

Police Students' Social Background, Attitudes and Career Plans

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Abstract

Purpose: To compare the social background of Norwegian and Swedish police students. Are there differences in the students' social background, and if so, are such differences reflected in different attitudes and career plans among the students?

Design/methodology/approach: The questions are explored on the basis of survey data on all Norwegian and Swedish police students who started their education in 2009 (N=737). The methods employed are cross-tabular analysis and multivariate linear regression.

Findings: The results show that a larger proportion of Norwegian police students have highly educated parents, compared to the Swedish. However, students' social background does not seem to be important for their orientation towards theory and knowledge or their plans for doing operational police work.

Practical implications: An important question for the future's police educators is whether a study with a formal bachelor status will attract a different type of students. These results show that the Norwegian police education with a formal bachelor degree attracts more students with highly educated parents, but the importance of attracting students with a given social background to the police profession seems to be limited.

Originality/value: There are no previous comparative studies on recruitment to police education, or studies of police recruitment that focus especially on the importance of social background.

Police Students' Social Background, Attitudes and Career Plans

The traditional picture of a police officer has been that of a physically strong man with a working class background, coming from a rural area (Larsson, 2010). The police officer has often been described as a man with a lower middle class or skilled working class background (Reiner, 1992: 461, Sparger and Giacomassi, 1986, Niederhoffer, 1969). Many writers have also commented on the traditional antagonism between the police and academia (Lee and Punch, 2004, Granér, 2004: 234, Fielding, 1988). However, several new trends challenge this picture. Police education has gradually become more formalized, and several countries are now considering making police education into a bachelor's degree course (Stevnsborg, 2010: 200, SOU, 2008). Whether higher education actually results in better police officers has been a long-standing debate (e.g. Roberg and Bonn, 2004). It is important to find out whether a bachelor's degree will attract police students with a different background, and whether the students' background actually matters for the type of police officers recruited. This study explores whether the police students in Norway and Sweden differ in terms of their social background, and whether such differences are reflected in their attitudes and career plans.

In an international context, police education systems in Norway and Sweden have much in common. They both involve relatively long courses at post-secondary level, with two years of classroom study and a long period of on-the-job training. There are many applicants in both countries, and the entry requirements are extensive. In addition to upper secondary education and other formal requirements such as good health, applicants need to pass physical tests and meet demands for personal maturity and character (Polisen, 2013, Politiskolen, 2014). The similarities between police education in Norway and Sweden lead us to expect that the students also will be quite similar in many respects. However, there is one important difference between the two countries: police education in Norway is a college programme leading to a bachelor's degree, but in Sweden, education is six months shorter and does not qualify for a degree. Few countries have experience with police education to the bachelor's level, but several are considering extending police education. In Denmark, the plan is to launch a bachelor's degree for police education in 2014. Compared with previous police training in Denmark, this will be a more academic and analytical course with an increased focus on theoretical subjects (Stevnsborg, 2010: 200, Politiskolen, 2014). Upgrading police education to a three-year bachelor's degree at university level has also been proposed in Sweden (SOU, 2008). This proposition also includes withdrawing most of the special conditions for admission to police education, and making the admission process much more similar to that of other university courses. Police education at the university level has also been tested in Australia, as part of police reforms following debates on mismanagement and corruption (Wimshurst and Ransley, 2007). Similarly, there is an on-going debate in the US on whether previous college education should be mandatory for police recruits (e.g. Telep, 2011). The departments where this is mandatory, claim that it ensures professionalism, and that college education increases the quality of the officers (Bruns, 2010).

The topic of this paper is the social background, attitudes and career plans of police students in Norway and Sweden. Two questions are asked: Are there differences between the two countries in terms of students' social background, and will such differences be reflected in different attitudes and career plans? The students' opinions on the importance of theory and knowledge in police education and their plans for doing operational police work are tested. The questions are explored using survey data from students who started police education in Norway and Sweden in 2009 (N=737). The data cover all first-year police students in both countries. The methods employed are cross-tabular analysis and multivariate linear regression.

One important reason for focusing on the background and attitudes of police students is that these factors are likely to influence how students will behave and think when they become police officers. The nature of the police forces of the future depends upon the students' attitudes and career plans. Previous studies have shown that norms and values are important for the day-to-day practice of police officers, sometimes more important than formal laws and instructions (Holmberg, 1999, Reiner, 2000: 65). Their social background is important not only because of the influence it has on their attitudes and behaviour, but also to ensure the political goal of creating a police force that is

representative of the population it is responsible for. As noted by Loftus (2007), class matters in the everyday work and narratives of the police, but is almost non-existent in the on-going debate about policing diversity. In a review of core topics in police science, investigating the influence of police officers' social background on their "working personality" is highlighted as an important question to address (del Barrio Romero et al., 2009: 91).

