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Theory or practice? Perspectives on police education and police work

ABSTRACT

This article explores interview data taken from a study of Norwegian police training, and discusses whether police education is perceived as providing a relevant and sufficient platform for performing police work. Since the police have monopoly status when it comes to the general use of physical force, the police practice appears boundless. How should police education be directed towards covering such a diverse and complex role? The article will demonstrate how differently police officers assess police education. The interview data will display both ideological differences with regard to how policing is viewed as well as highly different expectations of police education. There is a contradiction in the fact that the police districts expect a finished product, in terms of professional autonomous police officers from the Police College, but the Police College will hardly be able to meet such an expectation. Through the notion of “practice theory” the article will challenge the traditional distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ by conceptualizing the relationship between education and practice.

1. Introduction

Police Education¹ has become increasingly focused, expanded and prioritized throughout the Western world during the twentieth century. Much of the basis for the international development of police education is for the purpose of reducing abusive police force and the desire to reform the entire police organization (Cordner and Shain, 2011). Robert Reiner points out that police legitimacy has different conditions in a modern, pluralistic society. A diverse and multi-ethnic population provides a higher potential for conflict, thereby increasing demands on the police. This process has also led to increased focus on police education as well as stricter requirements to the contents of this type of education (Stanislas, 2014c, p. 289), and how theory and practice are balanced within the education.

The history of Norwegian police education is varied and complex, but in short terms it can be described as unsystematic and not formalized until 1950. After the 2nd World War, police education in Norway lasted for two years, with a year's education in the field of practice, and one year in school at the academy in Oslo. From 1992, the program developed as a three-year college education, and transformed from so-called "basic education" to the bachelor's degree in 2004 (Hove, 2012, p. 7). In line with the development of police education, there has been an ongoing debate with regard to the form of this education as well as its relevance within the police profession. This study² presents interview data on police officers' views, both

¹ The concepts of education and training are slightly different where training often refers to something practical and education to theory. Education and training are still treated equally in much of the international literature on police education/training (see Stanislas, 2014a) and will be done so also in this article.

1. ² The data in this study have earlier been published in Norwegian in the Police University College` internal report series (Aas, 2014a), and in “Nordisk politiforskning” [Nordic Police Research] (Aas, 2014b). This article

graduates and their leaders, regarding police education as a platform to perform operational policing. The main research question in this article is as follows:

Does the Norwegian police education provide, from the point of view of police practitioners, a relevant platform for the exercise of operational policing?

This question is three-fold. Firstly, it is operationalized through police leaders' experiences with regard to graduates' expertise as well as skills, and their reflections about the education. The leaders are however less familiar with the police education, and can therefore only evaluate the education indirectly through taking standpoint with regard to how the graduates function in the police profession. Secondly the graduates will reflect on the extent to which police education has enabled them to carry out operational policing. Finally, among these issues a key question arises about what kind of knowledge the operative officers prioritize, and what kind of knowledge they actually put into use.

Background

Previous research

The Norwegian Police University College, in accordance with guidelines from the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), is required to ensure the quality of its education. The quality of police education is measured by researchers at The Norwegian Police University College primarily by asking graduated police officers and their supervisors about whether the graduates have a relevant and sufficient foundation of knowledge for performing this diverse and varied profession³. How graduates and their managers regard the police education is of fundamental importance for the Police University College and its ongoing reform efforts. Through two quantitative studies, the police university college has previously obtained knowledge about how graduated police officers and their superiors consider Norwegian police education. These surveys are conducted by using electronic based questionnaires in the internal police net⁴ (Hansen, 2006, Bråten, 2010).

The quality of police education is in these studies explored indirectly by asking how well graduates function in the police service, seen from both graduates' and police leaders' perspectives. The fundamental idea behind the studies of educational quality is that the graduates functioning in the police service reflect police education. If the graduates work well, it is assumed that that the program has been successful. This idea has an obvious weakness considering the possibility that the graduates may keep a good professional level of service even if the police education has not been successful. It is possible that some officers master the police profession well because of their experiences/education in the past independent of police education, or may have a personality that indicates good police practice. Regarding the latter question, the actual recruitment to the police college may sometimes be

represents a new angle, composition and systematization of data, as well as several new theoretical perspectives on the data.

³ This question dealt with a number of minor issues relating to graduates' mastery of operative, preventive and investigative tasks. Respondents were asked to check off on a scale from 1 to 5.

