

# Can experience be evidence? Craft knowledge and Evidence-based policing

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of evidence and other varieties of knowledge in police decision-making. It surveys official government policy, demonstrating that evidence-based policymaking is the dominant policy-making paradigm in the United Kingdom. It discusses the limits to social science knowledge in policymaking. The article explores four ideas associated with the notion of ‘experience’: occupational culture; institutional memory; local knowledge, and craft, drawing on data from four UK police forces. We discuss the limits to experiential knowledge and conclude that experience is crucial to evidence-based policing and decision-making because it is the key to weaving the varieties of knowledge together.

## KEYWORDS

Evidence-based policy, evidence-based policing, experience, focus group research, craft, political knowledge.

## Introduction

In the public policy literature, there has been a renewed interest in using evidence to support policymaking (Stoker and Evans 2016). In turn, there have been vigorous exchanges about what we mean by ‘evidence-based’ policymaking (EBP). Much of this discussion has focused on what counts as evidence and what constitutes the ‘best’ evidence (Learmonth and Harding 2006). This article explores the debate surrounding the use of evidence in police decision making using data from four police organisations in the United Kingdom (UK). It asks what varieties of knowledge are drawn on by the police when making decisions. Specifically, we ask what experiential knowledge is and why it is relevant to police decision-making.

The debate about the relative merits of evidence-based and experiential knowledge has moved centre stage. For many, there is a strict division between experience, craft and scientific facts. Sherman (1998: 4) argues that evidence-based research must be ‘a systematic effort to parse out and codify unsystematic “experience” as the basis for police work’. Others less persuaded there are such scientific certainties have argued that ‘evidence’ takes many forms and there are multiple forms of knowledge (see for example, Raman 2015; Greenhalgh et al. 2014). EBP is not, as Moore notes (2006: 324), restricted to randomised controlled trials (RCT), ‘it has always included many more different types of investigations to acquire and use knowledge’ (see also Sparrow 2011).

This article focuses on the varieties of knowledge and begins with an account of official government policy and its dominant paradigm of EBP in the UK generally and in policing specifically. Second, we discuss the limits to social science knowledge in policymaking. The section is brief because the much-rehearsed arguments about the theory and practice of policymaking are well documented. Third, to move beyond the science *versus*

experience debate, we explore the notion of experience and identify four ideas entwined with the notion of experience: occupational culture; institutional memory; local knowledge, and craft. We use these terms to provide a thematic analysis of focus groups drawn from four UK police forces. We use police as our case study to highlight the way in which experience and inherited knowledges are shared and assimilated in an organisation. The case study identifies the varieties of knowledge the police draw on. It shows how experience is the inherited knowledge base of much police work and how such knowledge is intrinsically seen as valuable, practical and conducive to problem solving. We show that police officers draw on any source of knowledge that helps them do their job, whether it is their local knowledge of policing, their assessment of the organisational and political context in which they work, or research-based knowledge.

We recognise that all sources of knowledge have their limits. All are constructed in an organisational and political context that selects the facts and their relevance. We argue that experience is crucial to notions of evidence-based policing because the police draw on a variety of knowledges, selecting their knowledge based on whether it makes sense to them and fits in with what they ‘know’ already. We must recognise these varieties of knowledge, and the role of experience in weaving them together. These combined understandings will be the basis of decision-making in practice. We argue for a systematic approach to collating local, political and organisational knowledge with research-based evidence into a wider evidence base. We do not argue against EBP only against an exclusive reliance on it.

## **Evidence-Based Policymaking in the UK**

At the heart of Labour’s Cabinet Office (1999) professional policymaking model is the concept of EBP. This model purports to ‘use the best available evidence from a wide range of sources’; ‘learn[ing] from the experience of what works and what doesn’t’ through

systematic evaluation (Cabinet Office 1999: para. 2.11). When the Coalition government launched its *Open Public Services White Paper* (Cm 8145, 2011), twelve years later, and the emphasis was still on ‘*building on evidence of what works*’. Phrases like ‘sound evidence base’, ‘what works’ and ‘robust evidence’ abound. Departments need a ‘clearer understanding of what their priorities are’ and need ‘to ensure administrative resources match Government policy priorities’ so the Government can get ‘value for taxpayers’ money in delivering its objectives (Cabinet Office 2012: 14, 16 and 20). The Cabinet Office’s Behavioural Sciences Unit claimed to be ‘global leaders in experiment design’, and to have ‘run more randomised controlled trials than the rest of the UK government combined in its history’.<sup>1</sup> The instrumental rationality of EBP was alive and well and at the heart of the Coalition’s reform agenda.

EBP displays a marked predilection for randomised controlled trials (RCT) (see) and many people promote their promise (see Bristow et al 2015: 126-127; Haynes et al 2012; Torgerson and Torgerson 2013). Some demur (see for example, Petticrew and Roberts 2003; Pawson and Tilley 1997) but RCTs are fashionable. In brief, RCTs involve identifying the new policy intervention, determining the anticipated outcomes, and specifying ways of measuring those outcomes. Following this, the investigator chooses control groups, whether comprised of individuals or institutions. The policy intervention is randomly assigned to the target groups with a designated control group. Using a randomly assigned control group enables the investigator to compare a new intervention with a group where nothing has changed. Randomisation is considered appropriate to eradicate the influence of external factors and potential biases. The next step is to measure the impact of the intervention and adapt the intervention as a result of the findings. The catchphrase for the approach is ‘test, learn, adapt’ (Haynes et al. 2012: 8-9). With its roots in clinical trials, the influence of the natural sciences’ methods is clear.