Previous research

A large body of research has confirmed the importance of social background in educational choices (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996, Breen and Jonsson, 2005, Shavit et al., 2007). Furthermore, the background and attitudes of police students have been the subjects of several studies (Lauritz, 2009, Alain and Grégoire, 2008, Chan et al., 2003, Fielding, 1988, Larsson et al., 2006). For example, Chan *et al.* (2003: 131-137) report that Australian police recruits value operational skills more highly than the theoretical subjects in their education, and that they are divided when asked whether they want to be working the streets/stay in uniform in the future.

As noted by del Barrio Romero *et al.*, there seems to be surprisingly little systematic research on recruitment to police education (2009: 93). Previous studies have mostly been based on qualitative data. These give an interesting account of topics such as individual motivation for the police profession (e.g. Lauritz, 2009), but provide limited insight into the broader picture of the background and attitudes of police students. However, we do find some studies of police students' background. In a review of police research in the United Kingdom, Reiner (1992: 461) concludes that most studies find an under-representation of both the high and the low ends of the social distribution. The most typical background for a police officer seems to be skilled manual working class and lower middle class. Older studies from Norway and Sweden describe the background of police students as dominated by the working class (Cedermark, 1967, NOU, 1979). Turning to more recent studies, Larsson *et al.* (2006) find that among Norwegian police students, approximately 70% have parents with some higher education. Larsson (2005) classified only 1/3 of the Swedish police students as coming from a working class background, although more than half identified themselves with the working class. Chan *et al.* (2003: 65) report that the fathers of about half of Australian police recruits have post-secondary or university education. However, these studies do not say whether the students' social background is reflected in their attitudes and career plans. To our knowledge, there are no comparative studies on recruitment to police education, or studies of police recruitment that focus especially on the importance of social background. Chu and Sun (2007) point out that there are generally few cross-national studies on the police¹, and claim that one reason for this is the lack of comparable data.

The effect of higher education on police behaviour and attitudes has been the topic of several studies. Many of them conclude that previous higher education does influence the attitudes and behaviour of police officers, although it does not seem important for all aspects (Roberg and Bonn, 2004, Paoline, 2001). For example, previous research has shown that officers with higher education have better chances of succeeding at the academy (Chappell, 2008, Wright et al., 2011) and being promoted (Polk and Armstrong, 2001). Officers with higher education also seem to be less relativistic in their ethical orientation (Catlin and Maupin, 2004), more sceptical towards the abuse of authority (Telep, 2011), and less likely to use verbal and physical force in their encounters with the public (Paoline and Terrill, 2007, Rydberg and Terrill, 2010). However, we also find studies which conclude that the importance of previous educational attainment on the recruits' attitudes toward police role and work are limited (Sun et al., 2009), and that it does not influence the probability of arrest or search (Rydberg and Terrill, 2010). All in all, the conclusion shared by Wimshurst and Ransley (2007) and Sun et al. (2009) seems reasonable: The question of whether higher education really matters for the type of police officers we get, is still not settled.

While there is plenty of research on the importance of the officer's previous education, there seem to be very few studies on the importance of social background for the attitudes and careers of police officers. Exceptions include Sparger and Giacomassi (1986), who find that the class background of police officers does affect their attitudes towards the wealthy, and Morash *et al.* (2006) who

includes class background as a control variable and finds that it does not have a significant effect on the self-reported occupational stress of police officers. Finally, Sun et al. (2009) have found that the socio-economic status of the family does not influence the recruits' views on what are the most important tasks of the police. However, their results show that compared to the other recruits, those who have a family member working in the police see law enforcement as somewhat less important. Reiner (1992: 464) especially points out the importance of research into whether and how background characteristics actually matter for policing styles and the culture of policing. Paoline (2001: 49) also states the importance of gaining insight into the differences between police officers with different background characteristics, while Sun et al. (2009: 767) point out the lack of research on the importance of social background among police officers. This will be explored in this study, which looks at the importance of social background on the attitudes and career plans of police recruits.

Theory

Social background and educational choices

To understand the role of social background in recruitment to police education, it is useful to consider general explanations of why social background influences educational choices. Generally, two theories have been central when explaining socio-economic differences in educational choices: rational action theory and cultural theory. According to rational action theory, individuals choosing education should be seen as rational actors who consider the costs, benefits and risks of the different alternatives (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997). These calculations will be dependent on social background. For example, a young person with highly educated parents who chooses higher education will have the benefit of keeping in touch with his or her social environment and avoiding the cost of social degrading, which is achieving a lower status compared with the parents. For a young person with parents with little education, the situation is different; choosing higher education is not necessary to avoid social degrading, and continuing in the education system could mean distancing oneself from friends and family.

While rational action theory does not include cultural differences and norms, these are the main focus in cultural theory. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) claim that the education system is made by and for a special segment of the population. In school, children with highly educated parents will experience that their values and ways of thinking are appreciated, and they will feel at home in the education system. Hence, they will do better at school and more often choose to continue on to higher education.

