Police Research Methodology: Studying Police Officers Who Deviate from ‘the Police Culture’

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ABSTRACT

Research on the police force has typically been occupied with seeking out commonalities between police officers rather than differences. This has amounted to a vast volume of literature on the shared occupational culture of police officers that has pointed to several problematic aspects of policing. However, in this paper, I argue for the value of studying individual police officers who are doing things differently from their colleagues as a method for actually engaging with these problematic aspects. To demonstrate the viability of this methodological approach to police research, I draw on an encounter with a particular police officer from my own empirical work. I argue that conducting case studies of such police officers and describing their practices and attitudes can be a valuable contribution to the development of better and more socially just policing. These case studies of how things can be done differently can aid in imagining new and better police practices.

Keywords

police culture, case studies, methodology, impact

Since the inception of the field of police research, a recurring theme has been trying to uncover how police officers see the world collectively and how they share similar attitudes, values and ways of being. This is what has been termed ‘the police culture’, ‘the police sub-culture’ or ‘the police occupational culture’. In this paper, I will argue for the value of studying those police officers who deviate from how police officers typically have been described: those who do not conform to the orthodox account of how police officers see the world.

1. Acknowledgements:

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2. The terms are used interchangeably throughout this paper.
The literature on police culture has contributed to our understanding of certain problems and challenges which might hinder socially just policing. These include, among many other factors, different discriminatory practices in the way police officers use their discretionary power (Holmberg, 2000; Van Maanen, 1978), as well as a reluctance towards organisational change (Chan, 1996) and a narrow conception of the police mandate among officers, resulting in an understanding of themselves as exclusively ‘crime fighters’, while other police work is relegated to a peripheral role (Bittner, 1974). These studies have all provided us with valuable knowledge and insight into the workings of the police force. Specifically, they have alerted us to some problems in the way policing has been carried out.

The reason that the shared culture among police officers has been of interest has been ascribed to the considerable discretion they enjoy in their work. This discretion of individual police officers gives considerable scope for their actions to deviate from the law and organisational policy. This means that the law and policies are not sufficient to describe why a police officer acts as he or she does. Police culture was then developed by police researchers in the 1960s as a means of understanding the actual practices of the police (Reiner, 2010).

It is of general consensus today, that police culture should not be understood in a ‘monolithic’ or static manner (Reiner, 2010, p. 116). That is to say, that the culture is embodied in individuals who enjoy autonomy. Loftus (2010) has argued that, even though our understanding of police culture relies heavily on ethnographies conducted decades ago, the underlying world-view of police officers displays remarkable continuity. With reference to Skolnick (1966), she argues that the police culture endures because the basic pressures associated with the police role have not been removed. Skolnick (1966) identified these three basic pressures, half a century ago, as being: (1) the potential dangers that officers face in their encounters with the public, (2) the authority they need to sustain in such encounters, and (3) the pressure to be efficient. Skolnick (1966) argued that these basic pressures shaped the ‘working personality’ of the police officers that he was observing, and Loftus (2010) argues that it is still these pressures that shape the police occupational culture today. Furthermore, Loftus (2010) argues that, although there might be complexities within the police identity, these should not be accepted at the expense of overlooking the continued dominance of the key cultural features.

On the other hand, the concept of police culture has also been widely criticised. Waddington (1999) has criticised the concept for predominately relying upon its ‘condemnatory potential’, instead of its ‘explanatory power’. Waddington (1999), has also criticised the characterisation of a malign police culture for being principally dependent on what police officers might be saying to their peers and not on the actual police practices and citizen-police encounters. According to Waddington (1999), the ‘canteen culture’ of peer-to-peer banter amongst police officers, that might seem very problematic to outsiders, is in fact designed to give meaning to inherently stressful and difficult occupational experiences and it is not necessarily a reflection of how the police act when interacting with the public.

According to Sklansky (2007), the preoccupation with describing the police as a group has led to what he calls a ‘subcultural schema.’ That is to say, an understanding that ‘police officers think alike; that they are paranoid, insular, and intolerant; that they intransigently oppose change; that they must be rigidly controlled from the outside, or at least from the
top’ (p. 20). In addition to this, Sklansky (2007) argues that this preoccupation with the subculture of police officers makes it ‘hard to see differences between officers, new complexities of police identity, and dynamic processes within the police workforce’ (p. 21).

However, several authors have actually noted and addressed the need for studying within-category differences in the police. These authors have either described different segments of the police organisation, arguing that they each have their own subculture (Wilson, 1978; Foster, 2003; Graner, 2004; Manning, 2007), or they have developed typologies of different police orientations and styles (Broderick, 1973; Muir, 1977; Walsh, 1977).

