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Police reform, research and the uses of 'expert knowledge'

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interplay between research and police reform. Focussing on the creation of Scotland's national police force in 2013 it examines the role of research as 'expert knowledge' in the political and policy debate leading up to the reform and the on-going evaluation of the impacts and implications of the new police force. The paper also situates the relationship between research and reform in the context of the role played by the Scottish Institute for Policing Research, a strategic collaboration between Scotland's universities, Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority. The analysis is informed at a conceptual level by the work of Boswell and her consideration of the different ways in which bureaucratic organisations make use of expert knowledge. This focuses attention on both instrumental uses (ensuring decisions are based on sound reasoning and empirical understanding) and symbolic uses where knowledge plays a role in enhancing legitimacy or helping substantiate policy preferences in areas of political contestation. These different uses of expert knowledge have important implications for thinking about the role of police-academic partnerships.

Keywords: Police Reform; Research; Evaluation; Knowledge



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1. Introduction

In June 2010 the two authors of this paper sat in the audience of the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland (ACPOS) Annual Conference being held at a hotel just outside Glasgow listening to Scotland's Justice Minister deliver what was a routine address to these types of gathering. The Minister praised the eight police forces for making Scotland a 'safer and stronger' country and paid tribute to the brave and compassionate work of police officers. But against a background of rumour and speculation prompted by the implications of financial crisis of 2007-08 he also made it clear that the Scottish Government had no plans to merge Scottish 8 police forces to create a national police service. In fact, his speech celebrated the achievements of Scottish policing: recorded crime was at a 35-year low, the clear up rate for violent crime was at a 35-year high, and there were high levels of public

satisfaction with policing. Within a matter of weeks, however, the Minister's message had changed. The political narrative now focused on the deep cuts to public spending being made by the coalition government in Westminster and how these would impact on Scotland. The police service in Scotland, the Minister made clear, would need to share the burden of these cuts, with the Scottish Government estimating a reduction in police funding of £1.7 billion over the next 15 years (*The Guardian*, 2011). Against this background, work to identify what was termed a 'sustainable policing model' began and less than 15 months after his speech at the ACPOS conference the Minister announced the establishment of a national police force in the Scottish Parliament in September 2011, the most radical change to policing in Scotland for 100 years:

'The creation of a single police service will protect and improve local policing across Scotland by removing the inherent duplication across the current eight forces. A single service will also provide more equal access throughout Scotland to specialist policing support and national capacity, such as murder investigation teams and firearms teams, where and when they are needed'. (K. Macaskill, Cabinet Secretary for Justice, 29 September, 2011)

In this paper we explore aspects of the decision-making processes that lay behind the creation of Scotland's national police force and in particular consider the role of research as 'expert knowledge' in those processes. We then consider the role of research in the on-going evaluation of the impacts and implications of Scotland's police reform. Our analysis is informed at a conceptual level by the work of Boswell (2008, 2009) and her consideration of the different ways in which bureaucratic organisations make use of expert knowledge. Often this is in an instrumental sense, ensuring decisions are based on sound reasoning and empirical understanding, as exemplified by the drive for evidence-based policy making. But the use of knowledge also has significant symbolic dimensions. By being seen to draw on research, 'an organisation can enhance its legitimacy and bolster its claims to resources or jurisdiction over particular policy area' (2008, p. 3). In addition to this 'legitimizing' function, research can also play a 'substantiating' function by lending authority to particular policy options, 'helping substantiate organizational preferences in cases of political contestation' (2008, p. 3). Understanding these symbolic uses of knowledge helps make sense, Boswell (2009, 35), contends of the 'puzzle of research use' where there is often a gap between organisational rhetoric of valuing research and the marginalisation of the more instrumental use of research in practice.

To put these issues of research and policing in context, the next section sets out the nature of police-academic collaboration in Scotland before going to track the interplay between research, reform and the different uses of knowledge which have emerged over the course of the reform journey.

2. The research context: SIPR, police-academic collaboration and the production of instrumental knowledge

To understand the ways in which researchers have interacted with the police service in Scotland in relation to reform, it is important to place these relationships within the broader context of police-academic collaboration. Engel and Henderson (2014) have sketched out a typology of different forms of police academic partnership that include individuals researchers working directly with police agencies and an academic unit within a single university working with multiple police agencies. But there is third form, involving collaborations of researchers across academic institutions working directly with police agencies. Engel and Henderson argue that it is this third type that 'will be most effective at advancing evidence-based practices in policing agencies' because it provides the capacity and capability for long term engagement in programmes of collaborative research and which, they suggest, is best exemplified by the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR).