When it comes to choosing the police profession in particular, Sparger and Giacopassi (1986) offer three possible explanations for why young people with working class background traditionally have been attracted to the police profession. Their explanation highlights family traditions, a job with expressive elements that is consistent with working class values of masculinity, patriotism and conservatism, and lastly the instrumental benefits of the profession, such as secure employment and upward mobility. However, their second explanation – consistency with working class values – is dependent on the status and image of the police force in different countries. In Scandinavian countries, the police seem to have a rather “soft” image compared with, for example, the United States, and this could mean that becoming a police officer in these countries has less appeal for working class youth.

Social background and attitudes towards theory, knowledge and practice

What differences would we expect to find when examining attitudes towards theory, knowledge and practice? According to Pierre Bourdieu's influential book *Distinction* (1984), attitudes and values are determined by one's position in the social space, which in turn is dependent on the amounts of different types of capital one has. Especially important are economic and cultural capital. Cultural capital includes non-financial resources that give the individual advantages in the social hierarchy. Education is cultural capital in an institutionalized form but there are also more informal aspects of it; manners, taste and ways of acting and speaking are important markers of cultural capital. Those who

hold large amounts of cultural capital will value academic and intellectual knowledge to a greater extent, and practical work to a lesser extent. Because young people whose parents have higher education will generally have more cultural capital, we can expect them to be more positive towards theory and knowledge, and less oriented towards practical work.

One could question the importance of cultural capital in relatively egalitarian societies such as Scandinavian countries. Danielsen (1998) claims that the uniform cultural hierarchy described by Bourdieu does not exist in Norway, and that social capital is more important in small societies. However, this conclusion is challenged by Prieur and Rosenlund (2010), who claim, based on empirical studies, that the notion of cultural capital is also important in a Scandinavian country such as Denmark.

Police attitudes towards theory and practice

Police attitudes towards academia have been described in such terms as “a war” and “inherent anti-intellectualism” (Lee and Punch, 2004: 234). The idea of a police officer as a craftsperson implies that what is needed to become a good cop is practical training, not theory. Fielding (1988: 58) describes how “book learning” and academic ability are not valued in the police culture. He suggests a connection to working class culture where common sense and pragmatism are central values (Fielding, 1988: 64). In Scandinavia, too, we find accounts of how academic knowledge has low status among police. Granér (2004: 231) describes how police officers who are too theoretical are criticized for being slow when it comes to situations that demand immediate action. Gundhus (2009: 113) finds a hierarchy of competencies in the police, where practical, experience-based knowledge is ranked more highly than theoretical knowledge. However, the simplistic description of a relationship characterized by antipathy has been seriously challenged in recent years. As several authors have pointed out, police culture is not “monolithic, universal or unchangeable” (Reiner, 2000: 87) (see also Granér, 2004, Finstad, 2000). Recent contributors claim that the relationship between researchers and the police is more positive today, although challenges remain (Murji, 2010, Cordner and White, 2010). A growing body of research on educational attainment as a path towards professionalism and certification of the police is among the trends that have led to a more complex relationship between the police and the academic world (Lee and Punch, 2004).

Sun et al. (2009) have described two general theories which can be used to understand attitudinal differences between police officers. According to *predisposition theory*, the occupational attitudes will reflect the officer’s personal characteristics and background, including social background. However, Sun et al. notes that the empirical evidence for this theory is both conflicting and limited. The second theory, the *differential socialization/experience theory* states that the attitudes of the officers are influenced by their socialization and their experiences on the job. Hence, one would expect differences between officers according to the training they receive, where they work, the assignments that they have and their experiences with peers, supervisors and the public. Sun et al. claim that this theory, too, has received limited empirical support. One should also be aware that these two theories are not mutually exclusive: Both could be effective at the same time, and they could possibly interact, e.g. socialization could be stronger among the recruits who do not hold a previous degree. A purpose of this study is to contribute to the empirical validation of the predisposition theory, by exploring whether the social background of the recruits is important for their attitudes and career plans.

Data and measures

The data in this paper are part of the research project *Recruitment, Education and Careers in the Police: A European Longitudinal Study* (RECPOL). This study will eventually cover Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Belgium, Scotland, Estonia, Hungary, Slovenia, the Netherlands, Germany (Hessen, Brandenburg, Thüringen) and Spain (Catalonia). The plan is to follow police students with regular surveys, starting when they enter police training and ending six years into their professional careers. The questions cover background characteristics, general values, opinions on police training

and expectations and attitudes towards police work. Taken together, the data from this project will provide a unique opportunity to study recruitment, education and socialization in the police using a longitudinal and comparative approach.

The research design is based on the StudData survey, which was developed by the Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo University College. The questions have been tested on several professions in regular surveys since the year 2000, and have been used in a number of publications (e.g. Nerdrum et al., 2009, Abrahamsen, 2010). Some of the central questions are based on measures used in ESS (European Social Survey) and ISSP (International Social Survey Programme). The police-specific questions are based on a comprehensive qualitative field-work, including interviews with five experienced police officers, interviews of 24 police recruits at three points in time, as well as field observation (Pettersson, 2012). This provides a solid knowledge base for designing the questions in the survey.