Looking beyond the narrow field of policing research, the idea of ‘culture’ has also been criticised in anthropology, the discipline that might traditionally have been most closely associated with the concept (Brumann, 1999). Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1996: 470) famously argued that, ‘culture is the essential tool for making other’, i.e. that culture and subculture always implies a separation into groups who are thought of as having some distinct features, and that this risks freezing and emphasising differences in a static manner (Abu-Lughod, 1996). Because of this, Abu-Lughod suggests that, despite its long usefulness, the notion of culture ‘may now have become something anthropologists would want to work against in the theories, their ethnographic practice, and their ethnographic writing’ (Abu-Lughod, 1996: 466). However, other anthropologists, such as Christoph Brumann, have argued that it is certain usages of the concept ‘culture’, such as when it is used in a static manner, and not the concept in itself, that are problematic. Therefore, Brumann (1999) argues that ‘culture’ should be retained as a convenient term for designating the clusters of common concepts, emotions, and practices that arise when people interact regularly’ (p. 1).

The purpose of this paper is not to evaluate or judge whether or not the term ‘police culture’ is a good analytical concept. Instead, it is to suggest an alternative to studying the shared features of groups, regardless of whether the specific concept of ‘culture’ is invoked. I wish to take the argument for studying heterogeneities in the police even further than those authors who have argued for developing typologies of different police personalities or have argued that the police organisation is made up of several smaller subcultures and segments. Instead, I argue for the value of studying individual police officers who deviate from the norm of how police officers typically act, or at least how they have been described as acting. Drawing on different authors who have each written on social science methodology, I argue that these kinds of case studies could provide a valuable contribution in themselves, without any attempt of formal generalisation (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Law, 2004; Clarke et al., 2017). By studying those police officers who are opposing a sometimes-problematic police culture, the critical potential already present in the empirical situation might be leveraged and used to develop policing in more socially just directions, and, by emphasising difference over commonalities, this approach could help to counterbalance the great majority of studies in policing that focus on sameness. However, this approach is not proposed as a replacement to studying the shared beliefs and attitudes of police officers, but rather as a novel and alternative perspective that might produce new insights, which might help improve on possibly problematic or ineffective policing practices.

As this paper should primarily be read as an argument about research methodology, I will only draw on my own empirical research to provide some examples for discussion.
(for further information about my empirical research, please see Kammersgaard, forthcoming). First, I will summarise the broader discussion about generalisation and universalism in the social sciences. Subsequently, I will introduce some of my own empirical research; specifically, I will describe a police officer who actively opposes the practices and attitudes that have been described as problematic and as characterising police forces in the literature. Lastly, I will discuss the utility of studying the practices of individual police officers as case studies, and I will argue that these cases might provide valuable information about how to improve policing.

SOCIAL SCIENCE METHODOLOGY: GENERALISING, SUMMARISING AND UNIVERSALISING

It is not surprising that there has been an emphasis placed on trying to describe the police as a group and their shared culture, as most social science has traditionally sought commonalities, while evading and avoiding representations of differences and contradictions. As Clarke et al. (2017) have argued, ‘centralizing tendencies, stereotyping, and simplifications’ are inherent in much, if not most, social science (p. 173). However, as they also state, these centralising and simplifying tendencies are ‘constantly deleting heterogeneities from our vision’ (Clarke et al., 2017, p. 173) and, because of that, this way of practising social science is increasingly being questioned, especially after what has been termed either the post-modern, post-structural and/or interpretive turn in social science (Clarke et al., 2017).

Law (2004) has argued that we, as social scientists, need to change many of our ‘methodological habits’ (p. 9). These include: ‘the desire for certainty; the expectation that we can usually arrive at more or less stable conclusions about the way things really are; the belief that as social scientists we have special insights that allow us to see further than others into certain parts of social reality; and the expectations of generality that are wrapped up in what is often called “universalism”’ (Law, 2004, p. 9).