Pearce and Raman (2014) suggest there has been a specific focus on promoting the use of RCTs in policymaking. They note how the message of the RCT as a ‘gold standard’ within a hierarchy of evidence has been widely disseminated. The authors cite the prominent author, physician and academic, Ben Goldacre, arguing that RCTs can benefit policy by concentrating on ‘what works’ rather than relying on ‘eminence, charisma, and personal experience’ (Pearce and Raman 2014: 388). This dismissal of experience suggests that the proponents of RCT are unlikely to value a plurality of sources and forms of knowledge in UK public policymaking.

In March 2013 the Cabinet Office launched the ‘*What Works Network*’, a nationally coordinated initiative aimed at strengthening the use of research-based evidence on ‘what works’ in public policymaking. The network was developed in a political environment that not only supported the idea of evidence-based decision-making but also greater cost-effectiveness in an era of austerity. Currently, there are seven research centres<sup>2</sup> focusing on six key areas of public policy, intended to build on existing models of delivering evidence-based policy. Three of these Centres (What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth, the Educational Endowment Fund and the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction), emphasise the use of systematic review and RCTs while others such as the well-established and well-funded *National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence* have a more nuanced view of what constitutes evidence (Bristow et al 2015) including stakeholders’ views and expert judgement in their deliberations as to what constitutes evidence

The policing service is another example of the government’s endorsement of EBP.<sup>3</sup> The ‘*What Works Centre for Crime Reduction*’ (WWCCR) was established in 2013 to develop a strong evidence-base for decision-making around crime reduction. It is led by the College of Policing (College) and supported by a Commissioned Partnership Programme<sup>4</sup>. A

key component of the WWCCR programme has been to assist in building an evidence base to establish a common database of knowledge and to develop police officer skills to enable them to appraise and use evidence to inform their decision-making – the phrase most frequently used in the discourse is *evidence based policing* (Fleming et al. 2015).

This summary has a simple purpose; to forestall any criticism that our construction of EBP is a straw man; modernist social science provides the dominant rationality in British government. Whether we are talking about civil service reform in general or the more specific reforms just described, all are top-down, with RCTs as the vanguard (Pearce and Raman 2014). All stress improving the evidential base of policy. All are guided by economic and managerial rationalism.<sup>5</sup>

What has been missing is an acknowledgement of the limits to ‘scientific knowledge’ in public policymaking and any recognition that contests over meaning are central to any understanding of what constitutes evidence. We address these two issues below.

## **The limits to social science knowledge**

In examining how people ‘grapple’ with social problems, Lindblom (1990: 136) stresses the ‘impairments’ to social science knowledge, which include, for example: incomplete information; lack of time; limited cognitive and technical skills; the complexity of problems; theories that cannot predict; and hypotheses that we either cannot or have not tested (see also Lindblom 1988: chapters 8 and 11; Parsons 1995: chapter 5; Vickers 1968: chapter 2; and Wildavsky 1980: chapter 1). Such impairment is compounded by the political and economic context which introduces powerful biases into policymaking.

Policymaking in British government is complex and uncertain and illustrates these impairments. It is not informed by evidence because the information is not available, the

decision has to be taken yesterday (or has already been made), and is often surrounded by secrecy. The Minister is not usually a scientist and scientists often do not understand the political context in which decisions are taken. Others (often more cognisant of the policy process) will put up their hand to provide a piece of the policy jigsaw (Cairney 2015). So, proponents of EBP in the UK cannot present themselves as neutral scientists with objective evidence. Rather, they must become protagonists in a political game – *partisan evidence advocates* (Schultze 1968: 101) or policy entrepreneurs, but *not* bearers of truth. Like any other actor in the policy process they must persuade, negotiate and compromise; be political actors, not scientists. And no one should forget that all organisations – police as much as other public sector units - are to a greater or lesser extent political systems characterised by many conflicts of interest and values, and bargaining between entrenched and diverse stakeholders (Fleming 2010). Decision makers are slow to use rational models of decision-making because such techniques do not fit the political context and can be neutered by both bureaucratic and party political games (and for a vivid example see Dunlop 2016).

This account of a complex and ambiguous policy process and the primacy of politics is well substantiated in the public policymaking literature about British government (for example, Cairney 2012; Diamond 2014; Dorey 2014; King and Crewe 2013; and Rhodes 2011). Similarly, there are accounts of the problems of using social science knowledge in public policymaking (see Stoker 2013). We are persuaded by Weiss's (1980) survey data supporting the idea that policy relevant research influences decisions by 'decision accretion' and 'knowledge creep'. Thus, policy emerges from bureaucratic routines and builds like a coral reef. Research creeps into the 'undifferentiated, fragmented and multi-layered' decision process almost by osmosis - by 'the amorphous and indirect absorption of research knowledge' - becoming part of the *zeitgeist*, rather than overt deliberations (Weiss with Bucavalas 1981: 268; see also Fleming 2012).

At the heart of this political science approach to public policymaking is the idea that political rationality is *the* fundamental kind of reason in public policy making because ‘the solution to the political problems makes possible an attack on any other problem, while a serious political deficiency can prevent or undo all other problem solving’. In public policymaking, decisions are not ‘based on the merits of a proposal but always on who makes it and who opposes its decisions’ (Wildavsky 1968: 393). Politicians confront many vested interests. They must negotiate and compromise. Political expediency, whether because of imminent elections or the politician’s career prospects, is inescapable. Any politician ignoring such factors would be acting irrationally and have a short political life. EBP cannot continue to ignore evidence about the nature of policymaking. It cannot dismiss politicians as irrational simply because they have different criteria for deciding. For any game, it is brutally simple; if you want to play, learn the rules, and in public policymaking politicians set the rules.

