



# Unpacking the Theory–Practice Nexus in Basic Police Education

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## Abstract

A meaningful connection between theory and practice is crucial for strengthening education quality, especially in professional education programmes such as police education. Meanwhile, the increasing academisation of police education puts more focus on the theoretical and academic courses. This challenges the practical relevance of police education. How the relationships between theory and practice are forged depends partly on educators' conceptualisations of theory and practice and its implications for the teaching and learning design. We therefore asked Norwegian police educators how they understand the concepts *theory* and *practice* in police education, and how they plan and facilitate learning activities to create a meaningful relationship between the two. We conducted face-to-face interviews with police educators from different knowledge domains. In all cases, a simplistic, dichotomous relationship between notions of theory and practice is rejected. Instead, we found multiple relationships, each with different underlying assumptions about how it supports students' professional development.

## Keywords

Theory–practice nexus, police educators, academisation, police knowledge domains

## 1. Introduction

The increasing professionalisation of police education challenges the practical relevance of police education and the connection between theory and professional practice (Karp et al., 2020). The relationship between theory and practice in professional education has been a topic of extensive research (Grimen, 2008; Hatlevik, 2014; Heggen & Smeby, 2012). Different aspects of this relationship and the fear of study programmes becoming less relevant to the

professional practice have been manifested within a variety of professional education programmes, including teacher, real estate, nurse and police education (Aas, 2016; Birkeland et al., 2016; Dahl, 2012; Halmrast et al., 2013; Hovdenak & Risør, 2015; Mo & Gjerde, 2019; Nolan, 2018; Upton, 1999). A basic assumption in such studies is, however, that overcoming dichotomous relations between theory and practice is crucial for strengthening education quality, which is a prominent idea in contemporary education policy.

There are indications that the tensions between theoretical and practical knowledge are particularly strong in police education, at least in Norway (Hove, 2012; Lagestad, 2013). This has mostly been studied from the students' perspective. Norwegian police students view theory as less important in education than students in other professional education programmes such as nurse or teacher education (Wernø & Smeby, 2018). Existing research reveals an interesting paradox: Police students say they want their educators to relate theory to police practice, but the same students also undervalue theory-loaded social sciences because they perceive them as lacking practical relevance (Lagestad, 2013). Both researchers and practitioners have been seeking answers to this paradox. Part of the explanation has been sought in police culture, which is reported to be sceptical towards 'book learning' (Lofthus 2009; Cockcroft, 2020; Reiner, 2010; Lagestad, 2013; Sørensen, 2010). Another explanation is the perceived lack of relevance in police science research, which should be connected more closely to police practice. However, this paradox might also reflect the fact that police students and their educators have different understandings of the concepts theory and practice, which will lead to a misunderstanding between them. This paper therefore explores the police educators' perspective, and how educators perceive and understand the concepts *theory* and *practice* in their teaching and learning. The police educators' perspective on the theory–practice nexus has decisive practical implications for how they facilitate students' possibility to learn.

A key challenge with concepts such as theory and practice is that they are abstract and they need contextual factors to shape their exact meaning. Consequently, they may refer to various aspects of the (police) education process and take on different roles to aid students' learning (see Halvorsen, 2020, for the same discussion in teacher education). Such differences in conceptualisation may be informed by different knowledge domains (Jensen et al., 2012), different understandings of what theory is (Kvernbekk, 2012), or the perceived role of theory and practice in student learning (Risan, 2020). These understandings have practical implications for how teaching is conducted. For example, confusion might arise if educators who are co-planning a course refer to different things while using the same terms such as theory and practice.

Against this backdrop, we argue that it is important to study empirically how police educators conceptualise theory and practice, and the implications that these conceptualisations have for the design of teaching and learning activities. We focus on the Norwegian police education context, where the empirical material has been collected, but we build our theoretical perspectives on the professional educational literature in general (Knorr Cetina, 2009; Nerland & Jensen, 2012). We start by outlining relevant literature on knowledge orientations in the police organisation before presenting our theoretical and analytical approach. This is an important background to understand the points of view of the police educators we explore empirically. We then sketch Norwegian basic police education's empirical context before describing our methodological approach and results. The paper concludes with a discussion in which we discuss our findings' implications for both police education practice, specifically, as professional education in general, and for the field of police education research.