The origins of SIPR lie in the early 2000s when the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland (ACPOS) met with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to indicate their interest in supporting a research centre on policing in Scotland. This interest in supporting greater collaborative research activity between university researchers and the police service had partly been prompted by the exposure of senior officers in Scotland to developments in England and Wales. Applied policing research south of the border appeared to enjoy a relatively high profile, with strong links between some universities and police forces and an active Police Research Group at the Home Office. In Scotland, by contrast, research on policing appeared to be fragmented across universities; relationships between the academic community and the 8 Scottish police forces were ad hoc and infrequent; and the extent to which research findings informed discussions about policy and practice were negligible (SFC, 2017).

Against this background, Fyfe was invited to lead a small group of academics on behalf of Scotland's universities to work with ACPOS to design a policing research institute. In 2006 a proposal was accepted by the Scottish Funding Council for a Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR) based on a consortium of 13 universities working in partnership with ACPOS. SIPR was formally established in 2007 with funding provided by SFC, ACPOS and the 13 universities to invest in capacity building, new research and knowledge exchange. Furthermore, it was through SIPR that the two authors first began working together: Fyfe as the founding Director of SIPR and Richardson (then an Assistant Chief Constable in Lothian and Borders Police) as one of two representatives of ACPOS on SIPR's Executive Committee.

The vision underpinning SIPR was one strongly informed by an instrumentalist view of knowledge. Reflecting a wider movement around evidence-based policy making which had come to the fore in the UK in late 1990s, SIPR offered the prospect of building an evidence base to inform policing policy and practice in Scotland. From a policing perspective, the kind of research SIPR would undertake was framed largely in terms of a 'problem-solving' paradigm, providing a mix of descriptive, explanatory and predictive knowledge that would provide key insights

into what works in policing. To be sure, much of the early research undertaken by SIPR researchers did attempt to deliver just such a problem-solving approach, with projects examining issues ranging from community policing and the policing of the night-time economy to the interactions between young people and the police and the use of DNA in volume crime investigations (see SIPR, 2008). In practice, however, this instrumentalist vision of policing research soon encountered a range of broader challenges regarding the instrumental use of research evidence to inform policy and practice, challenges that are by no means specific to policing. Research outcomes are often messy, ambiguous and contradictory so offer little precise guidance on 'what works'. There may also be a lack of organisational support for research-based change and cultural resistance to research and its use (Fyfe, 2017). As Weisburd and Neyroud (2010) have also observed there is often a structural disconnect between research and practice in policing:

'The police operate in a reality in which decisions must be made quickly. And issues of finance and efficiency can be as important as effectiveness. But academic policing research generally ignores these aspects of the police world, often delivering results long after they have relevance, and many times focusing on issues that police managers have little interest in' (p. 5)

Against this background, much of SIPR's focus has been on knowledge exchange as much as knowledge creation. Challenging the simplistic assumption that interactions between researchers and practitioners merely involves research evidence being packed into knowledge 'products' and transferred to recipients capable of using them, SIPR has created institutionalised arrangements in which chief police officers and academics regularly meet to discuss research needs of the police service and opportunities for collaboration. SIPR therefore exemplified the call made by Weisburd and Neyroud (2011, p.15) for a shared academic practitioner infrastructure in which there is regular and routine engagement around the nature and value of the research evidence based for policing, helping secure a culture of engagement and a commitment to the co-production of research between the police and academic communities (Fyfe and Wilson, 2012; Fyfe, 2017).