The dataset in this paper stems from the pilot study, which was conducted in 2009. The survey was submitted to all first-year police students in Sweden and Norway during their first weeks of police training. The police students in both countries were presented with exactly the same questionnaire, which enables us to compare Norwegian and Swedish police students directly. The students filled in the questionnaire at college, under supervision of their instructors. Hence, the response rate was remarkably high, 87%. There were 737 respondents, comprising 295 Swedish and 442 Norwegian students.

The variable *knowledge and theory oriented* is based on students' answers to the question "To what extent should the following be emphasized in the education in order to make you a good police officer?" with 20 different sub-questions mentioning different types of skills and knowledge. An exploratory factor analysis (principal components) yielded three distinct factors, named *ethics/value oriented*, *operational skills oriented* and *knowledge and theory oriented*. The last factor included the following items (factor loadings in brackets): knowledge about planning and organizing (0.70), theoretical knowledge (0.63), broad, general knowledge (0.56), understanding of rules and regulations (0.54) and occupation-specific knowledge (0.53). The variable *knowledge and theory oriented* is an index based on these five questions. The responses range from 0 to 4, where 4 represents "To a very high extent" and 0 represents "Not at all". The mean is 3.2 (SD=0.5), which implies that students generally are quite positive towards the importance of knowledge and theory, but with some variation. Cronbach's alpha for the index is 0.67, which could be characterized as acceptable given the relatively limited number of items and the exploratory character of this work (Berthoud, 2000: 169, Larcker and Lessig, 1980: 131).

The variable *operational orientation* is based on students' answers to the question "If you try to imagine what your life will be like in ten years' time, how probable is it that the following statements will apply to your situation?" Our focus is the item "I am doing operational police work", with responses ranging from 0 "Doesn't apply at all" to 4 "Applies very well". The mean is 2.8 (SD=0.9), which shows there is a considerable degree of variation in the answers to this question, but that many respondents find it quite likely that they will be doing operational police work ten years from now. The definition of the term "operational police work" is not clear-cut. While patrolling in uniform is clearly operational police work, other tasks such as undercover police work are not easily defined as either "operational" or "non-operational". However, the term "operational police work" is widely used in the Scandinavian countries, and first-year students are likely to understand what the term implies.

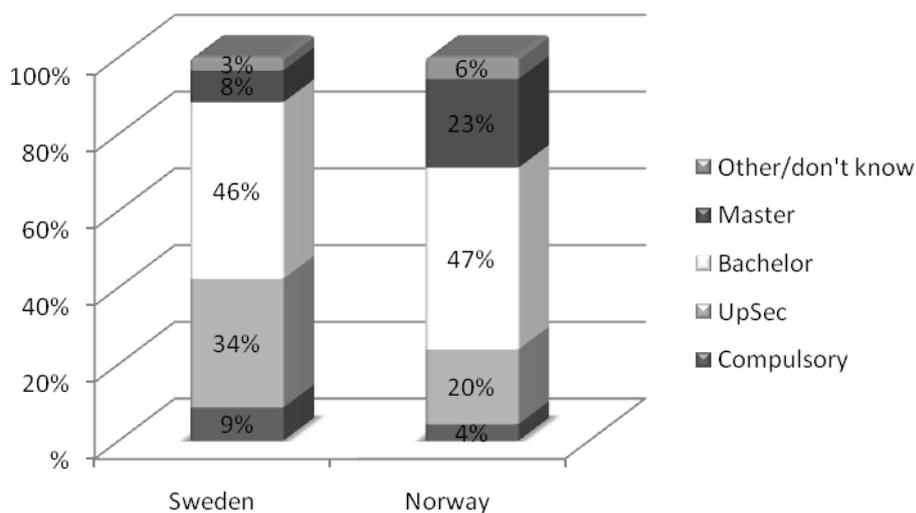
The *social background* of the students is measured in the question "What is (was) your mother's and your father's highest level of education?" Parents' education is defined as the education of the parent with the longer education, or of the parent for whom we have information on education level. The variable is divided into four levels: compulsory school or less (6 %), upper secondary school (25 %), bachelor's level (up to four years of higher education) (46 %), master's level (17 %) and other/don't know (5 %). One could wish for a broader measurement of social background, including e.g. parents' occupation or family income. However, parental education is an important indicator of cultural resources, which generally have proved to be very important for educational choices and preferences

(Erikson and Jonsson, 1996) and are also likely to be important when the dependent variable is student attitudes towards knowledge and theory. The students' *previous higher education* is measured by the question "Did you have any higher education before you started your present education?" and is divided into three categories: None (53 %), one year or less (28 %) and more than one year (19 %). Age is divided into four groups: 20–24 (59 %), 25–29 (28 %), 30–34 (9 %) and 35–39 years (5 %). Sex is coded 0 for female (43 %) and 1 for male (57 %), while *country* is coded 0 for Sweden (40 %) and 1 for Norway (60 %).