## 2. Knowledge orientations in the police organisation

Finding a balance between police education's practical relevance and a research-based knowledge perspective always has been central to the development of Norwegian police education. Like many professional education programmes, police education has undergone a historical development in which the profession's knowledge base has become increasingly diverse and multidisciplinary. Professionalisation refers to the process in which the education programme is made relevant to the profession. Concepts and conceptual structures in education and learning are based on an analysis of vocational tasks and practice. Professionalisation of education content, working methods and forms of assessment can be viewed as a prerequisite for relevant professional education (Hiim, 2015; Sylte, 2013). Simultaneously, police educators have faced increasing demands to develop education programmes that combine an emphasis on research and academic rigour with professional relevance and practical training (Politihøgskolen, 2018). Academicisation (or 'academic drift') refers to a process in which scientific knowledge domains are expected to strengthen students' professional qualifications (Harwood, 2010; Terum & Smeby, 2014). These processes of academicisation and professionalisation of police education also increased the diversity among police educators. Police educators come from different professional and disciplinary contexts, eliciting diversity in concepts and conceptual structures on theory and practice (Terpstra & Schaap, 2022).

The literature about knowledge cultures in the police realm, describes a distinction between street knowledge and analytical, general, academic and scientific knowledge – exactly the dichotomy that practitioners have questioned (Gundhus, 2013; Reuss-Ianni, 1993). Aas (2016) described how Norwegian police officers most often referred to the police knowledge domain as 'healthy common sense'. Their practical knowledge is what police practitioners view as most important for their job performance. A similar, but slightly different terminology distinguishes between evidence-oriented knowledge-based police work and professional-oriented knowledge-based police work (Hestehave, 2021; Wathne, 2020). The former uses analyses, models, and empirical facts; is connected closely with intelligence; and can include applied, scientific and policy research as important knowledge resources. However, the professional-oriented form uses police discretion, experience, and contextual understanding as the most important knowledge sources. This is intertwined with two levels of professional understanding within the police: standardised and experience-based professionalism. While the former is understood as a 'thin' form of professionalism characterised by formal knowledge and competence acquired from theory and analyses, the latter is understood as a 'thick' or 'rich' form of professionalism, characterised by knowledge that is 'concrete and vivid, based on gut feeling, intuition, loyalty and discretion' (Ellefsen et al., 2021; Hestehave, 2021). These understandings might contribute to explain Gundhus's (2013) notion that the academisation of police education paradoxically contributes to a reduction in professional independence among police. Far-reaching academisation, indeed, might threaten the thick, experience-based form of professionalism, which would not be served by a critical and reflective attitude (see also Handegård & Berg, 2020).

To sum up, existing research on knowledge orientations in the police organisation illustrates how different perceptions of theoretical and practical knowledge's role hold concrete and significant implications for how police work and professional qualifications are understood (a.o. Cockcroft, 2020; Hestehave, 2021; Loftus, 2009; Reiner, 2010). These studies also have highlighted that these perceptions are contextual, and that the specific kind of work that police officers conduct holds implications for what forms of knowledge are privileged. However, few studies have examined these themes in the context of education planning.

We contribute to existing research by examining campus-based police educators' accounts, steering our analytical focus toward how police educators conceptualise the concepts of theory and practice, and how these conceptualisations inform their approaches to education design. In existing research on professional education, much emphasis has been placed on the relationship between campus-based and workplace-based education, but less attention has been directed toward how theory/practice relationships are constructed in teaching activities that occur on campus. This is important to investigate, given that police students (in the Norwegian context) spend two-thirds of their education on campus; therefore, their campus-based education is likely to shape how they perceive the relationship between theory and practice significantly, and how they operationalise this relationship in their later practice as qualified police officers.

### 3. Theoretical perspectives on knowledge relations in professional education

The continuing disconnect between theoretical and practical knowledge, both in police education and in professional education more generally, points to the need for a nuanced understanding of how different relations can be constructed between knowledge domains to support student learning. Several authors have criticised a dichotomous conceptualisation of the relationship between theory and practice, instead emphasising that theory and practice can enter into different forms of interrelationships in the context of professional education (e.g., Grimen, 2008; Kvernbekk, 2012). How such relationships are forged depends on several factors, including educators' conceptualisations of concepts such as theory and practice, but also the notions of *research-based* and *experience-based knowledge*, how these conceptualisations inform actual teaching, and the specific content knowledge and broader knowledge domains upon which specific teaching activities are based (see, e.g., Hatlevik, 2014; Hermansen, 2020).