⁴ All officers who had been practicing for 2 - 4 years and all leaders at sergeant and inspector level were encouraged to complete the questionnaire.

of greater importance than the education itself. Yet it is not unreasonable to imagine a correlation between the police education, and the exercise of the police role, and that the police officers' functioning in general also reflects the quality of their education. This correlation, however, must be regarded cautiously. If you rely solely on the connection between education and what respondents say about how the graduates perform their tasks, then instrumental and visible police actions may be given too much attention in police training. As we will later identify, the police profession also consists of reflections and sensitive assessments which are not easily captured in such quantitative evaluation studies.

Another obvious limitation in the quality surveys lies in the fact that questions about the professional performance of police graduates is only addressed to police practitioners. This issue could obviously also be addressed to the general public, those affected by law enforcement and other professionals who cooperate with the police. Measurements of confidence in the police show that the general Norwegian public has solid confidence in the police compared to other institutions (Strype, 2010). Confidence in the police is however lower among groups who have the most contact with the police (Larsson, 2010). There may be important differences between the population and the police when it comes to evaluating police work. For example, a study of police work connected to domestic violence demonstrated that the police referred to success criteria like clarification and efficiency while victims gave ratings according to how well they were taken care of by the police (Aas, 2014c). It should also be noted that there is a certain naivety and oversimplification in the quality surveys when it comes to society's expectations of the police. There are probably highly divergent expectations to be found within the population.

The purpose of this interview-based study, which is the third educational quality study to be conducted, is to go beyond the quantitative data in the previous surveys, and attempt to elicit reflections about police education from the graduates and their leaders in a deeper and more comprehensive manner. However, a restriction is made in relation to the previous studies – now the focus is narrowed down to the operative part of the police profession.

Theoretical framework

The police have a lot in common with professional groups such as nurses, teachers and social workers in both education and practice structure. All these professions have a three-year course of education (providing a bachelor degree) in which there has been an attempt to intertwine practical skills and theoretical studies. Heggen defines these professions as knowledge-based professions, where formal (theoretical) knowledge must be combined with judgment to develop good practice (Heggen, 2010, p. 60). Professionalism is about using systematic and general knowledge to handle individual cases – cases which vary a lot and are unique. Higher education is relatively new for these occupational groups, including police. Previously, motivated people with appropriate personal qualities were regarded as sufficient to perform these occupations. Professionalisation of the police is a process in which police practice has been increasingly standardized and specified to counteract subjective and arbitrary police practice. An essential part of this professionalization has been to ensure the quality and scientific basis of police training (Stanislas, 2014c, p. 289).

Handal and Lauås (1999) concept of "practice theory", originally intended for the teaching profession, can shed light on the relation between theoretical college education and police practice. "Practice theory" is a completely comprehensive theory of everything that underlies and shapes the practitioner's actions. "Practice theory" is analytically divided into personal experiences, theoretical knowledge and practitioners' values (both philosophical and ethical). More specifically "practice theory" consists of one's own experiences and values, cultural norms, observations of others' practices, exchange of experiences in collegial collaboration, study of literature, and more. All these elements are unavoidable in practical exercise. It is only possible to separate them for analytical purposes – in reality they are closely intertwined, and provide constant stimulus relative to each other (Handal and Lauås, 1999, p. 19-23).

Concepts about how theory and practice interlink raise fundamental questions within professional and educational fields about knowledge cultures, knowledge hierarchies and ideological diversity in thinking about both police education and the police profession. The dichotomy theory-practice arouses also reflections on what the police role really is all about: whether it can be boiled down to a multitude of practical tasks, or whether it contains a whole which is essentially different from other professional roles that perform portions of what the police have to do. This article will shed new light on the relationship between theory and practice, by presenting police practitioners' own reflections about the value of a theoretical college education for practical policing.

This study is thus to be found mainly within two different theoretical traditions. First and foremost, it is docked in police science, a relatively young research tradition. The article is also rooted in professional science, a research tradition that is centered around core issues on which occupations can be defined as professions, recruitment and training for professions (such as teachers, nurses, social workers and police officers), the link between theory and practice in the exercise of these professions et cetera (Molander and Terum, 2008). This article may contribute to building a bridge between these research traditions.

