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Building the capacity of police change agents: The nexus policing project¹

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This paper argues that police members from all ranks possess potential to challenge the beliefs and meanings that inform their daily practices, and are able to alter their routines when innovative practice and new ideas assist them in responding to new dilemmas. The paper suggests that both scholars and practitioners pay insufficient attention to nurturing rank-and-file police as change agents and to building their capacity as knowledge workers and ideas generators in forging change. In response to this gap, the paper discusses the Nexus Policing Project in Victoria, Australia, which is based on a police–university partnership aimed at realising new ways of seeing and doing in the field of policing. The participatory action research method is utilised as a way of overcoming the traditional gap between research and practice. The paper discusses some of the challenges associated with this kind of collaborative endeavour.

Keywords: police reform; culture change; participatory action research; youth safety

Introduction

A question that is often not addressed in the policing literature is how ways of theorising police reform and police culture inform methodological choices in researching the police. This paper explores this line of inquiry. We write this paper as academic researchers who are interested in advancing both theory and practice, but who believe that this is only possible to achieve when practitioners (in this case police officers) are actively involved in the research process and in finding solutions to practical problems.

We adopt a modest understanding of police reform. We do not regard it as a parabolic leap in organisational structure, managerial style and strategic direction. We propose rather, that change occurs through new ways of thinking and acting. This paper is concerned with identifying and establishing the conditions that allow for the introduction of new perspectives and practices on the part of individual and group members of the police, regardless of rank. We focus in particular on change from a micro-cultural perspective, and suggest that ways of seeing and doing are mutually constitutive. We propose that in thinking of police as individual agents it is important to employ research methodologies that promote the capacity of police

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officers to resist, accommodate and shape police organisational reform (see Marks 2004).

Although it is now commonplace to suggest that police culture is neither monolithic, universal nor unchanging (Reiner 1992: 109), it is a notion that continues to be deployed without nuance and specificity. 'Culture' is used to paint a brush over broad social patterns, rather than to illuminate the individual practices of individuals as they go about deriving meaning from, and ascribing meaning to, the situations in which they find themselves every day. David Sklansky refers to this broad brush depiction of police culture as 'the Police Subculture Schema' which he says 'makes it hard to see differences between officers, new complexities of police identity, and dynamic processes within the police workforce' (2007: 21). In order to identify such differences a more 'hands on' approach to research is required.

Police researchers who wish to conduct research with police organisations are usually directed to senior management to discuss their proposals and ideas about new ways of doing business. Arguably it is easier to introduce such ideas and innovative practice at this level because management see such issues as central to their role. At the same time, operational officers spend much of their working life seeking creative solutions to the daily problems they face on the street, and discussions with them reveal a wealth of knowledge about policing styles and strategies that have great potential to shape organisational reform.

Although change in policing undoubtedly hinges on more effective ways of integrating the realities and experiences of 'street cops' and 'management cops' (Reuss-Ianni and Ianni 1983), we focus rather on the notion of a more fragmented, micro-level view of police culture, which helps us to move away from thinking about cultural change as necessitating major changes to traditional organisational practices, norms and belief systems. Culture changes as individual members 'struggle to resolve conflicts and negotiate new understandings that tie together (sometimes loosely) heterogeneous elements' (Foote Whyte et al. 1991: 43). Change can occur in small shifts in ways of seeing and acting. Taking this view of organisational change requires us to think about research approaches that allow individuals to explore and construct, then assess and reconstruct their concerns (Grundy 1986: 28). What we propose is a methodology whereby academic researchers bring police officers directly into the process of solving practical problems as part of the research process. We advocate participatory action research (PAR).

PAR is a methodology where creating a positive social change is the predominant driving force. PAR grew out of social and educational research and exists today as one of the few research methods that embrace principles of participation and reflection, and empowerment and emancipation of groups seeking to improve their social situation. The approach is not new. Kurt Lewin first talked about action research 60 years ago (Holter and Schwartz-Barcott 1993: 298–304). However, the nature of the methodology has changed markedly since then and prominent writers including McTaggart (1991), Grundy (1986), Foote Whyte (1991), McKernan (1991) and Jordan (2003), to name a few, have progressed the method considerably.