In professional education, a general distinction can be drawn between disciplinary and professional knowledge domains (Muller, 2009). Disciplinary knowledge domains are typically organised according to a self-referential logic that emphasises conceptual coherence. Examples of such domains include sociology, criminology or history. By contrast, professional knowledge domains tend to be organised around the conventions of professional practice. Consequently, multiple knowledge domains co-exist in professional education. Ample literature on professional education has addressed how this epistemic pluralism can significantly shape students' opportunities for learning and professional development (e.g., Afdal & Nerland, 2014; Hatlevik & Smeby, 2015; Hermansen, 2020). In this article, we analytically foreground how this epistemic pluralism can generate multiple understandings of the concepts theory and practice.

We adopt a relational perspective on professional knowledge (Knorr Cetina, 2009; Nerland & Jensen, 2012). A basic assumption is that the different knowledge domains represented in police education are characterised by specific knowledge cultures (Knorr Cetina, 1999), understood as discipline- or profession-specific ways of approaching, developing and safeguarding knowledge. It follows that notions of theory and practice are likely to be informed by police educators' associations with specific knowledge domains. For example, the concept of theory can refer both to a well-articulated theory that aims to describe causality and prescribe professional practice, and to ways of 'seeing the world' through specific conceptual lenses that can shape professional reasoning (Kvernbekk, 2012). In multidisciplinary education programs such as police education, multiple understandings of theory

and practice are likely to co-exist. In the empirical analysis, we therefore examine this diversity and how the notions of theory and practice are conceptualized in the context of different knowledge domains.

A relational perspective on knowledge also assumes that the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge cannot be taken for granted, but are actively constructed by teachers and students (Hermansen, 2020; Risan, 2020). Rather than conceive the relationship between theory and practice as a generic 'gap' that must be 'bridged', analytical attention is paid to the different kinds of relations that can be constructed between them, and how these relations inform how educators attempt to support students' professional development. In the empirical analysis, we not only examine how police educators conceptualize theory and practice, but also how they envisage the relationship between these two notions. For example, do police educators describe theory and practice as mutually constitutive? If yes, how does this relationship facilitate student learning? By contrast, do police educators describe tensions or conflicts between theoretical and practical knowledge? If yes, how are these tensions addressed as they work to support student learning? Do conceptualizations of the theory/practice relationship vary across learning activities? Such questions follow from our theoretical perspective and have informed our analytical reading of the data material.

#### **4. Empirical context: Police education in Norway**

Norway has one national police education institution: the Norwegian Police University College. The institution has several locations, all of which offer the same basic police education curriculum. The police education bachelor programme currently takes three years, where the students have campus-based education in year one and three, while they spend their year two in workplace practice. The Norwegian case is well-suited to explore the theory-practice nexus in the different knowledge domains in police education, because police education in Norway became a bachelor programme as early as in 1994. The programme is grounded strongly in the study of law, while in other countries, basic police education has been rooted primarily in criminology. Over the years, other academic disciplines have appeared as well, such as psychology, sociology, and history (Ellefsen et al., 2021). It consequently experienced a pressure towards greater academisation and professionalisation of the curriculum over a long time. The balance between research-based and experience-based knowledge is described as the most dominant fault line and persistent contradiction in police education (Aas, 2019). We therefore expect to find a variety of conceptions of theory and practice among Norwegian police educators.

#### **5. Method**

In this article, we explore how police educators understand the concepts of theory and practice in their teaching and learning. We conducted interviews with police educators teaching in different courses: three educators teaching social sciences in the course policing and society; four educators in public order policing; and four educators teaching crime investigation. We selected these courses because they represent a heterogeneity of courses in Norwegian police education, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the diversity of conceptualisations associated with the concepts *theory* and *practice*, and of the relationship between such conceptualisations and specific knowledge domains. This was a qualitative research project, and the empirical analysis did not present a statistically generalizable picture of how all educators within these three fields understand forms of professional knowledge. Instead, we made an

analytical explorative contribution by highlighting how multiple conceptualisations of theory and practice exist side-by-side in an education programme, and how this diversity holds implications for how opportunities for learning and professional development are designed.