The idea is that we should stay with the ‘messiness’ of social reality and not try to hygienically wash this messiness away. This means staying ‘true to the complexity’ (Clarke, 2017, p. 9) and imagining social science methods that no longer seek ‘the definite, the repeatable, the more or less stable’ (Law, 2004, p. 6). According to Law (2004), social science methods still aim to ‘obtain the best and technically most robust possible account of reality’ (p. 9). However, this attempt to capture reality as a ‘determinate set of discoverable entities and processes’ is destined to fail (Law, 2004, p. 9). As Law (2004, p. 6) argues, there is ‘no doubt that local structures can be identified, but … the world in general defies any attempt at overall orderly accounting’. Because of this, we need to reimagine our social scientific methods. They cannot, Law (2004, p. 9) argues, be seen any more as a ‘system for offering more or less bankable guarantees’, and as a tool for guiding us ‘more or less quickly and securely to … knowledge about the processes at work in a single world’. Social scientific methods should not be seen as a short circuit and a sure-fire way to attain knowledge about the world. Instead, social science research will always be ‘slow and uncertain’ because of the ‘flux and indeterminacy’ of the world it tries to capture (Law, 2004, p. 9).

In the same vein, Flyvbjerg (2006) has argued that formal generalisation ‘is considerably overrated as the main source of scientific progress’ (p. 226). According to Flyvbjerg (2001),
formal generalisation is ‘only one of many ways to create and accumulate knowledge’ and
the fact that a piece of knowledge ‘cannot be formally generalized does not mean that it
cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or in a
society’ (p. 76). Flyvbjerg (2001) is also sceptical about the possibility of establishing uni-
versal knowledge, meaning ‘knowledge which is invariable in time and space, and which is
achieved with the aid of analytical rationality’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 56). Flyvbjerg (2001)
argues that the ideal of producing universalised knowledge has come close to being the
only legitimate view of what constitutes ‘science’, even to such an extent that social scien-
tists, ‘which are not and probably never can be scientific in this sense’ (p. 56), are striving
for and trying to legitimate themselves in this particular scientific ideal of generalising and
universalising.

According to Flyvbjerg, social science is good where natural science is not, and vice
versa. Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that, just as social science has not been able to produce pre-
dictive theory and universals in the way that natural science does so well, so too has natural
science had ‘little to offer to the reflexive goals, values, and interests that is the precondition
for an enlightened development in any society’ (p. 53). According to Flyvbjerg (2001), the
social sciences should refrain from producing universals and formal theory, and instead do
what they do best, i.e. ‘analysis and interpretations of the status of values and interests in
society aimed at social commentary and action’ (p. 60). By doing this kind of social
research, Flyvbjerg (2001) argues, we may ‘successfully transform social science from what
is fast becoming a sterile academic activity, which is undertaken mostly for its own sake
and in increasing isolation from a society on which it has little effect’ (p. 166). In other
words, practising social science in this way, according to Flyvbjerg (2001), might help
bypass the ‘so what’ question that social science that is undertaken for purely academic rea-
sons might often encounter from the general public (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 156).

Social science, according to Flyvbjerg (2001), should be an activity ‘done in public for
the public’ with the aim being ‘sometimes to clarify, sometimes to intervene, sometimes to
generate new perspectives’ (p. 166) in order to increase our understanding of the present
and help us deliberate about the future. Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that social scientists should
aim to develop ‘partial answers’ and ‘such answers would be input in the ongoing social
dialogue about the problems and risks we face and how things may be done differently’
(p. 61). Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that this kind of social science can be practised in many
different ways as long as ‘the public has use for the answers in their deliberations about
praxis’ (p. 163). However, Flyvbjerg (2006) stresses that he does not argue against social
science that tries to establish generalised knowledge. This kind of knowledge is also impor-
tant for a sound development of social science, and is significant, for example, in attempt-
ing to understand to what degree a certain phenomenon is present in a group. On the other
hand, he also argues that the balance between general, theoretical (context-independent)
knowledge and concrete, practical (context-dependent) knowledge is biased in favour of
the former, rather than the latter (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In the following section, I will present
an example from my own empirical data. I will link this example to the wider debate about
research methodology in police research and the social sciences and I will then go on to
discuss the utility of studying police officers whose worldview may be contrary to their col-
leagues, as a viable research agenda in itself.
GOING AGAINST THE OCCUPATIONAL CULTURE: AN EMPIRICAL EXAMPLE

As part of an ongoing project about the policing of open drug scenes in Denmark, I have conducted several interviews along with observations, document and discourse analysis. I am currently investigating two particular open drug scenes in Denmark, one in Copenhagen and one in Aarhus. The research is aimed at investigating both how public drug use is being constituted as a problem and what specific ‘techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour’ (Foucault, 1997: 82) that goes into governing this ‘problem’.

However, in this paper I will focus on a particular police officer whom I encountered when I was investigating the open drug scene in Copenhagen. I have also conducted observations with this police officer on patrol, but here I will principally draw on an interview that I conducted with him, as I am still in the midst of doing the fieldwork and analysing my findings. Consequently, the following data only reflect the attitudes of the police officer and his discourse about his own practice. The officer could very well behave differently to how he describes his behaviour. In other words, there could be a discrepancy between the ideals he expresses in the interview and his actual practice. However, the purpose of this paper is not to present my empirical findings. The purpose is to discuss police research methodology and consequently I use this empirical example only to support the central methodological argument of the paper.