2. Methods

Out of a total of 27 police districts in Norway, four were selected for this study: Oslo, Vestfold, Vestoppland and Troms, and they are chosen to ensure diversity and variation in the informant groups. In Oslo, which is the capital of Norway, the police have a quite different job than in Vestoppland where the population is scattered or live in small towns and villages. Troms is a police district in the far north of Norway, which sometimes faces different challenges than police districts in southern Norway. Vestfold is a district with both rural and urban challenges. The diversity of police districts will hopefully reflect the diversity of police cultures. These four police districts are supposed to represent all police districts in the urban/rural and north/south dimensions. However it would also have been possible to draw up other district combinations to ensure variation and diversity.

The data consists of group interviews mostly from these four police districts (In addition, there have been conducted some group interviews of leaders who are attending education

courses at the Police College. These leaders are serving in a wide range of different police districts). A total of 42 police practitioners (18 graduates and 24 managers) participated as informants in this study (It is unknown whether any of these informants participated in the previous quality surveys). These two groups of informants may consider the main research question in this study from different angles. The leaders are encouraged to reflect on police education by means of the graduates' performance. Graduates are asked to assess the education in light of their own performance.

Focus group interviews were chosen to ensure a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what police practitioners think about police training. Qualitative interviews in groups are well suited when exploring general issues. In a group the informants get the opportunity to discuss each other's experiences and encourage reflections and associations. Personal and more emotional issues, which were not relevant in this study, would normally be carried out by individual interview. We already have quantitative data on police practitioners' views on police training, but these data only represent surface knowledge. In return, these quantitative data may be representative for the entire Norwegian police force. This is impossible with focus group interviews. The questions that were directed to the informants in this study are largely a continuation of the questionnaire from the quantitative survey, and this is also reflected in the research questions in this article. Multiple approaches were applied to stimulate the reflections and experiences of the informants – like presentation of the results from the quantitative surveys, ideas and statements from former focus groups, contradictions in the continuing interview material, theoretical dispositions and so on.

All group interviews (total of 11) were conducted during autumn 2013. The interviews with managers were conducted separately from those with graduates. Most of the graduates had been 2-3 years in operational service after graduation at the time of the interview, while the leaders held mostly positions both as the immediate superior of the graduates and roles that involve a higher level of leadership in the police district. The size of the groups ranged from 2 to 7 informants. In one of the interviews only one informant showed up. The interviews lasted mostly for about one hour.

The informants, both graduates and managers, were recruited by means of formal application to the leadership in each district, and voluntary informants agreed to an interview. In the communication with the commander of the police station, it was stressed that participation was purely on a voluntary basis. This was also repeated before each interview. We do not know how many police practitioners refused to participate, and possible reasons for this. The informants were informed about the research project by e-mail. The interviews were conducted at the informants' workplace as a break from their daily police service.

There are relatively few women in the material (total 8). For the officers' part it may have to do with coincidence. Among leaders in operational departments there are in fact relatively few women. The project follows otherwise the ethical principles recommended for social sciences in Norway and were subjected to standard ethical review by the Data Protection Official for Research at the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD). Informants were promised

anonymity, which is ensured through the presentation of the data. None of the findings relate to any specific police district. All interview statements presented in the article are impossible to trace back to identifiable individuals.

3. Results

3.1. What kind of knowledge is used in the operational police service?

An evaluation of police education as a knowledge base for operational policing must first raise the question of what kind of knowledge⁵ the operative division actually use. The informants in this study highlight common sense as being their main guide in the service. For example, officer 1 in the interview material clarifies the value of common sense as follows: “I often come up in situations where I do not quite know what to do – it goes a little bit back to healthy common sense”. It is the practical knowledge that police officers put in the center. Gundhus` analysis of knowledge cultures in the police shows that street knowledge has a clear precedence over analytical, general, academic and scientific knowledge. Street knowledge is regarded as something the individual police officer builds up through experience, not through formal studies. Street knowledge is concrete, and considered directly useful for control of specific groups. Theoretical and problematizing perspectives on crime are considered less relevant sources of knowledge (Gundhus, 2009, p. 108). Granér also finds that police practitioners reflect a view of knowledge that is largely action oriented, grounded in specific and self-experienced events (Granér, 2004). This is a type of knowledge which can largely be described as unarticulated and silent (Hove, 2012).