Finally, much policymaking now involves networks of organisations (Rhodes 1997; 2017). We live in an era of network governance where services are delivered by packages of organisations. Stakeholders frame both problems and policies differently and agreement is at a premium. Often there is no single authoritative decision maker. So, policy emerges from competing interpretations of data and evidence and such interpretation is underpinned by the shared experience of the policymakers.

## **What is experience?**

We use experience to refer to the practical knowledge about the world amassed by individuals in an organisational and work context. In our review of the literature, we identified four related and overlapping notions of experience and discuss each briefly.

## **Experience as an occupational culture**

In the organisational theory literature, and indeed, the police literature (Willis and Mastrofski 2016; Herbert 1998; Bayley and Bittner 1984), culture encompasses the idea of knowledge. Schein (1985: 7) defines culture as a ‘stable social unit that has a shared history’. Chan (2003: 21-22) in her discussion of organisational socialisation and professionalization of police cites Schein’s definition of organisational culture as:

a pattern of basic assumptions ... that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

In the policing literature, ‘organisational culture’ has pejorative connotations (see Chan 1997; Loftus 2010). It is used extensively as an explanatory variable to describe police resistance to all types of reform (Fleming 2006).

## **Experience as institutional memory**

Institutional memory refers to the organised, selective retelling of the past to make sense of the present. It is used to explain past practice and events and to justify present activity and recommendations for the future.

Institutional memory, corporate memory, organisational memory and departmental philosophy are ways of describing an organisation’s knowledge base. It is a combination of tacit and explicit information and knowledge. It exists in members’ minds, in agency records; in its routines, and in its inherited customs, traditions and stories. It is selective, even biased. Such a knowledge base is essential to any organisation’s identity, its ability to remember and to learn from experience. It passes on knowledge about what worked and what did not work,

what aroused criticism and what did not. The basis for much advice is this collective memory of an organisation (see: March 2010: 86; Pollitt 2009: 202-3; Schon and Rein 1994: xiii).

Top public servants, politicians and police officers learn through the stories they hear and tell one another (Shearing and Erickson 1991; Stevens 2011; Rhodes 2011). Such stories are a key source of institutional memory, the repositories of the traditions through which practitioners filter current events. It provides the everyday theory and shared languages for storytelling (Fleming 2015b: Chapter 1). Stories encapsulate the institutional memory of the organisation. The tales people tell one another are the knowledge they share.

### **Experience as local knowledge**

Yanow (2004: s10-11) sees local knowledge as ‘typically developed within a community of practitioners’ which makes it ‘local’ knowledge. It is specific to a context and to a group of people acting together in that context at that time. Local knowledge is the ‘mundane, yet expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience’. It is ‘contextual knowledge’, it is ‘tacit knowledge’ and it develops out of interaction ‘specific to a local context, such as a work practice in an organisational setting’.

Local knowledge is closely linked to the exercise of discretion by, for example, street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) such as police officers (Weatherley and Lipsky 1977). Durose (2009: 36) suggests that local knowledge develops ‘from [SLBs] own subjective interpretations or ‘readings’ of a ‘situation, which is passed on in the stories people tell about the solutions they identified and the discretionary judgement they exercised (see Fleming 2015). Local knowledge is complex, specific, and contextual. It is evolving because actions intersect and interact, spinning off to create and recreate webs of complexity that are the

product of no one person's intentions but become part of the beliefs and practices of all (Rhodes 2016b).

## Experience as craft

A craft is a skill, an occupation or profession requiring special skill or knowledge (cf. Bayley and Bittner 1984). To call something a craft rather than a science is to accept the importance of experiential knowledge as well as formal knowledge. The craft is learned on-the-job. A craft involves passing on beliefs and practices from generation to generation. In contrast to a science, a craft has no one best way. In contrast to an art, it has utility. The craft is learnt from a "master" and the novitiate moves from apprentice to journeyman to master. Commonly, a profession - or historically, a guild –controls membership and regulates knowledge and practices. Much of that knowledge is tacit. It has not been systematised. It is complex. Often it is secret. In this way, the practitioners of the craft can control the supply and demand for their skills (Rhodes 2016a).

The notion of practical beliefs and practices, or 'practical wisdom', is unpacked by Goodsell (1992, 247) who considers public administration as "the execution of an applied or practical art". It is concerned with helping practitioners find the right "tool". Public servants must become *masters* of their craft; that is, become experts. They acquire this mastery through *practical learning*, which recognises "traditional craft knowledge is not systematically codified and written down. It is known informally, passed on verbally to apprentices and journeymen over time". Through this mastery and practical learning, public servants build a sense of identity; an *esprit de corps* – or an occupational culture. Finally, this identity breeds pride in one's work and a willingness to accept *responsibility* for it (adapted from Goodsell 1992: 247-8).

In police studies, it has long been commonplace to stress the *craft-like* nature of police work:

Practical skill ... refers to those methods of doing certain things, and to the information that underlies the use of the methods, that *practitioners themselves* view as proper and efficient. Skill is ... a stable orientation to work tasks that is relatively independent of the personal feelings and judgments of those who employ it (Bittner 1990 [1967]: 33, emphasis in original).