The police officer upon whom I will focus my attention was one of two officers who were assigned to have the day-to-day responsibility of an open drug scene located in central Copenhagen, just south-west of the Central Railway Station in an area called Inner Vesterbro. A new policy was introduced in Denmark in 2012 that allowed the municipalities to run and administer drug consumption rooms, where heavily addicted drug users could bring their own drugs to consume while being supervised by professional health personnel. Since then, two drug consumption rooms were established in Inner Vesterbro, one of which is the largest in Northern Europe. With the introduction of the drug consumption rooms it was also decided that possession of illicit drugs for personal use would not “normally be prosecuted in the immediate vicinity of the drug consumption rooms, if the person was 18 years or older, and because of a longer and persistent use of illicit drugs, had a strong addiction to the drug in question” (Ministry of Health, 2015, p. 19, own translation).

A precise definition of what should be considered in the ‘immediate vicinity’ of a drug consumption room was not specified, and it was left to the municipality and the local police to define this area. The Municipality of Copenhagen and the Copenhagen Police Department decided on a somewhat broad definition of this ‘non-enforcement’ area that included most of Inner Vesterbro and, consequently, most of the open drug scene in this area. In other words, drug possession has been de facto decriminalised in this particular area, since the drug consumption rooms have been established, but only if you are over 18 years old and an addicted drug user. Decriminalisation meant that the police no longer had to enforce the drug legislation and ‘chase’ the drug users around the neighbourhood, as had been the strategy since the 1980s and up until that point (Houborg, Frank, & Bjerge, 2014).

The fact that drug law enforcement was no longer a focus opened up a new space for policing of the area (Houborg et al., 2014). In particular, one police officer took this decriminalisation as an opportunity to engage with the drug using community in a very different way than the police did previously.
The police officer worked within a programme called ‘Your Officer’, which had the purpose of strengthening relations between the police and the community. The programme was, and still is, active in all of Copenhagen, where one or two officers are assigned to the different neighbourhoods in which they have the main responsibility of engaging with the community in proactive ways. In this way, this is a prototypical example of a community-policing programme, which has been a large part of the reform agenda of modern policing in the last couple of decades (Cordner, 2014). At the same time, the label of ‘community policing’ has been described as an ‘ill-defined concept that may mean many different things in different countries, or even within one country’ (Punch, 2000). However, the concepts are generally associated with policing strategies, which aim to build ties with the local communities by considering citizen inputs, engaging in positive interaction and forming various partnerships (Cordner, 2014). However, this specific officer had been assigned to do this type of community work at the open drug scene of Inner Vesterbro, a place that is cohabited by drug addicts, the homeless and sex workers as well as ‘hipsters’, small-business owners and young couples with children. To engage with such a diverse community, with potentially widely conflicting views on the proper use of public space, can be seen as a challenging task. However, the curious aspect about how this officer worked, I would argue, is that he did not see the drug users as a mere nuisance or disorderly presence, but as community members with a right to expression and police protection.

In the rest of this section, I will try to pinpoint how this case and this police officer diverge from the usual conception of how police officers act and think as they have been depicted in policing research. This is not an attempt to debunk the arguments of these studies, but rather to emphasise that there is a great deal of difference between police officers and between their practices, and that this difference might be leveraged for those who wish to produce change or development in police organisations. I will not revisit every aspect of how the police subculture has been depicted, but instead choose a couple of central aspects where the case contradicts the literature. This will act as an illustration for the following discussion of the utility of studying police officers who contradict the usual description of the way the police see and act in this world.

The very first time I met this police officer he told me that he was inspired by the poster that Viggo Vagnby created in 1953 to brand Copenhagen. This poster is one of the most iconic and well-known tourist advertisements for the city. It depicts a mother duck and her ducklings crossing the street, while a friendly-looking officer is holding back pedestrians, cyclists, cars and trams. Later, when I conducted a tape-recorded interview with the police officer he brought up the poster again:

TK: Maybe you want to say something about what motivated you to become a police officer and what motivates you in your work today. Is there a difference?