The knowledge base in operational service can be described in accordance with a wide range of purely practical and instrumental skills. The handling of vehicles, radios, weapons and handcuffs are examples. The core of the police role is about using physical force if necessary to resolve problems and conflicts. Egon Bittner says it in this way: “The mandate of policemen consists of dealing with all those problems in which force may have to be used” (Bittner, 2005, p. 168). When I ask leader 1 about core knowledge in operational service, he responds in this way: “My first thought is that you should be good at the things that can endanger your life, or that of a colleague or a third party”. However, time-critical events involving the use of weapons occur rarely in daily police work. Officer 2 puts words to this paradox as follows:

“It is not so much shooting – our everyday life does not consist of shooting – it consists of everyday problems. I think we practice very much on what almost never happens – and practice little on what happens a lot”.

⁵ It is widely perceived that there is a clear distinction between knowledge and skill. Knowledge is usually placed in a theoretical and cognitive dimension, while skills are understood in a practical context. Friedson points however to a broader perspective on the notion of knowledge when he states that: “Above all, it must recognize that all work presupposes knowledge” (Friedson, 2001, p. 27). Skills require knowledge and vice versa, and I don’t operate with a clear distinction between these concepts.

Physical force is, however, a type of knowledge that several of the interviewees feel is underestimated in police education. Leader 2 claims that: “It may indeed be appropriate policing to shoot someone in the back, and this was not something that I heard about at the Police Academy”. He continues as follows: “To put it lightly– the job here needs some stone crushers too”. Leader 3 follows this up by asserting that “It is not always enough just to talk” - adding that it is important that big and strong police officers also take part in the police service. It is possible that these skills have been underestimated in police education. In a college course, with emphasis on formal skills through theoretical studies and exams, it may feel less acceptable to accentuate muscle power as an important value in itself.

International police research shows the corresponding lack of police training in several countries. Arsenault and Hinton demonstrate inadequate training on the use of force in the training of law enforcement practitioners in Canada. The consequence is described as follows: “Poor training will result in more improper application of force, injuries, and law suits” (Asenault and Hinton, 2014, p. 145). Considering the fact that police legitimacy and trust by the population largely rests on the ability to use force properly, this must be seen as a significant deficiency in police training. Stanislas stresses however that training on the use of force not only involves technical and tactical issues, but should also include training on ethical issues (Stanislas, 2014c, p. 293).

The importance of being able to switch between aggressive and reticent behavior in the police profession is pointed out by several informants. When solving missions it may sometimes be necessary to use physical force such as forcing open a closed door of a private address, but in the next moment it is sometimes required to sit down and talk gently with abused children. The good police officer shall not use more force than necessary, but at the same time not be reluctant to use physical force. Basically, this is a delicate balancing act. The understanding of when it is right to switch between high level and low level in police performance represents something unique in police knowledge. Although the core of the police role is about the right and duty to apply physical force, it is the communicative skills that are most applicable to the uniformed police service. Leader 4 states that “if you cannot communicate you will not get far in this job!” Officer 3 refers to various forms of communication that are performed in the service:

“It is to be able to talk to people – you have to be a little outgoing – and ready to put you on the different levels of people. This is what we do all the time – and that is often difficult for the various officers - it is obvious when you have police students here – it’s very difficult for them to find the words and the right thing to say somehow. You talk to people who are experiencing great sorrow - or you meet psychiatric patients – You have aggressive people, you should be able to talk to people at different levels all the time. You must distinguish between what level you are on – you may have to be very sympathetic/empathetic at one moment, and then suddenly turn angry in the next moment – you have to balance this to a great extent”.

In connection with the communicative skills, the police officer should also have the ability to have an understanding of a wide variety of social situations. Police officer 4 appreciates this quality as follows: “This is the key to success on a mission – to read a situation and meet

people properly”. The officer must quickly determine whether people are aggressive, hostile, ironic, sad, etc. Being able to read social situations in a reasonable way is, like the communicative skills, largely rooted in one's life experiences. This quality can probably only to a limited degree be learned through a college degree program.

The skills of the police profession are largely intertwined. Interpretations of situations can not be made independently of an understanding of the police role. Events are not interpreted in a vacuum, but in line with our interests, values, positions and roles. The police read social reality, like all other professionals, through their professional glasses – or “the policeglance” – as Finstad demonstrates (Finstad, 2000). Police officers should be aware of this and at the same time recognize the opposite relationship – how the audience interprets the police role. Officer 5 expresses herself in this way: “It is easy to forget the impact you have when arriving at a situation in the blue shirt”. A visible police patrol has a special impact on situations that arise. Much of police education is however geared towards this kind of knowledge – the socialization process towards adapting to the police role and seeking a deeper insight into the social function of the police. Let us now examine whether leaders believe that graduates possess this diverse knowledge required in operational service.