During the period May–December 2019, we conducted these 11 semi-structured face-to-face interviews lasting around 45 minutes each. Key themes in the interviews included the educators' background and experience, their identification as police educators, and how experience-based/research-based and theoretical/practical the respondents perceived the courses they taught, their teaching activities and the construction of cohesion in the programme as a whole, as well as that between theory and practice.

The interviewed police educators had different academic and professional backgrounds, such as social science, law and police. They all had at least two years teaching experience. For purposes of anonymity, we use 'him/his' regardless of the respondent's gender in presenting our findings, and will not elaborate further on the background of the respondents.

Two of the researchers conducted the interviews, and they conducted the first interview jointly to calibrate the interview guidelines. The other 10 interviews involved just one researcher and one respondent. The study followed Norwegian national ethical standards and received Norwegian Centre for Research Data approval. All respondents were told about how participation in the interviews was voluntary, the study's purpose, how we would use and store the interview data, and that they could withdraw at any time. All respondents work at the Norwegian Police University College, as do the two researchers, although we are employed in different departments. An advantage of this collegiality was that we did not experience problems regarding access to the respondents. However, we are aware that collegiality could influence the interviews or our analyses of the interviews (Raaen, 2018). As a measure to address this, we divided the interviews among the two researchers so that no one interviewed respondents with whom there had been close collaboration in teaching responsibilities. A third author, whose main affiliation is not with Norwegian Police University College, provided an external perspective on the analysis and interpretation of the data.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed in several steps (Peters & Wester, 2007; Flick, 2021). In the first step, all interviews were read repeatedly to obtain an overview of the material. In the second step, the interviews were coded one by one by selecting the different sections about the understandings of the concepts theory and practice in the interviews and classifying these according to the different meanings of *theory*, *theoretical*, *practice*, *practical*, *research-based knowledge* and *experience-based knowledge*. In the third step, we structured and analysed the different meanings, by the dimension 'teaching and learning process – content knowledge' and by course (policing and society, public order policing or crime investigation). We repeated this process of structuring and restructuring back-and-forth several times to get a better understanding of the material.

The theoretical framework showed how disciplinary knowledge domains typically are organised according to a self-referential logic that emphasises conceptual coherence, while professional knowledge domains tend to be organised around the conventions of professional practice. Traditionally are the social science courses within police and society based in the disciplinary knowledge domains, while public order policing and crime investigation are based in the professional knowledge domains. In the next section, we describe how the educators from these different knowledge domains understand the concepts theory and practice, perceive research-based and experience-based knowledge, how they construct different kinds of relations between them, and how these relations inform how educators attempt to support students' professional development.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1 Disciplinary knowledge domains: no contradiction between theory and practice

The respondents teaching in disciplinary knowledge domains (represented by the social science educators in policing and society) described the following conceptualisations of theory and practice as typical in police education: “When I started working here, I learned that everything written in books is theory, and everything one does with the body is practice”. However, the respondents are critical of this distinction, and one of them states that this understanding “creates an incorrect image of both theory and practice”. He stresses their interconnectedness, and the importance of theoretical knowledge in attaining practical skills: “The students should be made aware of the importance of theory in practical assignments”. He emphasised the perspective that you cannot solve practical tasks without having the ability to reflect, and that you need concepts and understanding to do that.

We asked the respondents several questions related to learning and teaching activities to understand whether they perceived their course as mostly theoretically or mostly practically oriented. We found two different perceptions. The first views this course as practically oriented, aimed at students’ ability to reflect on their professional practice: “Students need the social sciences for the practice of police work”. This practical orientation is described as a cognitive activity that underpins police work by strengthening its analytical and strategic character: “Analysing society in a strategic and reflective way is, for me, highly practical”.

In the other perception, the course is viewed as theoretical. This rests on an understanding of practice as a bodily activity or skill:

We do not ask [the students] to apply the knowledge in a practical, bodily sense. Students must reflect on their role as police; they discuss and explain theories.