In this paper, we focus on the Nexus Policing Project in Victoria and the emphasis Nexus places on the importance of collaborative partnerships between police and academics in pursuit of innovative ideas and practice that may inform new ways of seeing and doing from the bottom-up, as well as from the top-down. At the time of writing, Nexus is one of the 17 projects—funded by the Australian

Research Council—that Victoria Police is undertaking with various university partners on a wide variety of subjects (see Bradley et al. 2006). Our paper is thus concerned more broadly with the relationships between agendas of reform, cultural change and research, and uses the case of Nexus to illustrate our optimism for the capacity of small groups of police officers to engage positively with new possibilities and reconfigured social arrangements. In policing more generally, the shift towards collaborative projects like Nexus do, however, involve challenges associated with carving out a new place and role for research (and academics) in what is a historically pragmatic and task-oriented institution of law enforcement. We discuss some of these challenges, drawing on key debates in the literature.

Agency and change in police organisations

Bevir and Rhodes propose an ‘interpretive’ approach to studies of governance, one that focuses on ‘meaning in action’ (2006: 1). In stressing the importance of the mutually constitutive relationship between people’s actions and the meanings that surround them, the authors argue that beliefs inform practices, and practices reinforce and rework beliefs. ‘To explain an action’, they say, ‘we cannot merely correlate it with an isolated attitude. Rather, we must interpret it as part of a web of beliefs and desires’ (2006: 3).

This interpretive view supports a micro-level understanding of culture. If we want to understand cultural expressions we must examine *all* practices, and the ‘webs of meaning’ that surround them, from the ‘bottom up’. In other words, individual beliefs cannot be taken in isolation. Beliefs are sustained and supported by colleagues with similar beliefs and the institutional environment that informs them.

Bevir and Rhodes make clear that although the everyday practices of individuals are informed by wider webs of meanings, they are not pre-determined by them. People are able to reflect on the beliefs that shape their behaviour and adjust those beliefs based on the ideas circulating around them as well as the ones that they themselves generate. Individuals do not exist outside of a particular social context(s); they are ‘situated’ in that context rather than fully autonomous agents (Bevir and Rhodes 2006: 4).

It is therefore essential to think about human agency as central to change in policing. Change is vitally contingent on the capacity, and opportunities for individual police members to exercise this agency. ‘To accept agency’ Bevir and Rhodes argue, is ‘to imply people have the capacity to adopt beliefs and actions, even novel ones, for reasons of their own. In so doing they can transform the social background’ (2006: 5). Individuals have the capacity to respond innovatively to new ideas, problems, or dilemmas. Even when individual agents are confronted with new ideas that do not sit comfortably with existing ones, they can be, and indeed must be, given the space needed to reflect upon established ways of thinking and acting.

Studies of change in policing have revealed the important place of agency on the part of police members, although the focus has tended to be more on the agency exercised by police leaders, rather than on rank-and-file members. Police leaders are often viewed as the innovators within police organisations—certainly more so than the rank-and-file (see Bayley 2008). Wood’s study of change in policing in Ontario (Wood 2000) highlighted the capacity of police leaders to exercise agency in addressing a series of contingent, and sometimes unrelated, factors in their internal

and external environments. The study revealed that police leaders were not simply colonised by a new way of thinking imposed by those in higher levels of political authority. Rather, they configured new management paradigms to suit their own public policing environment. The end result was the introduction of new managerial models which were never completely convergent with the model that 'originated' in the private sector (see Poole et al. 2006). In actively playing with new ideas, individual police members—or in the case of the above study, individual police leaders—exercised a form of 'situated agency' (Bevir and Rhodes 2006: 5).

If *all* police officers are to be considered as change agents, the challenge before us is to identify and then to establish the conditions that build this capacity, not exclusively from the 'top', but also 'from the bottom up.'

Bradley, Nixon and Marks identify some of the conditions required for police organisations and for police members in particular to evaluate their everyday practice and ritual against the 'web of meanings' that shape and determine the world of public policing. These conditions include, 'equal partnership', 'dialogic engagement' and the creation of an environment that empowers officers to access innovation and put that innovation into practice. The opportunity for reflection on this practice, for both individuals and the organisation itself is crucial (Bradley et al. 2006: 190).

