Obituary Geir Aas 1965–2021

It was with deep sorrow that we received the message that Geir Aas has died on 28 February, all too early, only 55 years old. This is an indescribably sad occasion. But it is a consolation to be able to commemorate Geir’s life and the important legacy he left behind him. Amidst our grief, we can highlight the world of scholarship and learning he left us with. We have all followed Geir Aas’ academic works since he started working on his doctoral thesis at the Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo, at the beginning of 2000, in different phases. He was one of the first college teachers who were part-time doctoral students in addition to teaching duties at the Norwegian police university college. Educated at University of Oslo in sociology with a master’s thesis on the topic ‘Violence in intimate relations: An analysis and critique of different ways of understanding’ in 1995, and at the same time a famous football legend in Norway in the 80s and 90s, his energy and positive engagement was tremendous.

We are going to address Geir as a scholar, a police sociologist and criminologist in particular. However, we will also say some words about Geir as a teacher who brought academia into closer relation to practice, who enhanced the academic world to which he devoted his working life, and Geir as a colleague, an academic friend, an encourager and supporter of others. These themes are interwoven. Each of them is marked by Geir’s creativity and energy, by his striving for critical and nuanced knowledge about complexity in policing, the gap between ideals in education and police cultural practices, and by his quiet professionalism and strong personal integrity.

His PhD thesis from 2009, also published as an updated book in 2014, is an expression of that. In the thesis, Geir asks how do the police understand and manage their work tasks in domestic violence? The main purpose is to produce new knowledge about how the police think, what they do and why. There has been a huge amount of action plans being implemented. Despite these measures there is still a significant gap between the penal code and the police guidelines and what the police actually do. Several factors are brought to the table: discretion, conflict between law and pragmatism, characteristics with victims being difficult to categorize. The thesis is a valuable and innovative contribution to police sociology. He follows up his discussions of ethical dilemmas in participatory observation in an important article published in 2020 in Police Practice & Research. His sharp analytical discussion of doing fieldwork in police and researching vulnerable people got an international audience, and we cite:

‘Police work should be examined and evaluated particularly as it relates to the legal rights of those who are vulnerable. (…) It is hard to imagine development of policing if there is no proper knowledge of what the police actually do.’
Perceived safety in the public space is also a project he led just after defending his thesis in 2010, building on a survey and case study of eight Norwegian municipalities and boroughs. One of the best chapters on police sociology as a research tradition, has also been written by Geir, published in a research report about police science from 2010.

The police are not only analysed from the inside, but also investigated from the outside. Geir researched abused women and employees from five Norwegian shelters and their experiences with the police. He has also written extensively on policing elder abuse. One article explores how the police attempt to prevent elder abuse in close relationships, especially in parent-child relationships. The article highlights some contradictions between the need of the police to produce criminal cases (often contrary to the interests of the victims) on the one hand, and the police’s duty to prevent further abuse on the other. The report looks into why these forms of abuse become hidden from the police and turn into complex forms of violence in the population. For many victims it is almost impossible to detach oneself from the relationship with one’s own children, and in general it is probably more difficult than detachment from one’s own spouse.

Geir published four important articles in this journal: Nordisk Politiforskning/Nordic Journal of Studies in Policing. Three of them discuss domestic violence as a special field within the police. The first article in 2014 maps how it is specialised, through the system of family-violence coordinators, domestic violence contacts and specialized investigation teams at some police stations in Norway. One danger of further specialization, he argues, is that only a few police officers will dare to handle this field. The number of domestic violence incidents reported to the police annually is so large that any police officer must be able to handle them in a satisfactory manner. The other article related to this topic is from 2020, where Geir interviews the family-violence coordinators about the police reform. Does it matter that the police organisation is further centralised and specialised? Geir discusses this in a nuanced and balanced way, seeing both strengths and weaknesses. The third article explores policing of repeated and severe abuse in close relationships and the limits of the law within this field. The article evaluates these legal provisions, and in particular, explores the challenges to the police posed by severe domestic violence. It ends by pointing out that the police may achieve more by means of victim support and prevention measures; law enforcement is only a narrow element of policing.

The fourth article in this journal discusses police practitioners’ view of the police education, and the police leaders who emphasize general knowledge and skills for police work, give both education and the graduates good references. This strand of research is updated in three other important Nordic and European policing journals. Geir as a scholar in academia is deeply connected to building bridges between academia and practice. His research on how police practitioners view police education is important in the academic/practitioners’ debate in police science. The article ‘Theory or practice? Perspectives on police education and police work’, published in European Journal in Criminology in 2016 demonstrates how differently police officers assess police education. The interview data reveal 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 challenges the traditional distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ by conceptualizing the relationship between education and practice.

The article: Kampen om norsk politiutdanning from 2019 in Tidsskrift for professionstudie scrutinizes tension within police education. Parts of the police force, especially within
the operational environment, expect the Police Academy to train police officers who are as well-equipped as possible for police practice immediately after graduation. But is it a wise way to organize education? asks Geir. Will not then the practical-operational skills displace the theoretical, analytical and development-oriented skills? Another conflict theme is related to the structure of the knowledge content of education. Should it be organized according to traditional subject columns or in a more professionally oriented track? The most dominant contradiction, however, has been about what kind of knowledge should characterize the education – which is more precisely about the extent to which the education should be based on experience or research. He has no clear answers but raises the important questions and reflects on them.

Geir was not only an engaged scholar, but a warm, open, loyal, inclusive and generous colleague and friend, ever supportive. He often talked about the importance of free thinking and reflection, free from dogmas and external pressures. He was surprisingly modest and self-deprecating, eager to share, to include, to bridge and unite. He was a great team player also in academia, with great integrity. Geir was outstandingly nice, a wonderful teacher and mentor to students of all ages and an inspiring and popular lecturer. He had a great sense of humour, and we had much laughter and fun together. One of us received this message from him recently: “Thanks for asking me to give your student some advice. This is the best we can do these days, supervising for the next generation.” He made no effort to impress, never the least bit pompous or self-important; “generous,” “gracious,” “helpful,” “warm,” “inclusive” – all these key words describe him as a person.

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