This perception of practice, when it comes to learning, is described as a kind of physical remembering in the body through which practical skills are automated and turned into tacit knowledge. This differs from the kind of learning characteristic of this knowledge domain. One respondent explains: “In the social science courses, learning is connected to students who read texts and reflect upon them”. Our respondent perceived this as a theoretical activity and concluded that the course is, therefore, theoretically oriented.

### 6.2 Professional knowledge domains: authentic tasks turn theory into practice and vice versa

Both public order policing and crime investigation are seen as part of the professional knowledge domain in the police. We asked the educators in these courses what they perceive as theory in their professional knowledge domain. One respondent replied that “everything in the syllabus is theory”, echoing the notion that written representations of professional practice comprise theory.

With respect to teaching and learning approaches, we found different perceptions among the respondents. Some described public order policing as a theoretical course in which, according to our respondents, “students must acquire knowledge through theory”. Others described public order policing as having both theoretical and practical components:

The practical approach is that police students experience public order policing themselves; the theoretical approach is that police educators explain their own experiences as a police officer to the students.

One respondent pointed out that police educators must have both practical and theoretical competencies: “Police educators with a background as police officers transform theory into practice in the learning activities”. The respondents in crime investigation almost unanimously view their knowledge domain as theoretically oriented in its learning and teaching approaches. One respondent asserted that “both the learning activities and exams are theoretical”. Another respondent elaborated: “The teaching is theoretical. Practice is how the law is applied”. All police educators in this course sought to connect theory and practice in the application of knowledge, but struggled to make the students aware of this.

The students worked together in groups on paper cases, derived from real cases, by using different crime investigation methods. By using such learning activities, the educator fills the teacher role via assessment/supervision. The goal with this approach is that students use theory from the syllabus on various subjects to solve the case, and by doing so, connects theory and practice. One respondent explained: “Students’ ability to apply the theory is important, not only that they can explain and understand the theory”.

Learning activities in the public order policing courses included lectures, paper cases and practical assignments. The respondents cited learning activities as case-based tasks and lectures as theoretically. The use of examples from police practice in lectures was also described as partially theoretical. A narrative of something that happened on a police call is, after all, not the same as the real bodily experience of the same situation. Thus, this was viewed as partially theoretical.

However, assignments in public order policing were seen as mostly practically oriented, but also partially theoretical. The respondents explained: “The students evaluate their [practical] behaviour during the assignments and must refer to theory in their evaluation”. Assignments can be paper-and-pencil assignments, in which students solve a hypothetical (and thus theoretical) case, or they can be physical, in which students ‘play’ a situation or an incident with or without an actor’s help. In this perspective, a practical orientation refers to the experiences of the police students themselves. The public order policing course is practically orientated to the extent that the students must experience things physically in practical assignments. Several respondents asserted that the educators with a police officer background are practically oriented in their teaching, while the police educators with a prosecution lawyer background are theoretically oriented.

### 6.3 A relational perspective on professional knowledge

To look into the construction of the relationships between theory and practice in the police educational context, we asked the respondents about their notions of research-based and experience-based knowledge. Does theory always refer to research-based knowledge and does practice always refer to experience-based knowledge? The constructed connections between notions about content-knowledge and the learning process help us to understand this from a relational perspective (Knorr Cetina, 2009; Nerland & Jensen, 2012).

The educators in the disciplinary knowledge domain of the social sciences perceived their course in ‘policing and society’ as research-based. It is based on social science theories and empirical research. The syllabus originates from the course’s disciplinary tradition, with a social science framework of concepts and theories. In this context, *research-based* is thus perceived as a well-articulated written theory that aims to describe and explain the professional practice (Kvernbekk, 2012). The respondents also described a change in the syllabus over the years, with a shift towards more empirically based research articles. This shift is based on an understanding that one of the respondents explained as: “empirical research is easily connected to the field of police practice”. Research-based knowledge can thus have a theoretical source, or an empirical source – where the latter is connected to practice.

The professional knowledge domain respondents perceived the crime investigation course as both research- and experience-based. All educators pointed to a development towards a more research-centric knowledge base and a clear connection between theory and practice in the course. Part of the course dealing with technical investigation is viewed as completely research-based, closely followed by tactical investigation, which is viewed as research-based to a great extent. The disciplinary basis of the knowledge resources is varied and emerges from both the social and natural sciences. Research-based knowledge is described as knowledge that has been produced based on extensive empirical data and solid research methods.