The Nexus Policing Project has sought to apply a PAR philosophy as a way of 'partnering' with the police in reflecting on existing traditions and in forging new ideas and practices. The PAR approach is centred on notions of collaboration. It tries to overcome the traditional gap between research and practice (Whyte Foote 1991) through an interactive involvement of researchers and research subjects (Geva and Shem-Tov 2002: 192). Practitioners are directly involved in the research process from problem identification, to research design, to data collection and analysis, and thereafter dissemination and uptake of research findings. The action research encounter is one where 'equal partners meet, enter into dialogue and share different kinds of knowledge and expertise ...' (Jordan 2003: 190). Rather than the traditional research model where there is a rigid distinction between researcher and subjects and a quest for objectivity, PAR focuses on a 'dialogical relationship between theory and practice' (Jordan 2003: 188) where knowledge is generated within the everyday world of participants. PAR thus 'contrasts sharply with the conventional model of pure research in which members of organisations and communities are treated as passive subjects with some of them participating only to the extent of authorising the project, being its subjects and receiving the results' (Foote Whyte et al. 1991: 20).

In the remainder of this article we discuss the Nexus Policing Project, its research approach and the challenges associated with fully adopting such a method. The Nexus Policing Project is one of many partnerships that Victoria Police has created with Australian universities. The word "nexus" refers to a binding or linking together—a connection. In the context of research it refers to the linking together of different forms of knowledge and capacity in the propagation of new ideas about police policy and practice. It refers specifically to the connection between all those who in some way work with the police towards knowledge generation, validation, diffusion and adoption. It is this latter linkage that we will focus on in this paper. In discussing this we will provide some insight into the kinds of outcomes that have been achieved and which are likely to inform new practices in Victoria Police.

The nexus policing project: building agency through participatory research

Historically, police have been regarded as generally anti-intellectual in their outlook and considerably hesitant about exposing themselves to the beliefs and assumptions of outsiders (Young 1991). At the same time, academic researchers have found it difficult at times to collaborate with police (Fleming 2005). There is of course research being conducted between police and academics. Police in both the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) have begun to commission pieces of research from universities and indeed, act upon existing policing research in pursuit of evidence-based policy and practice (e.g., Bayley 2008; Bullock and Tilley 2003). In Australia, many police organisations are collaborating with universities and researchers. For example, the Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies (TILES) situated in the University of Tasmania was formed in 2002 by the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Department of Police and Emergency Management. In the US, programs involving community participation, proposed and designed originally by academics such as Skolnick and Bayley (1986) and Wilson and Kelling (1982) have encouraged police organisations in the US to experiment widely and substantial progress has been made. As Goldstein points out, police receptivity to this research has gone a long way to dispelling some of the 'police resistance to change' problems associated with police organisational reform (Goldstein 1990).

Although this signifies a change for the better, patterned stereotypes and defensive positions on both 'sides' still exist as an impediment to the realisation of police-academic partnerships based on sets of shared principles, processes and outcomes (Fleming 2005). Where police and academic partners do come together, as we have done in Nexus, there are a host of tensions and challenges that still need to be resolved and deliberated.

The Australian National University (ANU) and Victoria Police are committed to establishing partnerships where academics and practitioners come together to learn from one another. The enthusiasm for this partnership in Victoria Police is largely due to the positive support of its Chief Commissioner and her commitment to developing collaborative research projects in furtherance of police professionalism and evidence-based practice. What this requires is for academics and police to identify what these challenges are and how they can be addressed. And those who know best about daily challenges are the police at the coal face (Birzer 2002). Bringing academic and practitioners together has not always been easy. Practitioners and researchers have operated on different planets for a long time with police 'hold[ing] to a central ethic of distrust of the academic' (Young 1991: 38). As Foster points out:

Researchers see the worlds they observe in relation to how that world ought to be, or what they would like it to be. Police officers, by contrast, more rooted in the imperfections and messiness of worlds as they find them, are both perhaps less aspirational or optimistic about the possibilities of change. ... (Foster 2003: 222)