3. Developing a policy for police reform: symbolic knowledge and the search for 'epistemic authority'

It was in the context of these relationships that in January 2011 SIPR was approached by the police service to assist with examining the policy options for police reform. As mentioned above the background to this was the decision by the Scottish Government to explore the scope for a 'sustainable policing model' in the face of a looming budget cuts triggered by the economic crisis of 2007-8. Involving a team of civil servants and seconded police officers based in the Scottish Government the initial focus of the sustainable policing project was on 3 options: retaining the existing 8 forces but requiring enhanced collaboration; creating 3 or 4 larger regional forces

through mergers; and establishing a new national police force. From an historical perspective, exploration of these different options might not seem that radical. The history of modern policing in Scotland (like that of England and Wales) is punctuated by periods when local constabularies have been merged to create larger regional police forces. In the 1850s, for example, there were over 90 local forces in Scotland but only half this number 100 years later. By the early 1970s the number of forces had halved again to 22 and by 1975 there were just 8 forces aligned with the boundaries of new regional authorities. Given this trajectory, consideration of the merger of these 8 forces to create 3 or 4 larger regional forces or a single national police force might seem like the inevitable end point in a seemingly unrelenting process of force amalgamations. Indeed, many observers of Scottish policing over the last 15 years have remarked on a 'long centralising drift' (Walker, 2000: 1919), an inexorable movement in 'an ever more centralised direction' (Donnelly and Scott, 2010: 106) and of 'creeping centralism' (Fyfe, 2011: 186). But, as is discussed elsewhere (Terpstra and Fyfe, 2014), the creation of a national police force was far from inevitable. It reflected a very particular set of circumstances (a 'window of opportunity') in which the 'problem' of sustainable policing became coupled with a set of policy options and a political environment that enabled change to happen.

Policy entrepreneurs and expert knowledge

It was as part of the process of identifying policy options for police reform, that SIPR came to play an important role as a provider of expert knowledge. This occurred in a context where in January 2011, the Sustainable Policing Project team was relocated from Scottish Government offices to the Scottish Police College, and leadership of the project was handed to Richardson, now Deputy Chief Constable of Scotland's largest police force, Strathclyde Police. Symbolically and substantively, this was a significant event. It suggested a shift in the centre of gravity of the police reform process: rather than reform being done 'to' the police by government, reform was now being done 'with' the police. It also placed Richardson in a powerful role. Not only was he now director of the team based at the Scottish Police College, he effectively became a 'policy entrepreneur' (Kingdon, 2003: 179) through leading the assessment of the options for a new structure would best deliver an efficient and effective police force for the future by working in ways which were located outside the traditional structures of police policy-making in Scotland. Richardson was not acting on behalf of the ACPOS (Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, the established body which represents senior officers at a national level) but negotiating directly with political elites over the options for reform. A large number of police officers were drafted into the project team as 'professional experts' focusing on how the different options for reform might affect 'functional areas', including local policing, criminal investigation, and specialist operations. In addition Richardson commissioned SIPR to undertake a 'rapid evidence review' to examine the key findings from research on the mergers and restructuring of police organizations.

Led by Fyfe, the review drew together a wide body of research and 'grey literature' to assess the relationships between police force size, structure and performance,

and the identification of the risks and lessons learned from past experiences of organizational change (a version of the report was subsequently published as Mendel, Fyfe and den Heyer, 2017) The review found no compelling evidence regarding the optimal size or structure of a police force. In fact, strong arguments can be made for both 'small is beautiful' (in terms of an emphasis on local priorities and close oversight by elected officials) and for 'consolidation' (in terms of achieving greater efficiency, the availability of resources to deal with major challenges and the capacity to deal with more complex issues, such as organized crime, terrorism and cyber). The review also found that the available evidence on police mergers is limited and of variable quality. At the time the review was undertaken there were, with the exception of Denmark, no attempts at systematic evaluations of the impact of mergers on police activity and public confidence and much of the evidence that did relate to force amalgamations was quite equivocal about its impact. Rarely was the research evidence of sufficient quality to provide a clear and robust answer to the questions of interest to the Sustainable Policing Project team about the effects of mergers on the delivery of local policing, the provision of specialist services, or governance and accountability. What the review did highlight, however, were the risks associated with mergers. There was evidence from the UK that previous amalgamations had led to decline in public confidence with new organizations seen as being out of touch with local communities (Brain, 2010). This was echoed in Finland where Vitra (2002) argued that reforms around community policing ran into problems because of a lack of new resources and insufficient training and education of officers to deal with new tasks. In Denmark too, Holmberg highlighted problems with the merger of 54 police districts into 12 which included overestimating the capacity of the police to adapt to change, a fall in citizens' confidence in policing, and a perception among partner agencies that the police had become more hierarchical and centralized (Holmberg, 2013).