Police officer: When I joined the police, I wanted to make a change for people and I think I have landed in a place where I can do that. What I did not know was that I would end up working to make a change for marginalised and ostracised people. Back then, I thought that my goal was to catch criminals and help Mr. and Mrs. Hansen [Danish expression for middle-class people in nuclear homes]. Back then, I would never have imagined that I would be doing what I do today. Or maybe … because I have always been fascinated by the poster by Viggo Vagnby, with the police officer who helps the...
ducklings across the street. That's me. But now it's not ducklings, now it is our street people. (Interview with police officer)

When the officer mentions the 'street people' as the ducklings crossing the street, he is, of course, talking about the homeless, drug-using community which inhabits the open drug scene at Inner Vesterbro. Street people here functions as an umbrella term to encompass these different individuals and groups who might be marginalised in different ways, but who all share the characteristic that they spend most of their time on the streets or at the various charities in this neighbourhood.

A central aspect of the police identity, as it has been described in the literature, is the tendency of officers to divide the world into demarcated categories of good and bad people. Based on visual characteristics, citizens are categorised into the decent people and the 'assholes' (Van Maanen, 1978; Holmberg, 2000). How officers treat people is dependent on which category they are ascribed to. While the decent people will generally receive lenient treatment and be let 'off the hook' even though they might have committed a minor offence, the 'assholes' are far more likely to receive a fine if the law permits the officer to do so. This group of people are also sometimes spoken of as 'police property' (Lee, 1981). It is a group that is wholly or partly criminalised because of their lifestyle: drug users, prostitutes, delinquent juveniles, the homeless; categories over whom the police successfully exert superior power. Because of their lifestyle, and because of prejudice, they are much more likely to be subjected to police powers than others. As these people do not have any political power or political 'voice', the police are relatively free to use and abuse their powers against this group.

Contrary to how the police are usually depicted in their handling of this particular group, the officer I was interviewing showed great sympathy for precisely these people who would usually been seen as 'police property'. To him, this group had the greatest need for police protection and they should be actively sought out to offer them the services of the police. Very much in contrast to how the police are usually depicted as acting in a discriminatory fashion against this particular group, they were seen not as a source of problems for the neighbourhood, but primarily as a group that needed the protection and services of the police:

Police officer: We have a lot of marginalised people at the open drug scene on Inner Vesterbro where I am the local police officer. Here I work within a programme called Your Officer. The aim of this programme is to increase the presence of the local police and thus make the police more available to the citizens. It takes something extra to make yourself available to marginalised people, who might have a strained relationship with the police, so I have to make an extra effort. I usually say that I am a low-threshold offer. There are no barriers that prevent you from talking to me. What I have found is that the relationship is of great importance. If they know me, then they will come to me with something that they might not usually tell the police. I see that as something positive.

TK: So you have this focus – you said it a bit yourself – that you particularly see yourself as a police officer for the street people?

Police officer: Yeah, in that way, because Mrs. Hansen in her apartment can lock her door. She has a family and a network. She can call 112 or 114, and know what she is supposed to do when something happens. These people [the street people] are living with this [victimisation] as a fact of life and to make them citizens with rights, as everyone else, we have to come to them and make ourselves available. (Interview with police officer)
In this excerpt, the police officer emphasises his vocation towards providing the socially marginalised with basic citizens’ rights. He emphasises his role in protecting the most socially marginalised from harm. That is to say, those who might otherwise have a hard time gaining the police services that are offered to other citizens.

Based on the police officer’s remarks, one is not given the impression that he thinks of himself exclusively or even primarily as a ‘crime fighter’ (Cain, 1973; Holdaway, 1983), i.e. a particular understanding of the police role, which, according to Loftus (2010), is still prevalent and strong in many officers’ self-conception. This is the understanding that the main objective of the police is to catch criminals and bring them to justice.

It seems as if this police officer ascribes more to the role as that of someone ‘helping’, more akin to that of a social worker, than the ethos of ‘crime fighting’, embodied in the orthodox account of a police officer. He also explicitly states that he draws more on concepts from social work than from those common in police vocabulary. The following excerpt shows how the police officer sees the open drug scene as primarily being a social problem and not a criminal one:

These are people that commit a lot of crime, but above all this is a social problem. If we [the police] can support that social process, so they get a better life, then there will also be fewer who go out and commit thefts and robberies. That’s what this is all about. Even though they might say that it does not say pedagogue on the back of my vest, it says police officer. But we also have to be pedagogues, if we are supposed to support this social work.

TK: You say that it doesn’t say ‘pedagogue’ on the back of your vest. What is the difference between your role and their role?

Police officer: I am a police officer. However, I work as a pedagogue. Because it’s more effective compared to working as a police officer.

TK: Do you have more in common with a social pedagogue than the average police officer?