Police are often 'unsympathetically portrayed as resistive, irrational and unreceptive to the questions and ideas generated by these external researchers' (Bradley 1992: 3; Punch 1975: 8). Academics are often considered 'too theoretical and not grounded in the real world' (Perez and Shtull 2002: 169–170). Greenhill (1981: 103) points out that the lack of 'cultural fit' between police and academics is relational, with police

wanting to uphold mystifications of their 'unique' profession: 'Police often see sociological work as ill-informed and sociologists tend not to take seriously what the police do'. The difficulties of negotiating access has also been cited as a problem for academics (Holdaway 1982). There are widely held beliefs in police organisations that 'nobody understands police work that hasn't been on the street' (Perez and Shtull 2002: 170). In this context, Birzer notes:

The partnership between [police] practitioners and researchers will have to more fully blossom into a meaningful collaboration if evolving police strategies are to become fully effective. If this is accomplished, it will assuredly result in a much more salubrious state for both researchers and practitioners when developing theory and practical protocol. This means that practitioners will increasingly have to view research as a foundation for policy and practice. Likewise, researchers will have to increasingly realise the multiple realities that exist beyond the ivory tower and that by tapping into the rich experience base of practitioners is one avenue to more fully understand the multivariate world of policing. (Birzer 2002: 156)

Birzer (2002: 156) suggests that there is more to a successful police–university partnership than simply greater and easier *access* to the world of the other partner and to their unique forms of knowledge and capacity. Police should not simply be viewed, or view themselves, as simply enlightening researchers about the realities of policing. Rather, their knowledge and that of the researcher should provide a foundation on which to build a collaborative generation of new, actionable knowledge for policing that can be validated and diffused. It is important to support the identity of police members—regardless of rank—as agents of change and to assist them in enhancing their capacity as knowledge workers and ideas generators.

Police–academic partnerships need to be embedded through processes that entail a central role for police in the identification of research problems, the framing of research questions, as well as in the design and evaluation of intervention projects. In this vein, the aim of the Nexus project is to engage the police directly in a process for generating innovative ideas about ways to mobilise the capacities and knowledge of external groups in governing security. In the Nexus project, police are supported, for example, in developing new ideas for exploring opportunities to sit back in certain policing arrangements, so that other groups are able to play an active role in the governance of security. These explorations require radical rethinks for individual police officers and of the public police organisation. However, these rethinks are informed by the changes in the field of policing that these police officers have to acknowledge and address in their daily working lives.

In giving effect to this collaborative notion of knowledge production and praxis, PAR is a strong and relevant method from which to move forward. While there are very few cases of the use of PAR with police, Geva and Shem-Tov's (2002) work with the Israeli Police is a documented example. Geva and Shem-Tov are aware of the importance of aligning the research methodology with the outcomes of the research (i.e., more community oriented and collaborative policing practices). However, methodologies are also informed by theory. The underlying assumption that police officers are social agents demands a research approach that draws upon and expands the knowledge base of individual officers and encourages more reflective activity.

The PAR approach to research in this context is one that we have used in a variety of ways in the Nexus project.

The nexus project in Victoria

There is considerable variation across the various issues we are involved in as part of the Nexus collaboration with Victoria Police, but we apply the same phased approach to the process of gathering knowledge and generating new ideas. Wood and Marks describe these phases elsewhere (Wood and Marks 2006; Wood 2006: 230). In summary they are:

- ‘mapping’ forms of knowledge and capacity currently deployed in governing a security problem;
- conducting an in-depth research module on aspects of existing security governance arrangements;
- designing a new nexus arrangement to be piloted;
- implementing and reviewing the nexus pilot.

We will explore these phases in relation to one of the issue areas, youth safety in a rural town of Victoria.