In 1984, Bayley and Bittner (1984: 51) were arguing for the importance of the 'master craftsman' in policing for learning purposes:

Policing is more like a craft than a science, in that officers believe that they have important lessons to learn that are not reducible to principle and are not being taught through formal education. These lessons concern goals ... tactics ... presence .... "Experience-tested good sense," as one officer said, is what police must learn over the years.

More recently, the importance of craft resurfaced in the debates surrounding evidence-based policing. Scholars sought to reclaim craft as integral to improving policing and to discussions about evidence informed practice (See for example, Willis and Mastrofski 2014; 2016; Fleming and Fyfe 2015; Fleming, Fyfe and Wingrove 2016a). Willis and Mastrofski (2014: 323) define craft as 'the knowledge, skill, and judgment acquired by daily experience'. They argue that craft must be 'treated with respect' and integrated into any scientific experiments seeking to move the field forward. Recognising the existence and utility of this 'craft' is crucial to bringing together successfully the complexity of evidence and ideas that make up policy (Moore 2006: 336).

It also empowers those whose narratives and cultural wisdom combine to legitimise the decision-making process.

These several notions of experience overlap. To be clear, in our analysis of the focus group data we use occupational culture to refer to the shared beliefs and practices handed down from generation to generation. This culture underpins the police's notion of craft as practical wisdom. It is shared across police forces. The beliefs and practices specific to one force are referred to as institutional memory. Both are passed on through on-the-job training and storytelling often by master craftsmen. The idea of craft includes, but is not confined to the notion of experience. Experience refers to everyday beliefs and practices about work; 'practical wisdom'. A distinctive if not exclusive feature of these beliefs and practices is the emphasis on local knowledge; on contextual knowledge specific to a context and a group of people.

## **Method**

Part of the mission of the College of Policing and WWCCR was to train police practitioners and staff in EBP relevant skills and knowledge (Fleming, Fyfe and Wingrove 2016; 2016a; 2016b). Before this training began, a series of focus groups was conducted with 160 police officers across the UK during May and June 2014, with a pilot taking place in March of that year. The focus groups were organised by rank to avoid unhelpful deference to senior officers (see Fleming 2011). Each group was facilitated by one person and comprised between 10 and 14 people.<sup>6</sup> Each group ran for approximately two hours. The participating ranks were: Constables, Sergeants, Inspectors, Chief Inspectors, Chief Superintendents and Divisional Commanders. A Chief Superintendent, Assistant Chief Constables, a Deputy Chief Constable and a Chief Constable were interviewed (in the same time period) by the facilitators.

The aims of the focus group given to the participants were:

- ‘1. To better understand police officers’ attitudes, understanding and value of Evidence Based Policing
2. To gauge the extent to which research/evaluation is currently pursued in police organisations
3. To ascertain the challenges and perceived risks and barriers to greater evidence use
4. To appreciate what would be perceived as a useful training tool /programme in order to ‘instruct’ officers in the value/use of Evidence Based Research

The following data was taken from the responses to the first two topics:

*What do you understand by Evidence Based Policing?*

*What do you draw on in your everyday practice?*

We taped and transcribed all discussion. We used thematic analysis to code the focus group data (Braun and Clarke 2006; and 2013). We drew on our reading of the diverse literature on experience to identify some provisional and preliminary themes. We read and reread the interview transcripts to identify recurring topics across the full data set. We reviewed and collated these topics into potential themes. These stages fed into a detailed analysis of the data using NVivo.

Of course we found data supporting the four themes identified in our review of the literature, *but* we identified also three more themes: using research-based knowledge, political knowledge, and weaving together varieties of knowledge. We use all seven themes to analyse the focus group transcripts.

The danger with thematic analysis is that the researcher latches on to the vivid example that dramatises the point. And we do. But such examples can be atypical and mislead. So, for every theme, we provide more prosaic yet supporting quotes. However, because we have limited space, we can provide only a handful of such quotes. Many more were available. We structure our analysis of the focus groups around the four themes identified in the literature review of experience.

## **Research Findings**

Our analysis of the focus groups transcripts is in two parts. First, we organise the analysis using the themes identified in our literature review. Second, we report three additional themes unearthed by our analysis.

### **Occupational Culture**

When we asked Sergeants, ‘what would you say you understand by evidence-based policing’? One officer remarked:

*People doing things on the basis of past knowledge and history*

In another group, a long-term Constable agreed:

*What we know from our past experiences and the knowledge of our problem specifics*

Many police see themselves as working in what they identify as the police tradition. As one Chief Constable observed:

*We are essentially blue collar ... We're not medical, we're not law, we're not church, so we don't have a period of deep and thoughtful studying steeped in*

*academia and emerge with a wisdom beyond our brethren* (Chief Constable Interview).

This sentiment is echoed by the ‘*foot soldiers*’:

*I’ve worked full-time since I was sixteen. I never went to college and I don’t have a degree ... I’m not an academic at all, I’m a foot soldier and will always be a foot soldier ... I had to do a project ... and I think I went grey. I don’t need a course ...* (Sergeant)

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many demands are made on the police. Yet, despite their multifarious tasks, the ‘cops and robbers’ mentality defined by Reiner (2010 [1982]) over thirty years ago is alive and well:

*A thief taker is a lot more admired than a problem solver* (Constable).  
*Basic policing hasn’t changed; we nick people, that’s what our victims, our communities, our Chief wants and the new PCCs [Police and Crime Commissioners]* (Inspector).