Although the evidence review had indicated the lack of compelling evidence for mergers of police organisations and highlighted some significant risks, the report of the Sustainable Policing Project delivered in March 2011 was unequivocal in its support of a national police force. The report concluded that this option 'provides the greatest opportunity to manage change, drive efficiency and in delivering efficiency when the change is complete', while the current 8 forces model 'represents the opposite' (Scottish Government, 2011a: 5). This argument was reinforced by an Outline Business Case that claimed a national structure will generate savings of over £100 million a year (or 10% of the annual police budget) without the need to reduce police officer numbers. The combination of this professional endorsement for a national police force and the supportive financial arguments set out in the Outline Business Case added considerably to the political momentum for a decision in favour of a single police service for Scotland. That decision eventually came a few months later in September 2011 following fresh elections to the Scottish Parliament which had returned a majority SNP Government.

Police reform and the legitimizing and substantiating functions of knowledge

At an instrumental level, the substance of the rapid evidence review produced for the Sustainable Policing project would appear to have had little immediate influence on the course of the policy debate around police reform in Scotland. It had offered no compelling evidence in favour of a national force and had highlighted some important risks associated with processes of merger and restructuring. But its significance in the process needs to be seen more in terms of its symbolic (rather than instrumental) value, providing both legitimizing and substantiating knowledge that fed into the decision-making process. As Boswell (2009) observes, one of the insights of the neo-institutionalist literature is that organisations need to secure legitimacy from other key actors in their environment and that can be achieved through their 'talk' and decisions rather than just their outputs. The very act of commissioning 'expert knowledge' through research then becomes a way of enhancing legitimacy by signalling the authority and validity of certain organisational decisions and processes in ways which meet with wider public and political expectations of what appropriate behaviour should be. This is particularly important when organisations are operating in what Boswell refers to as 'an unstable environment' where there is 'epistemic uncertainty' about the future of an organisation and where there is a degree of risk involved in decision making given the lack of detailed understanding of what the longer term consequences of decisions might be. Expert knowledge, Boswell, contends, also provides a substantiating function by helping give 'scientific' authority to a preferred course of action, particularly where the debate about policy options centres on technical issues rather than on values.

Viewed through the lens of legitimizing and substantiating knowledge, the importance of SIPR's engagement with the Sustainable Policing Project and the production of the Evidence Review becomes clearer. By demonstrating access to expert information through an engagement with SIPR and by devoting resources to gathering information by commissioning the evidence review, the Sustainable Policing Project was enhancing the legitimacy of its approach as well as generating substantiating knowledge for its policy preferences. The absence of compelling evidence to support one particular position on force size and the ability to construct arguments that would mitigate risks associated with mergers highlighted in the review, provided the Sustainable Policing Project with important legitimizing and substantiating evidence in a highly unstable policy environment. Police reform was a fiercely contested issue with significant differences of political opinion, disagreements among Scotland's chief police officers and no clear public support for change. In terms of party politics, the Scottish National Party had made clear its support for radical reform as early as October 2010 when the then leader of the SNP, Alex Salmond, declared that the party would put 'bobbies before boundaries' (a thinly veiled reference to the way police forces in England and Wales were responding to the financial crisis by reducing the numbers of their officers). Scotland, Salmond contended, would follow a different path by maintaining the number of officers but reduce costs by reducing the number of police forces and therefore removing the duplication. At the May 2011 elections for the Scottish Parliament, police reform

became an important area of policy difference between the political parties: while the SNP, Labour and Conservatives indicated an appetite for reform (although not explicitly endorsing a national police force), the Liberal Democrats strongly opposed to any change from the status quo, championing the localism of the 8 force structure.

These political differences were mirrored in the professional differences among the chief police officers in Scotland. Early on in the debate the Chief Constable of Strathclyde Police publicly committed himself to a national force, while 4 other Chief Constables strongly endorsed the regional model and the remaining 3 chief officers remained largely silent on the matter. These divisions were important because they effectively left ACPOS, the body that represented chief police officers in Scotland, marginalised in the reform process. In terms of wider public opinion, the results of a Scottish Government public consultation indicated that there was no appetite for change and there were a range of concerns. There was very limited support for a national force (less than 10% of respondents favoured this option) with most responses favouring a regional structure and a substantial minority commenting in the lack of detailed information on which to make a decision (Scottish Government, 2011b). The consultation also highlighted anxieties about a national structure, including concerns that it would draw resources away from more rural and remote areas and concentrate these in the central belt.