Police officer: I think you would say that, yes. And I use the tools and methods of a social pedagogue instead of the tools usually employed by a police officer …

TK: Would you say that you think differently than most police officers?

Police officer: I would say so. It’s not sure that I would say it out loud though. I don’t think I should go around and tell people how to do their job. But I do it this way. Then they can shake their head at me or they can say that it’s actually working pretty good. But there are some who shake their heads. I know that. (Interview with police officer)

As is evident from the above quote, this police officer thinks of himself as being different from most of his colleagues. Because the police officer understands drug abuse and homelessness as a social problem, he primarily draws on concepts and practices of social work and pedagogical work. This also means that he contrasts himself with the ‘crime fighter’ and with some of his colleagues. Consequently, and because of this, some of his fellow police officers ‘shake their heads’ at him, as he phrases it.

The police officer also stressed the importance of the foot patrol in his approach. He prefers to do this patrolling alone, as he is convinced, in that way, that he is more approachable to the citizens. When conducting this foot patrol, he has the opportunity to visit the different facilities, such as the homeless shelter and drug consumption rooms, when ‘nothing is happening’, as he phrases it. This is very important to him, as this is the time when he can engage in relational work and getting to know the people and the status of the drug scene:
It is important to just walk around and hang out on the street and have those small ‘ping-pong conversations’ with those you meet, because in that way they get to know me. Then they do not get the impression that I am someone who comes when something is wrong or that I come to investigate something. I am not someone who comes to check anything or anyone. I just come to ask if they need help and if they are OK. When they realise that I am actually there for their sake, then trust emerges, and I can use that in my work. (Interview with police officer)

As is evident from this statement, the ‘foot patrolling’ in which he is engaged, does not primarily relate to looking for suspicious persons or activities, which is normally the defining feature of doing ‘patrol work’ (Sacks, 1972). This kind of ‘patrolling’ is much more closely related to making himself available to those who might need his help and services, but who are reluctant to show up at the police station to make a formal statement. As he explains it:

I’m not going through people’s pockets and bags and I do not walk around with that mistrust … the natural mistrust of the police … I leave that behind me … I do not pull out my police notebook, because that is also a barrier … That can be scary for some people and can make them refrain from telling me what it is that is worrying them … When you live as a socially marginalised individual, one that is a victim of violence, extortion and sexual violations, then it can maybe give a sense of safety to talk to a police officer. Tell what you are experiencing. And it can also make you feel safe, to know that we have an agreement, that I don’t do anything, unless we agree about it. So you don’t have to be afraid to tell me and that is really important. (Interview with police officer)

It is clear that this is a quite different form of patrol than those involved in crime investigation or strict order maintenance in an area. You could say that the police officer goes to great lengths not to display himself as being ‘the law’. He refrains from using any of the legal tools which an officer usually would use, such as documenting and starting criminal proceedings. However, even though he cannot be considered a ‘crime fighter’, he is still, nevertheless, committed to reducing crime, in the sense that he is committed to reducing the harm, the violence and the victimisation of the drug users in the open drug scene. Still, he principally does this by drawing on non-legal tools. More often than not, he refrains from pressing formal charges and instead engages in a kind of conflict resolution on the streets:

The good resolution can maybe be that, if you feel threatened by somebody, then you tell me, so I know it. Then I know to be observant when he’s there because he does this and this to you. In that way, you can shield them, and they get to talk to a representative of society … It can be someone who has stolen something from another – it happens all the time. You’re sitting in the drug consumption room, dozing off after doing your drugs, and then your things are gone when you wake. It only takes a second, and that is the way it is, everybody is stealing from each other all the time. And to avoid that these conflicts escalate, then we say ‘hey, we need to talk about this’ in peace and quiet and ‘maybe you have something in your pocket that you need to return’. Also, if there is a bad mood in the drug consumption rooms or in the Men’s Home, then the staff can call us and say, ‘Do you have the time to stop by, because we are afraid that this situation might escalate’. And then we do that. And a lot of times it is enough to just stop by and say ‘hey, how is it going’, maybe just put your arm around the shoulder of the one who is causing trouble and say: ‘Can you tell me what’s wrong?’. This can sometimes calm people down. (Interview with police officer)

In this way, the officer mostly engages in a kind of on-the-street conflict resolution. Instead of pressing legal charges against offenders, he tries to solve the problems by talking to the
offenders or mediating between the offender and the victim. The officer claims that the ongoing relational work that he does by just being present at the drug scene is invaluable in this type of policing. It is decisive that the people know him, if he is to be able to calm them down without using any legal action whatsoever. When asked about his procedure if he was called by the Men’s Home, he put it like this:

I can tell you what I don’t do. The thing that my colleagues do over and over again. They drive to the Men’s Home, exit the vehicle and enter the facility. And then they say: ‘who called the police?’ That’s what the police normally do. They go and find the caller to find out what has happened. But it should be done in a much more discreet way. Because we [the police] are leaving again and then we leave the social workers with these unstable and paranoid people, and then everything can happen. That’s also the thing that can make the social workers avoid calling us when something happens. Because it just gets worse when the police have been there and left again. (Interview with police officer)

In this excerpt, the police officer explicitly contrasts his own practice with the usual police practice and with the practice of his colleagues. This shows that he understands his own practice as not just different from a universalised and generalised depiction of a police officer found in the literature, but that he actually also sees himself as doing things differently than his own colleagues.

THE QUESTION OF UTILITY: A CASE STUDY OF AN OUTLIER

Of course, this case does not refute the characteristics about police culture that have been established by the existing studies on how the police generally act and think. There is always an exception to the rule when generalising about police culture and behaviour. It is in no way the point of this paper to devalue the studies that attempt to generalise about the police based on larger samples. It is, however, the goal to raise the discussion of whether something worthwhile could come from studying these very exceptions to the rule.

Turner and Rowe (2017) have questioned the practical relevance in continuing to analyse the shared beliefs and culture of police officers. As they argue, the attributes that have been proposed to characterise the culture of the police, might very well be true to some extent, but the utility of continuing to see the police through this cultural lens is a great deal less clear. They further question what significance we should attach to the features that have been identified in the police research and ask whether these are of sufficient importance to be of more than mere ‘academic interest’ (Turner & Rowe, 2017).

I will not try to judge whether research on police culture is of more than academic interest; however, it is fair to say that, for the most part, police research is not in the business of uncovering fundamental truths about human behaviour, and, as such, it should be thought of as an ‘applied science’ and not a ‘basic science’. If police research does not then lead to better policing and policies, then it is largely specious. Based on this, it is reasonable to ask whose decision a piece of police research might inform and how (Caulkins, 2017).

In continuation of this issue, one might ask what the practical relevance of studying individual police officers as an alternative to studying the police as a cultural collective might be. In many ways, you could say that the police officer presented above is the antith-
esis to how police officers are usually described in the literature on police culture. This again, I should stress, does not mean that this case refutes the studies that aim to generalise about police behaviour. This case would simply be deemed an outlier in traditional social science terminology. However, there might be some valuable information to be harvested from such an outlier case.

Flyvbjerg (2006) has written extensively on the role of case studies in social science. He argues that the case study has generally been misunderstood in social science and that social science would benefit from a larger number of case studies. Flyvbjerg (2006) specifically argues that, ‘when the objective is to achieve the greatest possible information on a given problem or phenomenon’ (p. 229), relying on a random sample might not be the best possible strategy and if conducting a case study, it might not even be the most representative case that provides the best information. The reason for this is that ‘the typical or average case is often not the richest in information’ (p. 229). An ‘unusual’ case might provide more valuable information about a given phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). These cases Flyvbjerg (2006) calls extreme or deviant cases, and they are either ‘especially problematic or especially good’ (p. 230).

Based on the data presented earlier, I think it would be fair to say that the officer in my example sees himself as different from how police officers usually are described in the literature on police culture. Much of the research on the police or police culture contains, either explicitly or implicitly, a critique of the practices of the police. Many of these studies have revealed how the police discriminate and act in ways that are less than desirable. As shown above, the police officer in my empirical data presents himself differently from this in pivotal ways and I would argue that, by doing otherwise, the police officer I have studied might actually show a path to resolve some of these problems.

CHANGING AND DEVELOPING POLICE PRACTICES

If one wants to have an impact on policing, there seems to be two pathways to take. One of these might aim to influence the police organisation from ‘within’, by having the organisation adopt one’s research results directly and use them to develop police practices. The other possibility is trying to change public opinion and, by that, put political pressure on the police organisation from ‘without’.

Hartmann, Hestehave, Høgh, and Rønn (2018) have argued that it might be ‘naïve to believe that going public with your critique and ideas about what needs to be changed in the police organisation will necessarily be helpful in pushing research conclusions and recommendation through’ (p. 20). Instead, they argue for an ‘embedded police research’ that seeks to ‘contribute actively to changes of policing, by taking on the role of cultivators and educators in empowering and enabling knowledgeable policing from within the organisation’ (Hartmann et al., 2018, p. 9).