Results

The first question to be answered in this paper is whether Norwegian and Swedish police students differ in their social background. Figure 1 shows the social background of police students in the two countries.

Figure 1: Parents' education among police students in Norway and Sweden.



N=730. Significant at the 5% level (chi square=41.251)

Figure 1 shows that the parents of police students in Norway and Sweden are quite well educated, compared with the general population in this age group². We find a clear and significant difference in the social background of police students between Norway and Sweden. More of the Norwegian police students have highly educated parents (70%), compared with only 54% of the Swedish police students having one or both parents with some kind of higher education.

The next question to be answered is whether the social background of students influences their attitudes towards what is important to learn to become a good police officer. Are the students with highly educated parents more oriented towards knowledge and theory? This question is explored in table 1. To enhance understanding, the main finding is also presented in figure 2.

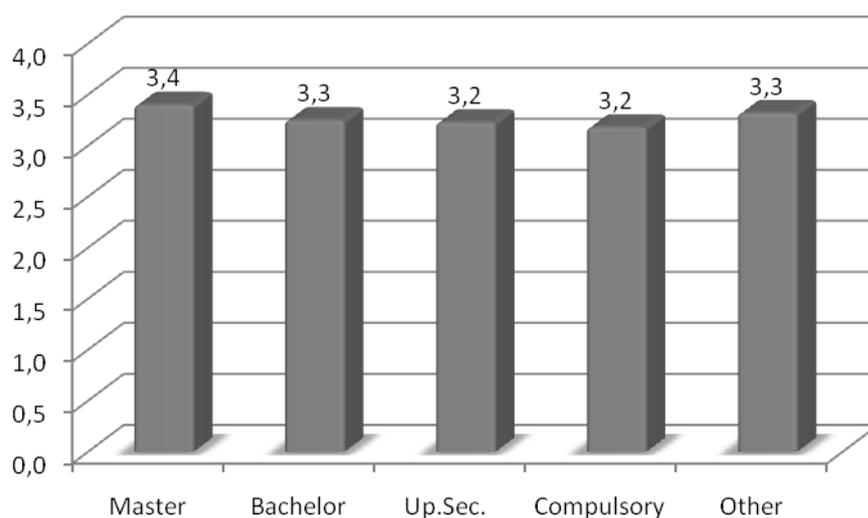
Table 1. Students' orientation towards knowledge and theory by social background.

Linear regression.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>b</i>	s.e.	<i>b</i>	s.e.
Parents: master's education (comp. edu.=0)	.22	.08	.23	.08
Parents: bachelor's education	.07	.07	.08	.07
Parents: up. sec. education	.05	.07	.06	.07
Parents: other edu./don't know	.14	.10	.12	.10
Sex (women=0)	-.14	.03	-.15	.04
Age: 25–29 years (20–24=0)	-.03	.04	-.01	.04
Age: 30–34 years	.02	.07	.05	.07
Age: 35–39 years	.18	.09	.21	.09
Country (Sweden=0)	.09	.04	.09	.04
Students' previous high ed.: 1 year (no=0)			-.04	.04
Students' previous high ed.: more than 1 year			-.11	.05
Constant	3.18	.07	3.21	.08
Adjusted r ²	0.04		0.05	
N	735		735	

Bold=Significant at the 5% level

Figure 2: Students' orientation towards knowledge and theory by parents' education. Theory and knowledge should be emphasized: 0="Not at all", 4="To a very high extent"*



*Based on estimates in table 1 (model 1), assuming the following characteristics: Swedish, female student, age 20–24.

Table 1 (model 1) shows that parents' education has a moderate effect on students' attitudes towards the emphasis on knowledge and theory³. Students whose parents have master's education are

slightly more positive towards emphasizing knowledge and theory in their education, but the difference is small (0.22 on a scale ranging from 0 to 4). Students whose parents have bachelor's/upper secondary education are not significantly different from students whose parents have only compulsory education. We also note that men are slightly less positive and that the oldest students and the students from Norway are slightly more knowledge and theory oriented. However, the main finding is clear: judging from the variables in model 1, there are small differences between the students with regard to orientation towards knowledge and theory. This is confirmed by the relatively small r^2 , which shows that the independent variables only explain 4% of the total variation in the index "knowledge and theory oriented".

One possible interpretation of the positive (although small) effect of having parents with master's education is that this is an indirect effect. Students with highly educated parents generally have higher education themselves, and this could be linked to a positive view about theory and knowledge in police education. This is tested in model 2. Here, we can see that the hypothesis of an indirect effect is not sustained. There are generally small differences between the students who have previous higher education and other students in their views about knowledge and theory in their education, and the small difference we find is in the opposite direction of what one could expect. The students who had the longest education before they started their police training are actually less positive towards knowledge and theory. A possible explanation of this is that these students feel that their previous theoretical training is sufficient, or that the students who choose police education after having taken a more academic education do this exactly because they want a more practical job. What is most interesting for our purpose is that the relationship between parents' education and students' orientation towards knowledge and theory does not seem to be altered when we compare students who are similar in terms of previous higher education.