Police educators in public order policing responded differently in their understanding of the term research-based. Some emphasised that research can be experience-based as well, and a further sentiment was that research often states, as one of the respondents described, “what we already know from practice”. They described the main source of the knowledge base in public order policing as experience-based. They also described the syllabus as comprising “experience-based knowledge”, i.e., texts based on typical practices that are part of police work. Examples include police method descriptions, routine descriptions, sequences of actions, etc.:

In our course, the theories are experience-based. Policing practices can be done in several ways. When a practice is considered as best practice, it becomes theory while it got included in the syllabus.

Experience-based knowledge is according to these respondents both theory and practice. They generally considered that “their own experiences from the field of practice are forming their professional foundation”. Therefore, when our respondents described their course as experience-based, they connected this notion to their own experiences as police officers, i.e., the more experience a police educator has, the stronger the professional foundation, which provides educators with legitimacy and authority in the classroom. However, experience-based knowledge does not, in this context, refer to students’ experiences.

One respondent described experience-based knowledge as “best practice”. Experience-based knowledge refers for example to the different procedures and prescriptions that comprise the crime investigative process. Crime investigation police educators also argue that research sometimes can lead to a change in practice:

I understand research-based knowledge as knowledge that is built upon solid empirical research and that supports how to perform police tasks.

One of the respondents from the social sciences stated explicitly that *experience-based* is perceived as an unclear concept:

All knowledge we have, both conscious and unconscious, is, in essence, experience-based. It’s knowledge from the school of life, so to say. There appears to be no distinction between misconceptions and prejudices on the one hand and experience-based knowledge on the other. If experience-based knowledge is not corrected and discussed, there is a risk of repeating earlier mistakes.

## 7. Discussion

The findings of this study serve to nuance existing research in which the relationship between theory and practice is frequently presented as a generic gap that needs to be bridged. Unlike a conceptualisation of theory and practice as two dichotomous entities, the multiple operationalisations of theory/practice relationships represented in our respondents' accounts point to the considerable didactical and pedagogical discretion that police educators exercise. Rather than treat terms like *theory* and *practice* as a given, these educators fill them with meaning in specific ways that they believe will benefit students' learning. These meanings are informed by police educators' associations with specific knowledge domains as followed from the relational perspective on professional knowledge (Knorr Cetina, 2009; Nerland & Jensen, 2012). Police educators operationalise these understandings in specific types of teaching activities, such as case-based learning that invites students to use theoretical knowledge in crime investigations, or to use concepts and theories to analyse police professional practice in the social science courses. The educators also re-contextualised knowledge domains originally organised around disciplinary traditions. For example, educators reported that they increased the amount of empirical literature in syllabi to strengthen courses' practical relevance.

Our findings illustrate how conceptualisations of theory and practice are shaped significantly by the knowledge domains underlying specific courses. In courses with long disciplinary traditions for organising knowledge around key concepts and theories, such concepts and theories become the main resources for supporting practical police work. In these courses, we observed a professionalisation of a disciplinary knowledge domain, as police educators design their courses in ways to maximise their practical relevance. However, public order policing is a knowledge domain that has historically relied on experience-based knowledge. In this course, practical experience with police work comprises the main resource for the academisation of police education, through which experience-based knowledge is codified and standardised. However, even as this academisation occurs, embodied knowledge remains significant as a source of legitimacy for police educators. Finally, in crime investigation, we observed signs of what has been termed 'practical synthesis' (Grimen, 2008), in which several disciplinary traditions have been combined and integrated to support the practical work of carrying out investigative processes. In each of these examples, experience-based knowledge and research-based knowledge inform each other in mutually constitutive ways, even though they adopt different roles.