Youth safety

The “mapping” process identifies various agencies and groups that play a role in the governance of a particular problem. Victoria Police identified youth safety as an area that required more innovative understandings and interventions as part of a broader safety delivery network. In this project, Nexus team members from the ANU—with the assistance of Victoria Police and local partner organisations—mapped those agencies in the relevant area that played a role in youth service delivery; say for example, youth justice, mental health, family and community services and education. The team interpreted ‘safety’ and ‘security’ very broadly, deferring to the perceptions of different agencies with respect to the needs of young people and the factors that contributed to delinquency, crime or other issues of health and well-being. We gleaned these perceptions through analyses of official documentation and through conversations with agency representatives about the project and its potential directions. As a result, the ‘map’ developed did not focus simply on the place and role of criminal justice agencies in the governance of youth safety.

Our ‘mapping’ suggested that existing networks of youth service delivery provided little opportunity for young people to exercise agency. They rarely played a role in defining issues of safety and/or devising initiatives and programs aimed at addressing those issues. The police were always the fallback agency when youth felt at risk or acted in risky ways. There were few organisational structures and processes focused on the beliefs and situated knowledge of young people themselves. Based on this assessment, we conducted in-depth research with young people aimed at exploring how they think about security, and in this context, the assistance they perceived to be available to them. An ANU academic and a youth worker representing the local government (a key project partner) conducted focus groups with a sample of school children from grades six, seven and eight over a period of

several months. Two schools, one primary and one secondary, were identified as pilot schools.

At the same time we wanted to understand the 'webs of meanings' that informed police officers' understandings of youth issues, and to place their practices in the context of such underlying beliefs. Focus groups with local police officers were facilitated by police members from the Nexus Team and the transcripts were analysed by Nexus Team members. The qualitative research with the young people and with the police supplemented our initial map of 'safety partners' by providing us with a richer perspective on how security was imagined and governed beyond the immediate realm of the police and the criminal justice system (Marks and Wood 2008).

The mapping and research phases led to a document informing the design of a new model to be piloted by police and their safety partners. Inspired by the core principles and procedures of a local capacity governance model in South Africa (see Shearing 2001), the goal of this model is to mobilise the knowledge and capacity of young people in identifying and addressing safety and well-being issues that they see as priorities in their everyday lives. The model places young people and youth agencies at the centre of a problem-solving process and offers a process and set of guidelines (see below) for structuring deliberative problem solving around safety and well-being issues that young people are experiencing in their everyday contexts of home, school and the broader community. The role of various agencies and community groups in this process is not to steer the agendas of the problem-solving groups, but rather to make themselves available—through nominated 'agency champions'—to be mobilised on a case-by-case basis when their unique knowledge and resources are relevant in addressing an issue. As stressed by one of the school principals, this model should be understood more broadly as a governance model, or perhaps more aptly, a 'microgovernance' model (see Burris 2004). The model has the potential to address a range of social and welfare issues relevant to young people and is designed to complement and supplement other governance processes in Victorian schools that are increasingly oriented towards restorative approaches to behaviour management (see generally Wood and Marks 2006; Marks and Wood 2008).

A weekend workshop was held with the young people involved, representatives of key youth service providers, Nexus members and two local police officers to discuss the model and to 'test out' model processes. One of the aims of this workshop was to explore means of aligning competing worldviews in order to identify a shared language and shared meanings so that an effective network to deal with local youth safety issues could be created. However, the main objective of this workshop was to test out the youth-directed problem-solving model that had been shaped by the discussions that took place in the focus groups.

The two police officers present had the opportunity to share their views of the role of the police within the model with the participants, where the possibility exists that they are not necessarily primary players. Concerns expressed by the police and other adult participants at the workshop around mandatory disclosure and the importance of institutional rules and laws led to the development of a set of guidelines. The guidelines are one of the core components of the model, which was then piloted in the two Wodonga schools. After the workshop, the officers spoke to participants about how they had been exposed to a completely new way of understanding youth safety issues and also had the opportunity to meet young

people who were not 'at risk'. These officers became 'champions' of the model and actively participated in the pilot and promoted it strongly within the Wodonga Police.