3.2. Police managers' views on the performance of graduates

The results of the Norwegian Police University College’s educational quality surveys revealed that police managers believed that there was a reasonably good correlation between police education and what they perceived as being society's expectations of the police (Hansen, 2006, Bråten, 2010). (The graduates were however more critical of any correspondence, but still more positive than negative in their check marks on this question). Now let's look at what some of the leaders in this study actually say about this question. Leader 5 resonates around the quality of their new colleagues in this way:

“I feel that we are getting very good new employees. I feel that we have a broad, good employee who is not focused on anything in particular. You have to be a generalist - and that's what we want to produce in Norway. They have such broad scope – really good people – I think it's because they know a little about everything”.

This leader emphasizes the graduates` broad and general knowledge platform in his quality assessment, and highlights the generalist model as an ideal and guiding light for police education. The critical voices in the interview material differ sharply from the positive leaders. Leader 6 emphasizes the graduates` lack of knowledge about the harsh realities in operational service in this way:

“I miss them being prepared mentally – someday you may have to shoot someone or you risk being shot at, or being knocked down. I feel that there is a bunch of blond wigs that is coming out.”

In this statement the naivety and lack of preparation for the sharp part of operational policing is highlighted. Several leaders express themselves in a similar manner. Leader 7 emphasizes,

however, a different value in new employees than skills connected to the sharp part of the operational service when he announces this:

“I actually think the quality is getting better and better. I think those who have come here now, almost without exception, are brilliant people – even if they are young – age is significant of course, but their attitudes are the most important. It does not matter how old you are if you do not have basic attitudes”.

The findings of the interview material overall show clearly that the leaders emphasize quite different values when it comes to graduates. How do the graduates themselves assess their expertise gained through police training in relation to carrying out operational police work? The next section will take a closer look at this issue.

3.3. Practice shock

The transition from higher education with theoretical studies to practical work has in many contexts been described as a practice shock (Heggen, 2010). This applies to a number of practical professions – such as teachers, nurses, social workers, child welfare workers – and also to the police officers. In tertiary education, the focus will primarily be directed towards success in the examination, not to solving practical problems in the professional field (Heggen, 2010, p. 69). Practice shock can hardly be described better than by officer 6 when she reflects on the difference between the discipline “Arrest Technique” at the Police College and the practice of this in operational service:

“When we are doing it at school – we have to be very kind to each other - we should not be heavy-handed – and we wear t-shirt and shoes so we`ll not slide on the floor. Outside in the street there are jackets and there are people who are crazy... blood in ... who are black in their eyes. At school (during exercise) you have an arm which maybe is placed in a slightly wrong position”.

There is undoubtedly distance between handholds you learn during education and the practice of those out in the field. In real situations, it tends to be far more aspects one has to deal with compared to in a limited educational situation⁶. This is particularly true for the emotional side of police missions, if we believe leader 8`s account:

“It has been in the wind for a few years now – domestic violence – and the complex situation you get into there. It's a pretty strong impression often – mother who is beaten and crying children. Is this something that can be trained? Is this something the Police College is able to prepare their students for? The practical bit is easier to prepare police students for than the emotional. It turns sad and painful for you as a police officer. I do not know if you manage to train for something like this”.

In this context the practice shock is not only described as an inadequacy in relation to practical handling, but also as an emotional challenge which the graduates are not prepared

⁶ Officer 6 is supported by international research on police training. When the gap between exercises and real life events is large, the training becomes ineffective (Stanislas, 2014a, p. 293).

for. The issue of expectations to police education has been central to the interviews. Is the Police College able to produce ready-trained police officers? – or should the police districts be satisfied with a “half-finished product”, graduates who just have a platform that does not accommodate more than a basis for learning the skills of the profession? Many of the interviewees acknowledge that it is impossible for the police college to deliver a “finished product”. To cope with uniformed police work in its entirety a lot of experience and educational ballast is obviously required. Officer 7 puts it this way:

“You don’t learn properly to be a police officer when you finish your education - that’s when you start to build your own real experience, start to make your own decisions. You may have as many cases as you like at the police college, and be explained that according to police law section 9, you may do this or that, but it’s not until you start to do it on your own that you understand how it is”.