I would argue that criticism of problematic police practices certainly has its place, and that some of the research that has shown police discrimination based on race, social class or other characteristics that should be irrelevant to police decisions has made important contributions by alerting us to certain problematics with policing. However, I would also argue that these kinds of studies might have difficulties in actually producing a change in
these problematic police practices. As the police force are known to be a very critique-averse organisation, more often than not these kinds of research results would probably generate significant resistance and denial of the conclusions. For the police, it can be politically unfeasible to even acknowledge that there are problems, such as ethnic profiling, because the acknowledgement, in itself, would spawn public criticism.

Because of this, police research that is critical of police practices might not succeed in generating changes in the police organisation, even though the conclusions might be wholly appropriate. These studies might draw some public attention and may, if the timing is right, generate political pressure that can force the police to acknowledge the research. However, this might prove very difficult. To draw a parallel, criminologists studying criminal justice and prisons have argued against punitive measures for decades, and, evidently, this does not seem to have had a lot of impact on public opinion on punishment (Valverde, 2006).

However, it should also be stressed that it is important to consider who it is that defines the research goals if police research is to be done from ‘within’ the organisation. If it is the police organisation itself that defines the goals of research, wider societal goals and interests might be given a secondary priority, and the researcher might risk adopting the ‘problem definitions’ of the police (Holmberg, 2014). Yet, by focusing on ‘outlier’ police officers and what it is about their specific, maybe unorthodox, views and practices that might transcend the common critique of the police, a critical potential is indeed introduced to the analysis.

By focusing on how things are being done differently than the norm, the analysis can emphasise implicit forms of actual existing modes of critique, in the empirical situation (Sonderegger, 2012). When the police officer says that his colleagues usually do things in this way, but that he does not, he is actually offering a critique of existing and prevalent police practices. By focusing on the already existing forms of critique present in the situation, the researcher refrains from the role of all-knowing scholar, who has a privileged access to see what is ‘really going on’ and instead focuses on how critique is already practised by those implicated in the situation under study (Latour, 2004). In this way, by describing alternative and ‘deviant’ ways of policing, we can visualise how policing could be practised in a different manner.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this paper, I have tried to make some suggestions as to how studying police officers who do things differently might aid in developing policing. Instead of describing the commonalities between police officers, which has been a prevalent objective in police research, I have argued that studying police officers who differ from the norm might prove a useful approach. Police officers that go against the (sometimes problematic) cultural norms of the police profession might give an insight into how to change these very norms. I have also argued that explicating good police practices might be an even more promising way to optimise, improve or change policing than pointing out and criticising problematic police practices.

Of course, this kind of research cannot stand alone. Because of the power possessed by the police force, it should always be subjected to critical scrutiny. The approach to studying
the police I have here offered should in no way be seen as an alternative to critical police research that seeks hold the police accountable to notions of fairness, legitimacy and justice. Rather, it should be regarded as a complementary mode of research, which is specifically interested in guiding the decision-making of police organisations in a more direct manner.

The work that the police officer from my empirical example does shows a path forward for a new form of policing, namely one that is aligned and allied with the social and harm reduction initiatives directed at marginalised drug users instead of opposing and working against these. It is a kind of policing that seeks to support the social workers that are trying to help this highly marginalised demographic. Describing and explicating how this works could provide a genuinely bottom-up approach to the development of better policing practices towards marginalised citizens.

However, to adequately assess and describe his practice, it would be necessary to observe it first-hand. Thus, the next step of the analysis is to observe, describe and explicate the police practice and methods of this officer. What I have here offered is in no respect the full analysis, it is a methodological argument and a defence of the viability of this approach (but see Kammersgaard, forthcoming).

Another factor I have not addressed is the structural and political aspects of this case. The policing that the police officer in my example is practising would not be possible under a different political regime. If drug possession was criminalised and that this criminalisation was to be enforced, the police officer would surely not be able to engage with the drug users in the same way. Consequently then, the policing practices of this particular officer are not just made possible by the will of one individual police officer, but, of course, also by a change in political and organisational goals and interests. Further research should investigate precisely what role decriminalisation has for the policing of this specific open drug scene and what role the legal status of drug possession has for the policing of open drug scenes in general.

In the same vein, research that aims to investigate outlier policing practices and attitudes should also aim to investigate how these are situated and made possible in the wider legal, cultural and organisational context they are embedded in. It should be stressed that what I have tried to achieve in this paper is not to provide an analysis of outlying and deviant policing practices and attitudes, but rather the aim has been to illustrate why this might be a fruitful approach in future research on the police.

REFERENCES
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