Against this background, there are four characteristics of the police tradition that shape the police response to evidence-based policing – the division between management and the rank and file; weariness of change; risk aversion, and lack of trust.

First, the hierarchical organisation of the police underpins the ‘us and them’ mentality and everyday phrases like ‘*foot soldiers*’. It permeates discussion of evidence-based policing in particular and reform generally (Reuss Ianni 1983; Manning 2007). So, ‘*if you want it implemented it has to be Constables*’ (Sergeant), but Constables will tell you:

*We're the ones who are going to make it work, you know, anyone below Chief Inspector tends not to be involved in these discussions ... so people on the ground trying to make it work have little faith because of the way it's being operated (Constable).*

Indeed there is 'jadedness' about all reforms, not just evidence-based policing:

*We have a lot of change all the time ... and people are fed up with it (Constable).*

*Nobody likes change, this organisation has had so much change over the years, it's unbelievable, it's change for the sake of change (Sergeant)*

*You can't just do a one-size fits all with policing (Constable).*

This cynical tone can be found among all ranks. One Assistant Chief Constable noted:

*I see [reform] in two ways - as an application of an empirical basis for police practice and approaches, and drawing on my 25 years of experience - the latest generation of fads.*

Risk aversion accompanies this jadedness: *the bosses always take the armoured plated option (Sergeant).*

*The risk averse thing's a trait of senior management. We are willing to try things, but the number of times you get overruled ... (Sergeant).*

The final ingredient in this uninspiring mix is a lack of trust:

*We don't have any choice in the matter, we don't trust what you're saying anyway, because you'd be saying it whether it was a good thing or a bad thing*  
(Constable).

*I think there are a lot of distrusting members of staff in the organisation*  
(Sergeant).

It leads to a gloomy prognosis about the role of the police:

*As a nation, we've forgotten the role of a constable that we all swore an oath ..., which is to save life, and we've forgotten that. We haven't forgotten what we do, what we swore to, but the Government I think have forgotten what our role is. The public have forgotten what our role is* (Sergeant).

## **Institutional Memory**

We know that institutional memory is the collective knowledge and learned experiences of an organisation. An individual cannot know everything but they *do know* that if they ask, they can draw on the collective and experiences of other officers; on their stories. They '*phone a friend*' when an issue needs clarification.

*You usually just make phone calls to somebody who's got a better skill, it's sharing between ourselves really and drawing on experience...I think we're in a system where you rely on your colleagues, you rely on your knowledge, you find somebody* (Constable).

*[We] probably approach it from our own experience and if you've got a gap in your experience there's plenty of people to ask to fill those gaps with whatever training they're been fortunate enough to get and you're going to use that to approach whatever problem it is ... You'd pick up the phone to the CPS and get their view on the way to go forward with the investigation* (Sergeant).

All ranks get advice and information from colleagues.

*There's only a few of us, so you always end up hearing things. A lot of it is word of mouth, and somebody will know someone in another district*  
(Inspector).

*There's always someone who knows an expert in something [in the organisation]* (Inspector).

## Local Knowledge

Local knowledge is important for police in their daily practice as it provides much of the basis of their problem solving and exercise of discretion.

*You've got your own local knowledge of the area* (Sergeant).

*I think we do it very locally based on what's been done locally in the past.*  
(Constable).

*Every branch, department and division has a local policy on what they have adapted from a force policy, which nobody recognises other than that local person or ...manager. So you have to learn as an officer when moving around the force what the local accepted policy and procedure is* (Sergeant).

Others lamented that austerity cuts and restructuring had led to a diminution of local knowledge:

*They've taken the personal out of policing, nobody knows who their local police officer is, there's so few covering such a large area that your local knowledge is way down the pan ...* (Constable).

While there was some discussion about the demise of the 'local', it was clear that what local knowledge remained was the main tool that police draw on to make sense of their working environment. As one Sergeant put it, *'Local but powerful, word of mouth can be very powerful'*.

## Craft

Although the focus groups were not set up to discuss neither craft knowledge or the skill set of the police, all the groups discussed one or other of their skills. In particular they talked about the everyday practices that lie at the heart of any craft. They talked about *'the shared knowledge of practitioners'* (Constable). When pressed on the meaning of practice, they responded with *'experience'*, *'common sense'*, *'knowledge'*, and *'judgement'*. As another constable put it: *'20% of what you go to is your knowledge, the rest is your common sense and judgement'*.

Unsurprisingly, given their views on the craft and their shared beliefs and practices, officers display a marked preference for their own experience and that of their colleagues:

*You can have two different officers and two different outcomes and that's the way policing is and in some respects that's a good thing because if you go to an incident and you think definitely this way and colleagues say well actually what about this, well actually it could work and it's worked out a lot better and that's just the joy of policing, being diverse in the way you deal with things* (Constable).

Members of the focus groups identified experience as a central element in their craft knowledge. All ranks saw it as central to the exercise of discretion in their working lives:

*It [evidence-based policing] doesn't take into account the professional instinct*  
*- We do have to factor in professional instinct, community knowledge and*

*understanding into these equations. It's important also to acknowledge officers' instincts, experience and values* (Assistant Chief Constable).

They rely on the experience of their colleagues in solving problems: *our evidence comes from others' experiences rather than a database* (Inspector). More quotes would be repetitious. We fear we may state the blindingly obvious. However, we note the sheer volume of quotes available to demonstrate the centrality of experience in all its forms to the work of the officers (Fleming 2015).