However, a central issue is how long graduates should get in order to develop into accomplished police officers. Leader 9 says he experiences great differences in “cooking time” among the graduates. It is possible to trace different directions in the interview material on the question of “cooking time”. On the one hand I find informants who maintain that the police profession should be learned in the field no matter what you do at the Police College. Officer 8 advocates precisely this when he looks back on his few years in the police service:

“At the beginning, you use a lot of your capacity to do things right, but as you incorporate your behavioral patterns into different types of situations much of the same elements are used. Once you get through them, you free up a lot of mental capacity to think beyond what you did earlier. So you spend more time making a proper assessment – and perhaps use even more capacity on the compassionate part of situations – rather than just the operative. But there is not much you can do with police education, because it is all about experience and confidence”.

The perception of practical policing being learnt through experience is probably something agreed upon by all informants, but parts of the informant group argue more clearly that the educational content is crucial to how long it takes before the graduates are fully functional. Leader 10 argues that the better the education is when exercising in the more acute and sharp part of operational service, the faster the graduates will be able to handle dangerous missions in a responsible manner. Expected “cooking time”, however, seems unreasonably short when graduates come into service immediately after receiving the diploma, and sometimes have to master demanding missions together with a partner who is also a recent graduate. This really expresses a dilemma – a discord between what is possible to demand of graduates on one hand, and what the situation and the audience require on the other.

Leader 11 points out in this connection that the police districts have much to gain from developing a mentoring structure to protect graduates, which ensures that graduates can serve with an experienced practitioner at the beginning of their career⁷. Most police districts in Norway have not formalized this arrangement. Several of the informants are operating with a two-year timespan to enable them to be «warm enough» for the job. Such a timespan will

⁷ A similar mentoring arrangement is practiced in the 2nd year of the three-year program of police education in Norway where police students take part in the regular practical police service throughout the year.

however obviously vary widely between graduates, and it probably varies according to the district in which they work. Stories about uncertain and over cautious police practitioners are prevalent in this interview material – both among officers and managers. Officer 9 puts his words in this way in his recollection of police education:

“What I am left with is that you learn a little about a lot – and it makes you kind of unsure about a great deal. When you have completed it, finished college, you have to spend some time to get back to being yourself. So when you go on a mission – yes, ok it's difficult to talk to kids – but it's still not that difficult. It's almost like it is dangerous to talk to kids who are under 16 because of the legal stuff. I do not quite know how to talk with children, but you spend some time finding yourself again – and daring to do things again”.

It is the rules on judicial examination when children have been exposed to crime this police officer states as an example of the limitations he felt at the beginning of his service (particularly relevant in domestic violence cases). Interestingly enough, he had to put the lessons from the police college to the back of his mind in order to find himself again and master the police job. On the other hand, it is the view of some of the informants that theoretical knowledge does not limit practical policing. It is rather the lack of theoretical knowledge that restricts the practice. Some informants emphasize the necessity of knowledge to discover the opportunities that the law provides, and thus room for maneuver within the operational police service.

Several of the graduates claim however that the Police College is "good" at teaching their students about the limitations of the police service, but not as focused on demonstrating the opportunities in operational service. Officer 10 summarizes this very clearly in his recollection of police education: “It was very much brakes, very little gas pedal! You are afraid of stepping on it – even when it's right”. Several of the officers mention the use of force and specific restrictions in the use of handcuffs as an example when talking about cautious officers. Officer 11 recalls in this connection the following from the police education:

“There was a very strong focus on a cautious approach, and reducing the use of force to the minimum – being very careful with handcuffs – it was said so many times so that you almost had the feeling that it had to be emergency before you could put the handcuffs on anyone. I understand that the purpose of it is to limit the abuse of power, but I think it has gone too far”.

4. Discussion

4.1. Common sense as the guide to police work

Should common sense as guiding principle for operational policing be regarded independently from the specific knowledge that officers learn both during police education and through their own experience in the police role? Does an academic possess similar common sense? – It is highly likely that he would be acting clumsily and inappropriately if he was dressed in a police uniform. When I ask leader 12 about what common sense in policing consists of, the answer sounds like this:

“It's difficult – it is based on the professional knowledge you have, your local knowledge and the knowledge of the individual client – the overall assessment here (...) common sense is based on many things”.