The last question to be answered is whether the social background of the students influences their plans for their future in the police. Are the students with highly educated parents less oriented towards doing operational police work? This question is explored in table 2. To enhance understanding, the main finding is also presented in figure 3.

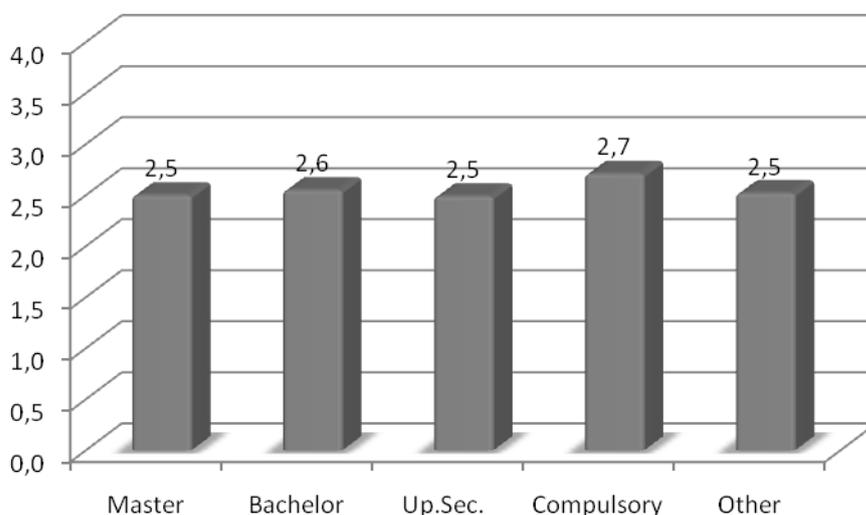
Table 2. Students' orientation towards operational police work by social background.

Linear regression.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>b</i>	s.e.	<i>b</i>	s.e.
Parents: master's education (comp. edu.=0)	-.21	.15	-.19	.15
Parents: bachelor's education	-.16	.14	-.15	.14
Parents: up. sec. education	-.22	.14	-.21	.14
Parents: other edu./don't know	-.19	.20	-.21	.20
Sex (women=0)	.39	.07	.37	.07
Age: 25–29 years (20–24=0)	-.02	.08	.01	.08
Age: 30–34 years	-.12	.13	-.08	.13
Age: 35–39 years	.08	.17	.11	.17
Country (Sweden=0)	.16	.07	.16	.07
Students' previous high ed.: 1 year (no=0)			-.10	.08
Students' previous high ed.: more than 1 year			-.14	.09
Constant	2.71	.14	2.75	.14
Adjusted r^2	0.05		0.05	
N	731		731	

Bold=Significant at the 5% level

Figure 3: Students' orientation towards operational police work by parents' education. I am doing operational police work in ten years: 0="doesn't apply at all" 4="applies very well"*



* Based on estimates in table 2 (model 1), assuming the following characteristics: Swedish, female student, age 20–24.

The main finding in table 2 is that there are remarkably small differences between students with different social background in terms of orientation towards operational work. When asked whether they will be doing operational police work ten years from now, students whose parents have higher education report that it is a little less likely than students whose parents have only compulsory education, but the differences are small and not significant. We also note that male students seem to be more oriented towards doing operational police work, and that there are small differences between the different age groups. Compared with the Swedish students, Norwegian students report that it is a little more likely that they will be doing operational police work, but the difference is again quite small.

In model 2, we can see whether the correlation between social background and operational orientation is different when we compare students who are similar in terms of their own educational background. Again, the main finding is that there are small differences between students according to social background, and controlling for the students' own education does not seem to alter this pattern. Although students with previous higher education are a little less oriented towards doing operational police work, the differences are very small and not significant. The overall conclusion from table 2 is that neither social background nor the students' previous higher education seems to influence their future plans of doing operational police work. This is confirmed by the relatively small r^2 , which tells us that only 5% of the total variation in the orientation towards operational police work is explained by these independent variables. Sex seems to be the most important predictor: male students are more dedicated towards operational police work.