In this contested policy environment, the expert knowledge provided by SIPR became important as a way of providing a degree of 'ritualistic assurance' that decision-making was being undertaken in a considered way and aimed to help reduce some of the 'epistemic uncertainty' (p. 70) over one of the most radical changes to policing in Scotland for over 100 years

4. Evaluating police reform in a 'hot climate': linking instrumental, legitimizing and substantiating knowledge

On the 1st April the new national force, Police Scotland, became operational but very quickly became the focus of a fierce media and political debate. The Scottish Government maintained that the new force would strengthen connections between the police and local communities and end the postcode lottery of access to specialist policing resources. Critics, by contrast, maintained that 'a one size fits all approach to policing' was emerging with a strong focus on enforcement and a significant local democratic deficit (see Fyfe, 2016). By the end of its first year of operation these two contrasting narratives had become even more entrenched and, to use Loader and Spark's (2011) phrase, was increasingly being carried out in a 'hot climate' of growing politicization and media debate. To be sure, Scottish Government and Police Scotland attempted to frame the achievements of the new national force in the positive terms of a New Public Management discourse of enhanced efficiency, effectiveness and 'benefits realisation'. In their Post-implementation Benefits review, for example, Police Scotland (2014) provided a detailed self-assessment of their perceived progress towards improved ability to deliver local community and policing priorities, improved access to specialist resources, and improved

collaborative working with partners. But a rather different narrative continued to be articulated in the media and among politicians opposed to reform which focused on a shifting 'culture of control' (Garland, 2001; Fyfe, 2016). Against a background of important changes to the way policing was delivered, including the introduction of a performance management system for policing in Scotland characterized by a strong focus on enforcement-related key performance indicators, a significant increase in the number of stop/searches being carried out across the country, and a decision to allow armed officers to be deployed on routine patrol, a media and political discourse developed around what was dubbed the 'Strathclydification of policing'. Commentators began to frame the creation of Police Scotland in terms of a 'takeover' by Strathclyde Police (by far the largest of the legacy forces) rather than a 'merger' of eight forces. This was partly attributed to the appointment of the former Chief Constable of Strathclyde Police, Sir Stephen House, to the position of Chief Constable of Police Scotland but further evidence to support this contention included the adoption of a policing style and set of priorities that reflected the Strathclyde approach, including the widespread use of stop and search and proactive police interventions, a shift away from community engagement and preventative activities, and a focus on violent crime.

Reconfiguring the research context: SIPR post-reform

Against this background, SIPR had established a programme of research in order to track the impact and implications of police reform. This included a collaborative PhD studentship with Police Scotland on the effects of reform on local policing (Hail, 2017); a longitudinal social attitudes survey tracking public awareness of police reform and its impact on public confidence; and international comparative research comparing and contrasting the reform journey in Scotland with that in the Netherlands which had also merged its regional forces to create a national police in 2013 (Terpstra and Fyfe, 2014).

Significantly, however, the institutional context in which this research was being carried out was also changing. Prior to reform, SIPR was a strategic partnership between universities and ACPOS but ACPOS disappeared along with the legacy forces given the reduction in chief police officers from over 40 when there were 8 forces to just eleven within Police Scotland. For a short period, SIPR therefore became a partnership between universities and Police Scotland with Fyfe remaining the Director and Richardson, who has now one of four Deputy Chief Constables in the national force, the senior police representative on SIPR's executive committee. However, the new Scottish Police Authority decided to join SIPR as an additional strategic partner alongside Police Scotland. The Scottish Police Authority (SPA) is an entirely new organisation that replaced the regional police boards and has responsibility for resourcing the police service, supporting continuous improvement, and holding the chief constable to account. Like Police Scotland, SPA's interests in research were largely framed in instrumental terms and desire for evidence-based policy making in policing. But in a context in which policing had become increasingly politicised, SPA's research priorities were