Officer 12 can supplement in this way:

“It has to be a combination of personal experiences and the theory taught at the police college (...) we have been through legislation – when combined with experience – we recognize situations – and thereby act correctly”.

The previously presented "practice theory" is useful for understanding the experiences of this police practitioner, and provides insight into the fact that it is not enough with just common sense as a result of practical experience, but also that theoretical studies are needed for professional practice. Some of the informants point out that common sense in police work is not common sense detached from theory.

It has been increasingly determined both by the Police Directorate management of Norwegian police (Politidirektoratet, 2008) and in the Police College` curriculum that police work should be based on knowledge. Knowledge-based policing can be said to contain both experiential and theoretical/scientific knowledge (Hoel, 2013). It is however a paradox that it is largely the knowledge based on experience that is valued in police culture, and the theoretical/scientific knowledge is correspondingly devalued. Conversely, there is a skepticism towards the experiential knowledge among academics (Hoel, 2013), and Johannesen (2013) is undoubtedly right that there is a cultural conflict between the operative and the academic communities in the police. The theoretical/scientific knowledge is thus an untapped resource for the police. On the other hand, it is debatable whether this knowledge is designed to guide the police in various operational duties and tasks (Cordner and Shain, 2011). Many of the informants both in this study and in previous studies call for a better link between theory and practice in police education (Lagestad, 2014).

John Dewey is considered to be the classical philosopher behind the idea that learning occurs through practice with the famous words of "learning by doing" (Dewey, 2005). In Dewey's theory of learning, activity and experience are fundamental. In this regard, the following questions need to be raised: Should all dissemination of knowledge for police students have a practical context? Is practice the only legitimate context for learning? The police role contains more than the sum of a large number of practical tasks associated with policing. The police are also a key player in modern society, and if you limit the police role to its practical tasks, there is a risk that you will identify only a number of individual trees but not the whole forest (Further discussion of this later). By accepting this argument it becomes impossible to learn the police profession only through practice. Theoretical studies are also needed to understand the overall aspects of the police role.

Heggen refers to several values theoretical knowledge may provide to practical professions. Although theoretical knowledge does not often seem to be directly applicable in practice, this knowledge can help to create meaning for the students (Heggen, 2010, p. 71). In this context, the social sciences may provide police students with a greater understanding of the police role and its function in a modern society. According to Heggen theoretical knowledge can also

have a "designating function", by identifying what is important and what is in the foreground and background when operating in a field. A "semiotic function" refers to theories as an instrument for discussion in the explanation of situations and events. Furthermore, a «rhetorical function» is connected to the ability to express what one feels about something, and put language to phenomena which may contribute to better practice. This is due to a "critical function" that holds the capacity for critical analysis and reflexivity (Heggen, 2010, p. 70, 71). Practitioners get apparently better in their work if they have the ability to continuously assess their practices with a critical eye, in order to adjust themselves and chart a new and better course.

In international research on police education a central question appears about the relationship between higher education and the exercise of police work. Some argue that what police practitioners learn in a classroom is rather useless in the everyday routine of policing (Mureau de Bellaing, 2014). Nevertheless, there are studies showing that higher education for police officers has a positive impact on values like tolerance and resistance to inequality and discrimination (Stanislas, 2014b, p. 61). However, there is a significant difference between attitudes and actions. Studies can more easily establish the impact education has on attitudes. Major challenges exist when measuring the effect of education on police actions because there are so many variables that affect police practice (Stanislas, 2014b, p. 62). Moreover, an important aspect of police practice in many cases is to refrain from acting. "Non-action" is however difficult to evaluate (Stanislas, 2014a, p. 7). The question about the impact of higher education on police practice is largely a matter of faith or doubt. The prevailing ideology in international research on police education is according to Stanislas an optimistic view of humanity, where the enlightened side of human beings is focused on (Stanislas, 2014a, p. 17).

4.2. Specialization of police education

The interview data revealed two conflicting ways of thinking about uniformed police. On the one hand there were leaders who emphasized the special skills when assessing their new employees. Then there was talk about skills in more critical, squeezed situations where force, at worst lethal, is required. When life or health is at stake, or when extremely challenging opponents call upon police action, there is little confidence to be found among those leaders who are critical to the graduates.

