integrity policy or the use of specific information in dealing with victims. They opened up a hotline that every officer in the force could phone when he or she had a ‘wicked problem’, a lot of people called and were without exception impressed by the contribution of the Juxtas. It further strengthened the idea that science and police work are a happy marriage and that it pays to let outsiders take a look inside your organisation. But most importantly, to quote Oliver Wendell Holmes, ‘a mind, once stretched by a new idea, never returns to its original dimensions’. Although we did not intend to recruit people for more than this project, more than half of the Juxtas currently work in our police force in regular positions.

And although Juxta was a one-off project, the ‘spirit’ of Juxta has not disappeared. Research and critical reflection has proliferated in the force, for example with regard to the aforementioned strategic themes. Explorations on these themes are performed by teams composed of a diverse range of people within the force who seek explicit interaction with ‘outsiders’ from the academic community or elsewhere.

### What have we learned?

What have we learned from Juxta? That we do have blind spots, that indeed it is important to focus on future-orientated police themes and that even if you do so, you still run the risk of lagging behind. We also learned how important it is to bring in new and diverse perspectives, that important issues are

mostly complex issues, and that you need to combine research with 'learning by doing'. But perhaps most importantly, we learned how fruitful it is when people dare to speak up, when they tell you how it is because they have thought about it, read about it, and studied it intensively. On some sensitive subjects the Juxta's ran into a lot of opposition, but they stayed loyal to their intention to show how it is from the perspective of an academic outsider. Sometimes this called for considerable commitment and courage, but in the end none of them regretted the investment.

### **An urgent appeal**

This brings me to an appeal I would like to make to police officers and scientists. As should be clear from my exposé, science is of crucial importance for current and future policing and senior and chief police officers

are advised to facilitate strengthening the relationship with science in every way they can. Be brave and do not worry: the truth will hurt you. For the relationship to be productive, however, scientists should also be willing to stand up for what they believe. In a world of all-important images and fast-changing hypes scientists should be willing to forcefully defend the outcomes of their research, both within the police force, but also in the public debate. Of course I am aware that in post-modern times scientific truth has become illusive, and that academics are in the position to question the validity of their own findings, and that most of the time they are very hesitant to issue policy recommendations. The problem is however, if they do not do it, who will? And I am of the opinion that, although the scientific truth has become illusive, nonsense is still nonsense. If you are in science and run into nonsensical policies: please take a stand and speak up! A brave police force deserves courageous academics.