Discussion: Different backgrounds, similar attitudes

The first question to be answered in this study was whether there were differences in the social background of police students in Norway and Sweden. The results show that although the proportion with highly educated parents is relatively high in both Sweden and Norway, there is a marked difference between the two countries. Police education in Norway attracts more students with highly educated parents. Although other studies have not compared countries directly, it is interesting to note that this finding is in line with studies from the Scandinavian countries which indicate that the proportion with middle class background is relatively high (Larsson, 2005, Larsson et al., 2006), at

least compared with the United Kingdom (Reiner, 1992: 461). The difference between the Norwegian and Swedish police students indicates that police education attracts more students with highly educated parents when the education programme is longer and has a more formal academic status. However, one should remember that although the different status of the programmes seems to be a likely explanation of the different social profile, there are also other possible explanations. Especially, grades are quite important for entry into Norwegian police education, but have more limited importance in the Swedish recruitment process⁴. Admission rules that highlight previous academic results are more likely to benefit students with highly educated parents, who generally do better at school (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). In addition, the history and status of the police profession and the general importance of social background in recruitment to higher education could also influence the socio-economic profile of police students in the two countries. Larsson (2010) claims that the police profession in Norway is a profession with relatively high status, and this could explain why police education seems to attract a relatively high number of students with parents who are highly educated. However, we can find descriptions of how policing has become a high status profession in Sweden also (Granér, 2004: 20), and we lack comparative studies of whether Norway and Sweden are different in this respect. To conclude with certainty whether a bachelor's degree really attracts a different type of students we would need longitudinal data from before and after the reform of police education.

Although the empirical evidence is not enough to conclude that the formal status of the education programmes explains the different socio-economic background of students, this explanation seems likely from a theoretical standpoint. The finding fits well with traditional theories of socio-economic differences in recruitment to education. According to rational action theory, the costs, benefits and risks of choosing a long education with a formal academic status are dependent on social background. For students with highly educated parents, choosing police education may not imply a social degrading if the education is long and leads to an academic degree. Similarly, the costs of choosing police education will be higher for students who come from families without academic traditions if the education is long and unpaid. Cultural theory as described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) offers an alternative plausible explanation. The longer and more academic the police education is, the more students with highly educated parents will feel at home in this education setting, and the more their social background will be an advantage while studying. Hence, more young people with parents who hold academic degrees choose police education in countries such as Norway, with its long education programme resulting in a formal academic degree.

The second question in this study was whether differences in social background would be reflected in different attitudes and career plans among the students. The overall answer to this question is no. Social background seems to have a very limited effect on attitudes and career plans. This result is based on the students' answers to the questions about how much emphasis should be placed on theory and knowledge in their education, and their plans for doing operational police work ten years from now. Although we note that those students whose parents hold a master's degree seem to be slightly more oriented towards theory and knowledge and less oriented towards doing operational police work, the differences generally are small and not significant.

The results in this study are not coherent with *predispositions theory*, which claims that occupational attitudes of police officers will reflect their personal characteristics and background, including social background (Sun et al., 2009). The *differential socialization/experience theory*, which highlights the importance of socialization and job experience, may be more relevant when explaining the attitudes and values of police officers. The impact of these factors should be explored in further research.

Based on a theory of socio-economic differences, one would expect that attitudes towards theory/knowledge and plans for an operational career would be affected by social background. Previous writers have highlighted class differences in attitudes towards education and the value that is placed on academic and intellectual knowledge versus more manual work (Bourdieu, 1984, Lamont, 1992). Judging from the findings in this study, social background is not important for the attitudes of the police students. This result could be interpreted as supporting those who see Bourdieu's theory as too deterministic, explaining individual action as determined by social background and leaving little room for change or independent rational actors who make their own decisions (see for example Chan

et al., 2003: 313). The police students' attitudes and plans do not seem to be determined by their social background. However, before concluding we should also consider alternative interpretations.

First, the similarities between students with different social background could be explained by selection effects of the young people who choose the police profession. Those with highly educated parents who apply for the police profession might be the ones that are more oriented towards practical work, and less oriented towards theory and knowledge. Similarly, one could propose that young people without an academic background who choose a relatively long education like this will be more oriented towards theory and knowledge than the average person with their background. This pattern could also be a result of selection in the recruitment process. Young people with academic backgrounds that are "too theoretical" and "too un-theoretical" young people from families where the parents do not hold academic degrees may both be eliminated in the recruitment process.

Second, one could ask if police students with highly educated parents would stand out if other aspects of attitudes and behaviour were measured. Especially, it is possible that the results would be different if we measured behaviour instead of attitudes. According to Bourdieu's theory, social background is particularly important for individuals' *habitus*. Habitus can be understood as a stable set of dispositions formed by family, socialization and personal history (Bourdieu, 1984). Habitus affects both the way one thinks and acts, and on an unconscious level. Differences in habitus may imply that social background affects the behaviour of police officers in practice, although they answer similarly when asked about attitudes.

A third explanation of why the police students seem to be remarkably similar independent of social background is that they have already gone through the process of anticipatory socialization. According to Chan *et al.* (2003: 62), this is "a process through which individuals prepare themselves for police work prior to the entry into the organization". The students are influenced by the myths and stories of the police, and adjust their habitus according to the rules defined by the admission requirements and their own ideas about the police. This process of anticipatory socialization starts long before the students join the police. Hence, the students in our sample may already have common ideas on what police education should be like and what is to be considered "real police work", even though the survey was administered during their first weeks of police training. This is in line with the classical studies of the police, which find that the socialization in the police is so strong that the importance of demographic background characteristics is limited (Niederhoffer, 1969, van Maanen, 1975).