The leaders that provided graduates with excellent testimonials emphasized their general skills, primarily their trainability, general knowledge, communication skills, empathy in the situation of others and their general attitudes. The critical leaders agree largely upon this, but do not emphasize these qualities in their assessment of the graduates. When Johannesen (2013) identifies a conflict between different fields of work in the police – such as between academic and operative work, it should be added that cultural differences exist between the various operational groups in the police. Police culture is definitely not a monoculture. There are interesting and clear diversities among uniformed police officers when it comes to views regarding the police role and ways of carrying out policing.

Most of the leaders and graduates are however advocating for more practical training, more operational education during the studies, and a better link between the theoretical and the practical parts of the curricula. There are divergent views about specialization of police education in the interview material. Some informants are in favor of specialization to cultivate the interests of the individual students. The idea is to identify those who have the most interest in the operative field, and make them better equipped for working in the uniformed service among the public. Other informants support the generalist model where it is necessary to equip all students with roughly the same basic package. In the latest curriculum for police education (Politihøgskolen, 2014), it is clearly established that police education is based on the principle of generalist education. In The Police Directorate's plan for expertise needed in the Norwegian police up until 2020, it is maintained that the generalist should be the main player in the Norwegian police (Politidirektoratet, 2008). The graduates are supposed to have knowledge and skills to be able to serve in the three main disciplines in policing, which are investigation, crime prevention and operational policing.

An important question arises in this connection: Will increased specialization during police education make the students better prepared for operational policing in the long run? In Birkeland's essay "The police generalist" (Birkeland, 2007) he argues that it is precisely the breadth of education that makes police practitioners good in the uniformed service:

"The generalist has the ability to see and think holistically, seeing correlation, thinking and manoeuvring generally. A generalist is someone who understands their mission in relation to the social reality he or she works. For the police it must partly be about what the police really are" (Birkeland, 2007 p. 37).

In addition, the generalist should not only see their own work in relation to the external social reality, but also the «inner characteristics» which form the main direction of policing. To conduct policing in a satisfactory manner, it is necessary for any police officer working in the operational division to have a basic knowledge of investigation and crime prevention. For example, the interpretation of evidence (immediate investigation) is necessary in various emergency cases.

Specialization in the form of a reinforcement of skills when carrying arms during uniformed policing is clearly present in this interview material. As a kind of corrective to this, I find interesting reflections from leader 13. He worries about the increasing focus on emergency preparedness in the police, and fears one-sided emphasis on these values at the expense of other operational skills. He says:

“So I think it is important that the police college does not fall into the trap and throw themselves into the discussion regarding emergency preparedness and stuff. Just today the state budget came out where millions have been allocated to more training in “active shooting”. But how often do we encounter this? How often do we not meet people just at the door and need to talk our way in or simply calm down people (...) Consequently I do not think the school should become a training camp for the SWAT team”⁸.

⁸ The same group in Norway bears the name “Beredskapstroppen” or the tag name “Delta”.

In his opinion it is the fear of repeating the police failure during the terrorist tragedy in Norway on 22.07.2011 which characterizes the current police mentality, but he warns that this fear is dominating the police education. It is a concentration of the operational tasks he fears, where the wide-ranging, every-day tasks involved in normal policing disappear from sight.

5. Conclusions

The ideological division that emerges in this study is about what kind of knowledge and skills are valued and emphasized in the police profession. A clear distinction lies between a wide and narrow focus on the police service. Police practitioners that emphasize the whole scope of the police service express far more positive attitudes to the education of police generalists than those that emphasize the sharp and threatening part of the duty. How relevant and valuable the educational programs are perceived to be, relates largely to where one places oneself in this ideological landscape. Despite police practitioners maintaining that common sense and practical experience are the gateway to the police service, this type of knowledge cannot be seen as being detached from studies and theory. Yet there is a considerable distance between a college education and practical policing. This is partly reflected in the “practice shock” signifying the transition from college to police work. Police education is not only aimed towards all possible practical tasks of policing, but also significantly towards a holistic understanding of the police mission in society. Police education cannot only focus on what the police do, but also on what the police are.

The interview data provide no clear advice for law enforcement authorities or the Police College about course changes in police education. Although the academic content of police training has been criticized on a regular basis since the establishment of the police college, this study provides support to the theoretical pillar of this education. The study also reinforces the acknowledged belief that theoretical and practical dimensions of education should interconnect, but never so closely that only the practical context legitimizes the content of syllabuses and teaching. This study also draws police education and the police role in to the science of professions. By doing so, this study contributes towards placing police science into a broader scientific network.

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