A practical implication from these findings for police educations worldwide is that police educators could likely benefit from discussing such conceptualisations more explicitly and turning them into objects of inquiry, both among themselves and with their students. Given the paradox mentioned in our introduction, namely that police students both seek and devalue theoretical knowledge, a potential way forward is to discuss with students explicitly the different roles that theory and research-based knowledge can play in police work, as well as the different ways in which these forms of knowledge can support their professional development. Police educators from different knowledge domains should reflect together on how these conceptualisations and concrete relationships between theory and practice inform their education practice. A better and mutual understanding of the different notions and concrete theory/practice relationships also could function as an inspiration to broaden one's own police education repertoire. This process is not unique for the Norwegian case but will be seen in all police educations that are under the development of more academisation and professionalisation (Terpstra & Schaap, 2022; Møberg, 2020; Rogers & Frevel, 2018). Moreover, discussion on the theory–practice nexus is not unique for police education alone

either. We find the same discussion in all professional educations that underwent an increasing academisation in the last decades. The relational perspective on professional knowledge can help us to move away from a false dichotomous conception on theory and practice, but instead acknowledge that the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge is actively constructed by teachers and students. And that these relationships can take a variety of forms, that in turn influence the possibilities for educators to facilitate students' learning.

A limitation of this article is that we have not examined how actual teaching is conducted in the classroom, or how students respond to and understand these different operationalisations of the concepts theory and practice and the relationship between them. Future research could benefit from investigating this further. Another approach for examining this topic further would be to analyse course literature to examine in more depth the characteristics of theoretical and research-based knowledge and how it is contextualised in relation to police practice. It would be helpful to align these discussions and findings with other professional educations or to conduct an international comparative study to find out similarities and differences among police educations in different countries.

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the perceptions and conceptualisations of theory and practice of Norwegian police educators from different backgrounds, using the relational perspective on professional knowledge (Knorr Cetina, 2009; Nerland & Jensen, 2012). In the empirical analysis, indeed a diversity of understandings of the concepts theory and practice emerged. Police educators in the disciplinary knowledge domain described theoretical knowledge as the concepts and theoretical frameworks associated with the academic discipline of social sciences (Muller, 2009; Knorr Cetina, 1999). They assigned this theoretical knowledge with specific functions in relation to professional police practice. It provides students with tools to reflect upon and analyse police work, and to develop sound strategies for practice. It also has a corrective function, as it serves as a vehicle through which to discuss practice critically and correct mistakes. Theory is viewed as integral to practice, and a dichotomous view of the two concepts was rejected. Teaching activities reflect these conceptualisations, in that tasks for students are designed to enable them to analyse and reflect on professional practice through theoretical concepts. More importantly, reflecting with theoretical concepts is an important part of police practice itself.

In the professional knowledge domain of public order policing, theory is understood as the codified representation of key police practices, in either written or oral form. The relationship constructed here is that practice provides the foundation for theory: 'Theorisation' of the course occurs when best practices are codified and included in the syllabus. This relationship also informs instructors' identity as police educators, as their authority in the classroom is, to a great extent, derived from their experience with practical police work, and their descriptions of this experience form an important basis for how teaching activities are designed. As they bring this experience into the campus setting, a dual dynamic is created, i.e., theorisation occurs as experience-based knowledge is brought into the classroom. Simultaneously, police educators' own experience helps make the course practically oriented. The emphasis on theory vs. practice in teaching activities is also said to vary based on educators' backgrounds as prosecution lawyers or police officers, respectively.

In the professional knowledge domain of crime investigation, all respondents agree that the course is strongly research-based, emerging from disciplinary knowledge in both the social and natural sciences. Thus, a heterogenous body of extant disciplinary knowl-

edge supports the enactment of the criminal investigative process. Furthermore, theoretical knowledge is viewed as important for changing or renewing professional practice. The respondents emphasised a close relationship between theory and practice, in which different forms of research-based and theoretical knowledge are used to apply the law and conduct criminal investigations. This conceptualisation is reflected in teaching activities in which case-based learning is prominent.

Both differences and similarities exist across these knowledge domains. In all cases, a simplistic, dichotomous relationship between notions of theory and practice is rejected (Hatlevik, 2014). Instead, theory/research and professional practice are placed in specific relationships with each other to support police students' learning. However, theory/practice relationships' characteristics differ across the knowledge domains. We found five different roles afforded to the notion of theory: a tool for facilitating student reflections over professional practice, developing strategies for practical police work, codifying experience-based knowledge, supporting criminal investigative processes and renewing existing conventions of practice. Each of these relationships points to underlying assumptions about the role that theory can play in supporting students' professional development (Hatlevik, 2014).

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