Roundtable discussions led by members of the Nexus Team were held regularly with the local police to talk through aspects of the model and new developments in the world of policing. Some of these discussions were somewhat robust, with police members articulating more conventional ways of acting and thinking about youth safety issues. But for the most part, these discussions provided the opportunity for shifts in thinking and a real engagement, with new possibilities for youth apparent. The involvement of the agency champions. The ongoing engagement between the local police and the ANU researchers was made possible by the (sometimes sceptical) support of the senior management at Wodonga who had been directed by Victoria Police to assist in meeting the objectives of the Nexus Project and more generally, the strategic plan of the organisation (Victoria Police 2003).

The process of measuring the contributions of the Nexus pilots is a complex one and it continues to be subject to discussion on the part on ANU and Victoria Police. It involves the continuing production of knowledge about whether, and to what extent, particular process and outcome level standards are being met. The establishment of such standards is protracted, involving continued reflection, deliberation and negotiation between pilot partners. Police partners, for example, may be most interested in establishing performance measures that are easily quantifiable, such as crime or victimisation rates. Other partners may be more interested in what police might perceive as 'intangible' outcomes, such as greater satisfaction with the process of working with other agencies or groupings. Measurement is complex because it involves acknowledging the unique objectives of each partner and establishing a joint way forward which assists each partner in addressing their individual dilemmas (Fleming 2006). In carrying out this phased approach to knowledge generation and 'ideas building', Nexus entails a process of mutual capacity building, not simply between the central partners, but also between all site-level partners involved in the design and implementation of the pilots.

Turning our attention back to the police-academic partnership, although the former function as knowledge generators in the course of their everyday work, such as in the area of criminal investigations, they have not traditionally been required to build their capacities as academic researchers. As such, Nexus has undertaken to assist members of Victoria Police to play an active role in choosing research methodologies and in developing ethics research protocols. This process has occurred largely in the form of 'coaching', whereby academic members of the Nexus team work with police members in discussing research requirements, devising research strategies and preparing the necessary paperwork, such as ethics applications.

In some cases, once a choice is made to utilise a particular research method, such as focus groups or surveys, police members themselves carry out the focus groups or administer surveys on their own. As discussed earlier, police-led focus groups occurred in relation to the youth safety project, and focus groups were also conducted for a different Nexus project on inter-agency responses to family violence. In a third Nexus project related to safety on the public transportation system, approximately eighty members of the Transit Safety Division from Victoria Police administered surveys focused on public perceptions of safety from a 'whole of

journey' perspective. In such cases, these research processes have provided a learning experience for police members, honing the skills required in extracting the knowledge of particular groupings and in understanding different perspectives on security and its governance.

Within Victoria Police and in many other English speaking country police agencies, there is a growing interest in police officers furthering their education (Lee and Punch 2006), including obtaining post-graduate university degrees and undertaking leadership and management training. PAR-inspired projects like Nexus—and its youth safety project—are intended to complement the capacity-building methodologies found in formal university training or other forms of learning 'in the classroom'. In practical settings, Nexus centres on police members building their capacities as field researchers and ultimately as 'coaches' of field research in their own right. The assumption is that this new cohort of police researchers will coach other police members in this and other research methodologies. A similar process has occurred in relation to the development of ethics protocols. In some cases, ethics protocols have been developed jointly with academic and police members of the Nexus team, while in the case of the transit safety project, the protocol for the public perceptions survey was developed entirely within the police organisation.

Challenges to collaborative knowledge production

The above discussion sought to illustrate key links between the methodological practices of Nexus and its underlying theory of police reform and police cultural change. In this section, we will outline several operational challenges that Nexus has encountered in relation to organisational structures, police procedures and general process and management issues. These of course can be discussed in a general context as issues associated with working with operational law enforcement agencies generally (Fleming 2005). Police organisations are pivotal institutions in our society, performing wide ranging functions in an effort to meet the increasingly high expectations of the community. Traditionally, police organisations have worked alone, reacting to crisis and public pressure and being assessed by governments and communities accordingly. Their research has traditionally been the province of their own research and policy units and primarily concerned with improving internal management with a focus on administration, surveys and the occasional special project.