Although experience has much tacit knowledge, if it is to be shared, then it must become explicit. The focus groups were aware of the limits of their reliance on craft knowledge: *'you're continually reinventing the wheel'* (Sergeant), and *'we won't know everything'* (Sergeant). To avoid such dangers, they tap into experience more formally than just a chat on the telephone. Debriefings after an incident are seen explicitly as opportunities to identify problems and share:

*I do debriefs on incidents on motorways, different counties, different areas [when] effectively the same things have happened, the same problems ... And nine months later we do a debrief and it's a completely different set of officers and the identical things come back again. So where does that organisational learning go? We sit through the same thing again and again ... Internally you don't get much more evidence-based than debriefing actual live incidents and deciding from there what you would do differently or definitely do in the future **but we never share that with people not in the room.*** (Inspector, *emphasis added*).

Debriefing may share experience about managing a major incident but that sharing takes place in a tradition that is risk-averse. To identify publicly mistakes or errors of

judgement is to court blame, even punishment (Fleming and Fyfe 2015). So, learning takes place in a circle of trusted colleagues and often is not widely shared with other organisations.

## **Other Varieties of Knowledge**

The thematic analysis of the focus group data was not restricted to the themes identified by our literature review. . Such analysis involves also puzzling over the raw data for other themes. We identified three. First, the police officers saw a place for research-based knowledge in their decision making. Second, they were keenly aware of the political and organisational context in which they worked (see Fleming and Wingrove 2017). Finally, and explicitly, they saw themselves drawing on whatever knowledge was available to help them. Strikingly, one of the key functions of their experience was to help them steer a course through the available information and decide what strategy would fit the circumstances.

### **Research knowledge**

As a first observation, most members of most groups had little prior knowledge of evidence-based policing, although Inspectors were better informed than other ranks. This finding was not surprising because the College targeted senior officers in its efforts to embed the EBP relevant skills and knowledge across police organisations (Fleming, Fyfe and Wingrove, 2016; 2016a; 2016b). By contrast constables and sergeants, who made up approximately 70 per cent of the focus group participants, were less likely to be aware of its organisational significance when the focus groups were conducted (Fleming and Wingrove 2017). When there was a discussion of evidence-based policing it resembled an academic seminar. It did not have the practical tone of other discussions; for example, there were few discussions of specific RCTs. There was the cynicism we have already encountered in our discussion of occupational culture:

*I don't want to use the term 'current flavour of the month' (Sergeant)*

... [but he does].

That much conceded, we are talking about a preference for experience, not hostility to research:

*I don't think anyone would dispute that information is knowledge and the more you know and draw upon is always going to be useful*

(Sergeant).

However, there were reservations:

*The vast majority of the frontline would struggle to see the relevance [of research] (Constable).*

There were several recurring motifs and the transferability of research was mentioned frequently:

*What works in [Force 1]... won't necessarily work in [Force 2] ... (Sergeant).*

*To use the American research example ... research ... in America suggested it was probably a good thing to take a police car home for visibility in the community ... but you put a white police car in my driveway and it'll cost hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of damage to cars and houses ...*

*Mainly your own (Sergeant)!*

Even when an idea was transferred, there was scepticism about its implementation:

*We don't know whether these things are long term effective or not (Constable).* It is not just a question of whether a policy can be transferred. It is not just a question of whether it works, but of what works best:

*I've gone as far as contacting the police captain in San Francisco. Seriously, I looked online found out what they were doing and thought I'd find out how they're doing it, but what they were doing wasn't that dissimilar. It was just different terminology. The difficulty you could have is you can look at websites at what they're doing in say Holland, but the mind-set you can have is it works in Holland but we're not Holland. But the difficulty is you can have all these different people with similar problems, just varying degrees and different locations, I don't think there's going to be that many different responses, you contact twenty people and get eighteen same answers, **it's finding out what worked the best is the hardest thing** (Inspector, emphasis added).*

If the evidence exists to tell the officer what works in one location, it will not tell her what works best where she is stationed.

The focus groups also identified many practical obstacles. Lack of time was an ever-present concern; *'There is an issue of time ... We need to be seen to be doing something all the time'* (Constable). It is not just a question of finding the time to learn about evidence-based policing or to read the research reports but also acting on evidence-based policing is time consuming: it takes time to implement:

*I've tried to implement something in terms of [evidence-based policing] and it's taken two years from implementing it when I was a district commander to it now being adopted by the force, that's two years... I think its painful* (Inspector).

Other specific complaints were that research knowledge was not always 'practical or user friendly' (Sergeant); and that acquiring such knowledge and implementing its ideas had

to compete with other, invariably more important, priorities (Sergeant). Indeed, for most of the focus groups, evidence-based policing was not a priority; it was a sideshow.

The focus groups also alighted on some more intractable weaknesses in evidence-based policing; some '*structural problems*'. They pointed out that the objectives of policing '*aren't that clear*' and data about performance could be misleading; '*as any of us know about crime recording ... [the statistics] will be an elaborate fiction*' (Inspector). They recognised that '*interpretation is the key*' pointing to their '*professional capacity to interpret subjectively objective data*'. Although they would never use such terminology, they are here talking about the constructed nature of facts and evidence.

A second structural problem is the increasingly networked nature of policing:

*Policing now works in partnership with all these other organisations and I think, it was a phrase used a couple of times this morning, they said why are you talking about evidence-based policing and not evidence-based partnerships* (Chief Constable).