increasingly focused on those issues around which there was greatest media and political interest, including stop and search and the deployment of armed officers on routine patrol. Accessing and using expert knowledge in these areas had important symbolic as well as instrumental dimensions. Both stop and search and armed policing were highly contested policy domains in which Police Scotland maintained a strong position regarding the appropriateness of their approach. In relation to stop and search, they robustly defended their strategy in terms of its effectiveness in combatting knife crime (see Murray and Harkin, 2016), while the deployment of armed officers was viewed as an operational matter for the Chief Constable in the context of his professional assessment of the risk to Scotland's communities. Faced with a situation in which the credibility of the SPA was being questioned by the media and politicians the process of commissioning research from SIPR into both stop and search and armed policing to inform wider their scrutiny of these topics served important legitimating and substantiating functions. It sent a signal to external stakeholders in the wider political system and the public that SPA were using expert knowledge to help reduce uncertainty in an unstable environment of strongly conflicting views but also assisted in underpinning alternative policy preferences in these areas. In relation to stop and search, for example, SPA was able to use the evidence to indicate that if used appropriately, this tactic can help detect and prevent criminality, but that it is not possible to draw simply cause and effect relations between increasing stop and search and falling rates of violent crime and there are significant risks that it could also cause 'a loss of confidence within the community which could undermine the principle of policing by consent and damage the ability of the police to work in partnership with the community to tackle crime' (Scottish Police Authority, 2014: 4). Similarly, in relation to the decisions about the use of armed officers on routine patrol, research evidence highlighted the importance of gaining community consent for policy shifts of this kind (Scottish Police Authority, 2015). In both these areas, there have been significant policy shifts driven in part by the contributions of expert knowledge: the scale of the use of stop and search has significantly declined and the policy on armed officers has reverted to the position to prior to police reform.

Evaluating police reform

It was also against the background of this increasingly frenzied political and media debate about Police Scotland (including a vote of no confidence in the Justice Minister in the Scottish Parliament triggered by the row over armed policing), that the Scottish Government commissioned an independent evaluation of police reform. SIPR was part of a consortium that successfully bid to undertake this work which began in February 2015 and runs for 4 years. Viewed in terms of Boswell's (2009) typology, the evaluation exemplifies the legitimizing role of knowledge use by the Scottish Government in terms of being seen to respond to an issue that had, given the controversies surrounding Police Scotland, been framed as requiring political action. But the evaluation also has clear instrumental and substantiating functions too. From an instrumental perspective, the research has been carefully

framed by the Government as an assessment of progress towards achieving its three strategic objectives for reform in terms of reduced duplication of back office services; improved access to national capacity and specialist expertise; and strengthened connections with communities. The evaluation is therefore seen as an opportunity by the Government to provide some objective evidence with respect to achieving each of these aims and to help Police Scotland deliver these goals. Based on interviews with a range of national key informants in Police Scotland, Scottish Government, SPA and other criminal justice agencies as well as series of geographical case studies involving local policing teams, local politicians, community groups and the public, the evaluation has so far published two main reports (SIPR et al, 2016 and 2017). These reports make clear, however, that it is not possible to reach any definitive conclusions in relation to whether the aims of reform have been achieved but it has been able to highlight areas where there are continuing challenges and a lack of evidence. In relation to reducing duplication, for example, there is evidence of significant progress being made towards rationalising service provisions but this is having some negative impacts on the resourcing of local policing teams. In terms of accessing specialist support and national capacity, there is some evidence of improvements in this area but also a perception among local officers that the process had become more bureaucratic than the situation prior to reform. In relation to the third aims of reform of strengthening connections with communities, there were some positive views expressed by community organisations and the public but also an awareness that community-oriented approaches are under pressure from other demands on policing.

Although these research conclusions may seem somewhat equivocal, they have played an important substantiating function in terms of informing policy preferences in relation to the next stages of reform. This is most clearly evident in relation to the debate about localism and the consequences of centralized, national police structures for local policing and for relationships with local communities and local government. While supporters of reform have consistently claimed that a national police force can enhance local policing (by, for example, improving local access to specialist expertise and resources) critics have highlighted the risk of negative impacts such as the erosion of local democratic oversight and a loss of local knowledge among officers. Against this background, both Police Scotland and the SPA have acknowledged the importance of a re-balancing of central-local relationships within the national force (see SPA, 2016). The evaluation of police reform has been able to substantiate that policy preference through highlighting the negative but often unintended consequences of this centralising tendencies within Police Scotland. For example, in relation to the creation of national specialist units has typically involved re-deploying officers from local policing teams but without replacing them. The depletion of local policing teams then leads to a focus on responding to calls for service due to a lack of capacity for more community-oriented activities. This has led to a clear recommendation from the evaluation of police reform that there would be benefits to be gained in terms of public confidence and efficient and effective policing from a renewed and refreshed commitment to local policing (SIPR, et al 2017).