The research capacities of police organisations have changed considerably in recent years. Victoria Police in particular have expressed their commitment to research through their extensive involvement in ARC-funded projects to which they contribute significant financial and in-kind resources. Extending their previous commitment to 'local priority policing' and problem-oriented solutions, they have recently devised a new set of service delivery principles that stress not only the importance of research as foundational to strategy development, but also requirement to give members of all ranks the space to be creative thinkers and innovators. Such efforts, however, exist alongside the traditional requirements of public policing agencies generally to meet objectives and desired outcomes that often have little to do with research.

Fleming reminds us that police organisations are primarily conflict-driven organisations. They are necessarily pragmatic and task-oriented and community

expectations demand that this is so. There are difficulties involved for police organisations negotiating with researchers new theories, new concepts and new ways of doing business, when there is ‘an ever present, urgent need to provide immediate relief from threatening problems’ (Fleming 2005). Policing is an ‘extraordinarily complex endeavour’ (Goldstein 1990) and there is always a tension between unresolved priorities and the consequences of demands for change and reform (Fleming and Rhodes 2005).

In today’s police organisations the importance of accountability, performance management and managerialist strategies generally means there is a strong emphasis on maximising performance and minimising cost. Measurement and meeting key performance indicators will directly or indirectly impact on research initiatives. Resource allocation and research activity may well be determined by what is measurable. Staff turnover in police organisations is also an issue. If a project leader or senior practitioner in the project is transferred or promoted, for example, it is not always a given that that person will be replaced with some one who shares a similar commitment to the project (Fleming 2005, 2006). These and other challenges to police partnerships of any kind are applicable to all police organisations, but it would be a mistake to assume that working with one police organisation is the same as working with another. Structural and organisational characteristics and leadership styles differ; contractual arrangements will be different and the demographics of a city shape and determine the way in which police do business in their various communities. Most importantly, in the context of research—and this is true across all police organisations—the support and overall commitment of the chief police officer is crucial if the project is to be sustained. This has certainly been true of Nexus and Victoria Police where standing governance committees such as the Organisational Development Standing Committee monitors, supports and acts as a high level ‘think tank’ for innovations and projects such as Nexus. New governance arrangements, enacted through bodies such as this, indicate a commitment to a move away from traditional, top-down decision making and planning processes. More participatory, outcome-based approaches to management in Victoria Police is important grounding for increasing the base of critical thinkers in the organisation and for engaging with a range of agencies, including academic institutions, that have an interest in making policing ‘smarter’.

Notwithstanding the support of the Chief Commissioner in Victoria, however, there were many moments in the Nexus project where disagreements and issues arose between the police (particularly at the local level) and ANU researchers. In the youth safety project, for example, local police officers questioned whether time spent designing the model was worthwhile considering the organisation’s limited resources and the more pressing problems of dealing with youth at risk. Others remained unconvinced about the commitment and capacity of network partners. These arguments led to renewed discussions about the objective of Nexus, how it relates to Victoria Police’s strategic plans and what the benefits are likely to be for the community and for the local police. The differences were resolved and the model has been successfully introduced into the three schools (including the initial two pilot locations) and the local police have committed to their continued involvement in the pilot. Such deliberations thus proved fruitful for different members of Victoria Police involved in the project, as they prompted a rethinking of accepted business and practices within the organisation, and opened up new spaces for reflection. Efforts to

diffuse and tailor the youth safety model to a different state jurisdiction are being initiated by the local police there.

Police may remain sceptical of researchers even while the project is in progress. It is therefore important that academics and police jointly negotiate appropriate styles and tools for communicating and working together. The ways in which this is done will be contingent on the organisation, the project and those involved. In running the Police focus groups with local police on youth safety issues, for example, the facilitators from Victoria Police were often asked about their own views and experiences as police officers. The shared identity of the focus group participants and the facilitators as police officers allowed for immediacy and the questioning of traditions between 'insiders'.

The nature of police work has the potential to limit officers' capacity to be proactive and innovative agents of cultural change. Police organisations are often crisis driven and time for reflection is not a priority (Fleming 2005). They remain hierarchical organisations despite attempts at more participatory management practices and the views of rank-and-file officers are often overlooked in planning and decision-making processes (Fleming 2005; Wuestewald et al. 2006). Police are also pragmatists who want to get things done in ways that are known to 'work'; experimenting is often seen as resource wasting. This, and uncertain outcomes, can be discomfoting to police given their high political profile (Bayley 1994; Fleming 2004).