*We need a network, people that we can go to when we've got a problem and have that conversation about the potential tools and potential interventions and so on* (Chief Constable).

Networks pose in acute form the issue of evidence for whom? One organisation's evidence is propaganda to another. In politics, it is called spin.

In short, as Fleming and Wingrove (2017) demonstrate, many officers are prepared to concede that evidence-based policing has its place in police practice. Research-based knowledge in general and evidence-based policing in particular are some of the varieties of knowledge that the police are willing to draw on.

## Political Knowledge

There was great awareness among all ranks about the politics of policing and the importance of political know-how (and on political reason see Diesing 1962). Most respondents were sophisticated, drawing a clear distinction between the internal politics of their police force, and the larger political context. Thus, on organisational politics, they comment:

*It comes back to politics; there are too many people who are seeking promotion or seeking certain bonuses (Sergeant).*

*Politics, I don't do politics but everyone has to end up doing politics of some sort. ... If you haven't got the political buy-in, it ain't happening (Sergeant).*

It is important to note that organisational politics comes in many guises. It refers to careerism, to new policies and, when they are talking about buy-in, to the politics of implementation, although they would never use that phrase. Also, evidence-based policing is seen as ammunition in internal political debates:

*If we actually developed an evidence base around effective policing in all areas it would put us in a much stronger position when we're being held accountable in certain areas by the PCCs (Inspector).*

On the larger political context, they comment:

*There's so much politics in policing now (Sergeant).*

*He'll [PCC] respond to something that will win him votes because that's the overwhelming need compared to us who'll say it doesn't work (Inspector).*

*Add into that the PCC - you get pet projects or flavour of the month projects and the reaction from most people is I haven't got time to do that and do everything else and that is definite (Inspector).*

So, the focus groups had clear and explicit views on the usefulness of research-based and political knowledge. Such knowledge was common-sense, part of their everyday lives, along with local knowledge. To return to our core argument, we stress the importance of recognising the several sources of knowledge, not the primacy of craft knowledge. But if the police draw on several varieties of knowledge, how do they know which to draw on and when. In other words, how do they weave the varieties of knowledge together?

## **Weaving**

Our respondents recognised the importance of weaving together knowledge from any and all available and relevant sources:

*[We need] a mixture of academic research and practical application (Inspector).*

*I think it's a combination of both, we need to take on board what we're told from research, what works, but put that together with what we know from our past experiences and the knowledge of our problem specifics and combine that together (Constable).*

*That's where we can resolve that by whatever tools are introduced, they should be interactive and rather than just be told to go and read this and try to improve your knowledge, if you look at forums and things like that where you're able to draw on knowledge from all different places and people and*

*you can make your own informed decision whether you agree with a post or reply to a question (Sergeant).*

Too often the different kinds of knowledge are set up as opposites; research-based *versus* craft knowledge. But as Moore notes (2006: 325):

Both research and the practice field in policing face the important question of how far down the path of scientific sophistication they should go in their combined efforts to establish a firm experiential and empirical basis for policing.

Demonstrably the police draw on any source of information available to them, and use their experience to determine the information they will act on. In this weaving, priority will be given to political knowledge because a political decision is the essential prerequisite for solving any problem. Thereafter, choice will be dictated by availability. Is there any research-based knowledge? If there is no research based knowledge (and we know that the police research base is limited), then experience is all there is. Its use is both essential and inevitable. The issue becomes what are the limits to this craft because like any source of knowledge it has weaknesses.

## **The limits to experience**

We noted the limits to rational, social science knowledge earlier. What are the limits to experience as evidence?

First, experience is based on the inherited stories of the organisation; its history. History offers no easy lessons. Ask any historian and she will tell you that history is complex, unpredictable, uncertain and contingent. We have only limited capacity to store and recall history.

Second, as March (2010: 45) suggests, a story explains history by turning the ambiguities and complexities of experience into ‘a form that is *elaborate* enough to elicit interest, *simple* enough to be understood and *credible* enough to be accepted’ (emphasis added). So, if we do find a relevant example, we do not know why it worked last time. Moreover, the more novel and complex the problem, the less relevant are the lessons of yesterday. The point of stories is to simplify. Stories employ simple explanations. Simple explanations limit the information we consider. Stories based on experience are ‘profoundly believed and widely shared’ but that does not make them valid because ‘the world is too complex and experience is too meagre’ (March 2010: 63). Such knowledge fathers guesses, and often they are guesses.

Third, stories are biased and to make matters worse we are often uncertain about the nature of that bias. In part, they are biased by our faulty memories. We selectively recall the past. Memories are not facts but constructed stories we tell ourselves about our yesterdays. When we construct our memories, we are framing them, often tacitly. Our stories are sensitive to such framing and there are many available, contesting frames and no obvious way to choose between them beyond the persuasive abilities of the storyteller. As with social science knowledge, stories are limited by incomplete information and our cognitive skills. We do not fully understand complex problems, so we leave out what we cannot explain or we simplify complex causal relationships or, all too often, we do both.

Fourth, experience is conservative. We prefer our existing beliefs and practices. We are reluctant to give them up. New problems not encountered before often do not compute. So, we bend inconvenient ‘facts’ to fit our preferences. Stories are ‘implicitly hostile to novelty’ [reform] because of their familiarity. Their shared frames make them endure. Stories assimilate experience. The new is filtered out. We accept what we can assimilate to existing

stories (March 2010: 77). Experience sustains small ‘c’ conservative beliefs and practices that, on occasion, support racist and sexist actions. So, experience can only be one of the varieties of knowledge the police draw on and it must be interrogated by other varieties.