Generally, the results in this study suggest that background is not very important for the kind of police officers we get, at least when it comes to orientation towards theory/knowledge and doing operational police work. This finding is in line with Paoline (2001), who finds that background characteristics – in his case previous higher education, sex and ethnic origin – have limited influence on the occupational attitudes of police officers. The overall question of the importance of police background characteristics is still not settled (Sun *et al.*, 2009, Wimshurst and Ransley, 2007). However, we note that the findings in this study are in line with the few newer studies on the social background of police officers, which conclude that police officers seem to have much in common in spite of different backgrounds (Morash *et al.*, 2006, Sun *et al.*, 2009). Paoline suggests that occupational experiences may be more important for attitudes than background characteristics. One could also ask whether young people who choose police education have common personality traits that are more important for their attitudes than background characteristics.

Conclusion: Two of a kind

The academic status of the police education varies greatly among different countries. While some countries offer bachelor degrees to those who complete police training, others have almost no connections between the police education and the academic world (see Hanak and Hofinger, 2005 for a detailed description of the different countries). According to del Barrio Romero *et al.* (2009: 158), more and more European countries are moving towards developing police academies into accredited

academic institutions, and several countries have concrete plans of a bachelor reform in their police education (Stevnsborg, 2010, SOU, 2008). An important question for the future's police educators is whether a study with a formal bachelor status will attract a different type of students. The results in this study show that the Norwegian police education with a formal bachelor degree attracts more students with highly educated parents. This is in comparison with the Swedish police education, which is quite similar but does not result in an academic degree. There is firm theoretical backing to suggest that the formal academic status may attract more students with highly educated parents. However, we should also note that differences in the admission rules could explain the empirical results. Grades are more important for admittance to the Norwegian police education, and this will favour students with highly educated parents who on average have better school grades. This aspect should be considered when deciding the admission rules of the police educations. Admission rules where school grades are crucial will probably result in a larger proportion of students with highly educated parents.

The social background of the students is important if one wants to recruit a police force who is representative of the population. One reason to pay attention to this is that class seems to matter in the everyday work and narratives of the police (Loftus, 2007). The most important question is probably whether the background of the students who is recruited actually matters for the type of police officers who graduate. The results in this study show that the social background is of very limited importance in terms of the attitudes towards theory and knowledge and their orientation towards doing operational police work. Hence, the concern about recruiting a police force that is much too theoretical in its orientation (as described in Granér, 2004: 213) seems exaggerated as far as it is based on the recruitment of students with highly educated parents and/or previous academic experience. Students with previous education and students whose parents are highly educated are not strongly theoretically oriented or more negative towards doing operational police work. Social background could be important for other aspects of police attitudes and behaviour that are not tested here, and this should be explored further before reaching a conclusion. However, judging from the results in this study, the importance of attracting students with a given social background to the police profession seems to be limited.

With a few exceptions, the importance of social background seems to have been largely overlooked in the research on the police profession. This is surprising, given the well-documented importance of social background in studies of educational choices and work (Bourdieu, 1984, Shavit et al., 2007). Although social background seems to have limited importance for the police recruits' attitudes towards theory and their plans of doing operational work, it is still an open question whether their background will be important for other aspects of their work attitudes, e.g. attitudes towards the public, and for their actual career paths. Longitudinal research, which follows the recruits from the academy and into their working life, would be interesting both to see whether the importance of social background changes during the career, and whether we find the importance of socialization and job experience, which is described in the *differential socialization/experience theory* (Sun et al., 2009)

The lesson to be learned for those who are considering a change in the academic status of their police education, is that this could result in a different social profile among the students, with a larger proportion having parents with higher education. However, this will probably not be important for the type of police officers we educate, at least when it comes to their orientation towards theory and doing operational police work. Regarding the attitudes and career plans tested here, Norwegian and Swedish police students seem to be two of a kind, despite differences in their social background.

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¹ However, see Nickels and Verma (2008) or Sun and Chu (2006) for exceptions.

² One should of course be careful with exact numbers when comparing data from different sources and with slightly different measurements. However, it is interesting to compare the parents of the police students with OECD numbers on educational level in the population in general. When we look at the mothers and fathers of the police students separately, almost 50% have higher education, while the proportion is less than one in three in the general population (aged 45–64 years). We also note that the differences between the parents of the police students does not seem to be explained by differences in the general education level in the population in the two countries, because Sweden and Norway are very similar in this respect (OECD, 2011: 37-39).

³ Analyses including interaction terms between parents' education and country (not shown here) show that the effect of social background on the orientation towards knowledge/theory and doing operational work does not differ significantly between the two countries.

⁴ Personal communication with the admission and recruitment sections in Norway and Sweden, 15.06.2010. See also the descriptions of the entry requirements (PHS, 2013, Polisen, 2013).