Building good relationships between researchers and academics invariably require some readjustment on the part of both parties. From our perspective, such partnerships are nonetheless worth pursuing and essential to building the capacity of police members—regardless of rank—to realise their potential as change agents. For change in policing to occur from the 'bottom-up', it is essential that *all* police members are seen as change agents and capable of being reflective about their beliefs and their practices.

Collaborative projects like Nexus must ensure that the police emerge from such projects with a sense of achievement and with the knowledge that they can contribute to change and innovation through partnerships and by designing and participating in new public safety institutions and networks (Marenin 2004).

Conclusion

Although appeals to culture are often made in attempts to explain reform failure (Fleming and Rhodes 2006: 193), we have explicated a view of culture that suggests the potential for *all* police members to be change agents. Although the practices of police are shaped by the 'webs of meanings' surrounding their situated lives, they are not determined by them. They do have the ability to reflect on the relationships between their situated beliefs, knowledge and practices and to adjust those in accordance with their environment. If we accept this view, then 'culture' needs to be understood at both the macro and the micro level as police officers individually interpret, respond to and act upon their external and organisational environments.

We have suggested that cultural change may take place in small steps rather than great leaps. Change occurs as individual police officers at both the top and the bottom come to see the value in new ways of thinking and acting and are willing and indeed, empowered, to challenge established practices. The possibility for this to

occur is greatest when the agency of police officers is recognised and when they are actively involved in knowledge building processes. The Nexus project in Victoria has explored these possibilities through a range of initiatives and projects.

This paper has identified some conditions under which collaborative research partnerships between academics and police (regardless of rank) may be established. It has suggested a PAR orientation, with an emphasis on interaction, planning, reflection and observation that challenges existing bureaucratic traditions, and allows officers to be exposed to research in a collegial collaborative environment. It provides a strong intellectual foundation for capacity building and innovative practice. If capacity building is undertaken with sufficient numbers of police officers in different parts of the organisation, their individual contributions can be pulled together and serve as exemplars of innovation.

However, a PAR approach on its own will not automatically deliver the desired outcomes. As this paper has suggested, the police organisation's leadership and commitment to the project is crucial. The phased approach to the process of gathering knowledge and generating new ideas (i.e., mapping, researching, designing and implementation) will not proceed well if senior management is not supportive and/or prepared to provide the resources required for such a project.

Other challenges to collaborative research between researchers and academics stem from the nature of police organisations themselves. Police organisations have a high political profile, pursue multiple objectives, are primarily reactive, and constantly under pressure to meet the high expectations of various communities and performance management criteria. Traditionally, such organisations have had research units, primarily concerned with internal research reports and data collection. It is, and should be considered, a challenge for academics to adapt to this environment. For some police managers, the short-term political fix is often preferable to the often long-term requirements of research projects. The allocation of precious resources to what are often perceived as uncertain and indeterminate outcomes and the need to focus on performance measurement requirements at all levels can serve as constraints on a willingness to participate in such endeavours. Communication will be the key.

Clearly, as the paper has argued, police and academics alike will need to adapt to their relatively new environments and endeavour to create collegial and deliberative spaces within which collaborative projects can thrive.

Perhaps the greatest challenge lies in providing the opportunity and the environment that empowers *all* participants to reflect on the 'webs of meaning' and beliefs that shape and determine their behaviour and attitudes. In that reflection we would hope that participants may adjust those beliefs when confronted with innovative practice and new ideas regardless of where that innovation has come from. In doing so they are individually capable of changing their working environment and in effect, becoming a '*change agent*'.

Rhodes has suggested that academics can provide multiple narratives to policymakers and practitioners with a view to enabling them to see things differently (Rhodes 2006: 31). The Nexus project represents one attempt at establishing a new approach to collaborative research. In providing these multiple narratives, the project has endeavoured to connect the 'situated' knowledge and capacities of police officers with those of academics committed to innovation in policing, and to the governance of safety and security more generally.

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