Finally, all knowledge – evidence-based policing and experiential - is political in that it involves conflicting definitions of problems, the selection of data by stakeholders, and the use of that data in both an organisational and a larger political game. Decades ago, March (1962) described organisations as political coalitions with contending, bargaining stakeholders. So, the difference between organisational politics and policymaking by government departments is one of degree. The politics of buy-in is the politics of implementation writ small. Whether the site is the force headquarters or the Home Office, advocates of evidence-based policing are partisan evidence experts and those arguing from experience are conservators of the tradition. Neither are neutral. Neither has privileged access to the truth.

Scott (1998: 321) suggests that abstract, universalist, scientific knowledge works best in those ‘spheres of human endeavour that are free of contingency, guesswork, context, desire and personal experience’. This playing field will suit evidence-based policing. However, professions like policing are spheres of knowledge in which guesswork and personal experience are part of everyday discretionary decision-making. Policing is characterised by contingency and ambiguity. Craft knowledge is ever present and central. We are arguing for a systematic approach to collating such craft knowledge.

## **Concluding remarks**

Too often the different kinds of knowledge are set up as opposites; research-based *versus* craft knowledge. We have shown that police officers draw on political knowledge and

craft knowledge as well as research-based knowledge in their everyday lives. We have argued that evidence-based policing ignores the limits to social science knowledge, and the inconvenient fact that ‘evidence’, whether evidence-based or experiential, is constructed in an organisational and political context that selects the facts and their relevance. We suggest that evidence-based policing should be not accorded priority. There are many sources of knowledge and we need to weave them together. In this weaving, local knowledge, or experience, is one source of evidence, and is essential given the limits to social science knowledge. Moreover, the different forms of knowledge are evaluated through the lens of an officer’s own experience. Officers use their experience to determine which information they will act on. They are not alone in promoting the importance of weaving and integration. In the context of public health, experience as a form of knowledge is deemed crucial. In January 2017, Professor Mike Kelly<sup>7</sup> noted:

Without experience evidence means absolutely nothing – experience is critical ... Clinical judgement is imperative – experience is so important as the basis of *a priori* knowledge (Kelly 2017).

This summary accepts the prevailing conceptions of craft knowledge, which looks at its value as instrumental knowledge and its utility for managers and policy makers. Craft knowledge is more important than that. It is also about the fundamental human activity of creating meaning.

Thus, craft knowledge is not about *how* we do something but *why we do it*. It is about holding the organisation together. Policy makers and practitioners are strategic storytellers who tell stories about the inherited beliefs and practices of an organisation that form the social glue binding that organisation together (see Fleming 2015a). To call shared experiences a ‘smothering paradigm’ as Larry Sherman does (2015: 6) is to misunderstand its

important role in creating a meaningful organisation for its members and the role of craft in decision-making.

Given the weight of criticism, and evidence, the obvious puzzle is why people continue to believe in evidence-based policing as the definitive way of informing decision making. Its practice has major limits, and its utilisation depends not on evidence but on its usefulness in a political context it can do little or nothing to shape. There are three possible reasons. First, everyone accepts that more information is for the most part helpful, but it is not decisive; just another input. Second, we have a body of partisan evidence experts and the advocacy of both evidence-based policing and RCTs is in their economic and professional self-interest. They are willing servants of power with a niche in policymaking. Finally, evidence-based policing persists because it provides the legitimating rationale for decisions made by other means. The imprimatur of science is used to legitimise political decisions. Of course, there are policy contexts that are not highly politicised. Of course, some evidence is better founded and more relevant in some areas than others. And lest we forget, sometimes if not often, there is rational scientific evidence available in time. But much evidence-based policing takes place in charged organisational and political contexts that ensure the data are always incomplete, always uncertain, and always ambiguous. So, the meaning of evidence is never fixed, it must be constantly won. By itself, evidence-based policing is not enough. We need the partisan evidence advocates but we need also the other types of knowledge. Craft knowledge, political knowledge, and research-based knowledge, all warrant a place at the table. These several strands need to be woven together. Craft knowledge not only needs to be treated as evidence in this weaving, but we need to recognise that it provides also the basis for choosing between the available sources of evidence.

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<sup>1</sup> The quotes are from: <http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), Sutton Trust/Educational Endowment Foundation, College of Policing What Works Centre for Crime Reduction, Early Intervention Foundation, What Works for Local Economic Growth, the Centre for Ageing Better, and the What Works Centre for Wellbeing.

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the acronym EBP refers to both evidence-based policymaking and evidence-based policing. For the latter, we use the phrase in full.

<sup>4</sup> University College London, Institute of Education University of London, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, University of Southampton, Birkbeck, University of Surrey, Cardiff University and University of Dundee.

<sup>5</sup> In public policy generally, adherents to the EBP model include: Cartwright and Hardie 2012; Davies, et al., 2000; Haynes, et al 2012; Stoker and Evans 2016; and John, et al 2011. In policing studies, proponents include: Sherman 1998; 2015; Neyroud and Weisburd 2011; Lum et al 2011; Welsh 2006; and Braga et al 1999.

<sup>6</sup> The facilitators were Jenny Fleming (University of Southampton); and Nick Fyfe (University of Dundee).

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