5. Conclusions

This paper has focused on the interplay between research and reform in the context of the decision by the Scottish Government in 2011 to merge Scotland eight regional police forces and create a national police service. Drawing theoretical inspiration from the work of Boswell (2008, 2009), the analysis has been informed by consideration of the different uses by bureaucratic organisations of ‘expert knowledge’. This has typically been framed in terms of the instrumental value of research, exemplified by the interest in evidence-based policy making. But knowledge can also play important symbolic functions both as a means of legitimizing particular decisions and as a way of substantiating policy preferences. Policing research and, in particular, research on police reform, offers an illustration of these instrumental as well as symbolic functions as organisations drawn on expert knowledge to bolster their credibility and pursue policy goals. Against a background of an increasing commitment to ‘centralizing forces’ (Fyfe, Terpstra, and Tops, 2013) in northern and western Europe involving macro-level reforms to the structure of police organisations, the role of research in informing these major policy decisions and of being used to evaluate their consequences will be of growing significance (see too Devroe, Edwards and Ponsaers, 2017). Indeed, as governments embrace ‘the rationalized myth of coordination and integration of resources as a means of cutting spending and increasing value’ (Giacomantonio: 2015: 55) in police organisations, one might expect a greater interest in the instrumental functions of knowledge in terms of understanding ‘what works’, particularly as this such a contested policy area. But, as the experience of Scotland indicates, it is the symbolic functions of knowledge that appear to be of as much, if not greater, importance in the political and policy decision-making processes associated with police reform.

This has important implications for wider developments in police-academic collaboration and for thinking more generally about the politics of criminological research (Loader and Sparks, 2011; McAra, 2016). Police forces are both ‘action’ organisations with interests in instrumental knowledge to improve their outputs and ‘political’ organisations that derive their legitimacy from their ‘talk’ and decisions where they need to conform to the expectations of external stakeholders. From this perspective, the increasing engagement of police organisations with researchers while partly driven by instrumental concerns with understanding ‘what works’ and the development of evidence-based policing (Lum and Koper, 2017), is also about signalling the ‘authority, validity or legitimacy of organisational decisions, structures and practices’ (Boswell, 2009: 61). For academic researchers working on policing, this closer collaboration with police organisations brings many new research opportunities but it also creates challenges in terms of how to ‘sustain the requisite level of critical distance from emergent consumers of knowledge’ and risks associated with academic discourse being ‘absorbed into (and potentially “tamed” by) key policy and practice networks whose behaviour we are attempting to influence and impact’ (McAra, 2016: 767-8). Reflecting on how criminologists address these concerns, McAra suggests there is a need to resist the potential for ‘clientelism’ and ‘knowledge patronage’ (785) and work with both institutional leaders and

with practitioners on the ground. Criminologists, she contends, need to be both 'transcendent' (standing above politics and seeing the bigger picture of systemic functioning) and 'situated' (by engaging with practitioner groups and understanding their day-to-day routines and practices). In many ways, the journey described in this paper around the relationship between research, police reform and expert knowledge has attempted to navigate just such a course between 'transcendent' and 'situated' research. At the start of this journey, research was focused on an attempt to understand the broad landscape of police reform and the opportunities and risks associated with different configurations of police organisational boundaries (Mendel, Fyfe, and den Heyer, 2017); four years into the reform, the focus is now on using research to understand what reform means for police officers, citizens and partner organisations in their routine interactions and encounters in local communities (Hail, 2017; SIPR et al, 2017; Fyfe, 2018). In this way 'expert knowledge' is, we would contend, being mobilized in the debate about police reform in ways which (to paraphrase Christie, 1971) are as much about 'problem raising' as about 'problem solving'.

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