

PARTNERSHIPS IN POLICING AND EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN CRIME PREVENTION ARE THEY INCOMPATIBLE?

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**PARTNERSHIPS IN POLICING AND EVIDENCE-
BASED PRACTICE IN CRIME PREVENTION:
ARE THEY INCOMPATIBLE?**

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Partnerships in policing and evidence-based practice in crime prevention: are they incompatible?

Abstract

Evidence-based practice has a high profile in medicine and associated professions, and, more recently, in policy-making and policing. In this paper, we argue that this model has limitations in the crime prevention context, particularly from a practitioner perspective. Eck (2002) suggests that problem-oriented policing is a more useful approach. This, too, has its problems, in that there is an insufficient focus in the literature on how to engage with the communities which are integral to the success of the problem-oriented process. We outline how an action-research approach can overcome these limitations, and offer examples of the outcomes of taking this approach.

Introduction

Our reflections in this paper are based on teaching crime prevention to masters students and work for the NSW Police, which has involved Crime Prevention Officers (Layton & Jennett 2004).^{*} The evidence-based approach to any profession involves reflexive praxis as information from social life is analysed, an intervention is planned and implemented and an output sought. It is a process typical of late modern society where the risks of daily living, such as those posed by crime, must be managed. Those who advocate the approach assert its validity through references to the scientific method but such an assertion is at odds with the critique of the value of scientific method which characterises the late modern social world.

Those who advocate the scientific method to deal with social problems tend to blame managers or frontline police officers for the failure to take it up in their practice. In this paper we argue that reasons for non-adoption of the scientific method may lie in the nature of practice in a complex social world. We argue that process is the central issue. Processes involve relationships of equality between diverse stakeholders, with diverse histories, standpoints and interests. Action research seems to us to be an appropriate problem-solving methodology which foregrounds process, enabling the practitioner to become a collaborative researcher with other stakeholders in social problems.

Evidence-based policing

Evidence-based policing is a recent development, arising out of a similar drive for improved practice in medicine, where it is described as a scientific approach, having great promise in that it de-emphasises intuition, unsystematic experience and general theoretical assumptions about the causes of problems as sufficient grounds for decision-making (Evidence Based Medicine Working Group 1992). The Evidence Based Medicine Working Group argues that this scientific approach to professional practice represents a paradigm shift (Kuhn 1962).

The turn to evidence-based practice has also been very attractive in crime prevention, perhaps owing to the influence that scientific management has had on the functioning of police. It is clear that the approach has worked for a range of crime problems, and

in particular for evaluation of crime interventions, as exemplified in the work of the Campbell Collaboration (Grabosky 2005). We thus have no quarrel with turning to research, but do take issue with the universal applicability of the scientific model, and the capacities of those without a background in science in general, and research in particular, to conduct the necessary appraisals, particularly given that reactive work and high workloads predominate in those areas with the most significant crime problems.

Sherman (1998) interprets the paradigm as referring to whole-of-agency activity, not individual practice, and links it with Deming's qualitative management approach. He summarises the relevance of the medical model of evidence-based practice as being that:

Just doing research is not enough and [that] proactive efforts are required to push accumulated evidence into practice through national and community guidelines. These guidelines can then focus in-house evaluations of what works best across agencies, units, victims, and officers. Statistical adjustments for the risk factors shaping crime can provide fair comparisons across police units, including national rankings of police agencies by their crime prevention effectiveness. (Sherman 1998: 1)

This suggests that evidence-based policing offers techniques that can be applied across the board, and that communities have no role in the process - it is a top-down activity. This perspective is used in Home Office research, which is mostly aimed at police managers.

Evidence-based practice

The evidence-based approach is an example *par excellence* of reflexivity - information drawn from social life is analysed and fed back to us as participants in social life, modifying our actions. It is a process typical, writes Giddens (1991) of late modern societies, where the risks of daily living, now affected by events and people far beyond those immediately experienced by us, need to be managed. It is interesting that the validity of the approach is asserted through references to the scientific method (Sherman 1998) against a hum of unmentioned dissent about the value of positivist assumptions in the social world (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969; Geuss 1981; Harding 1991; Duran 1998; Dick 1999). *Evidence-based practice is a late-modern strategy for practice in a post-modern world where such strategies are questioned.*

The focus of evidence-based practice is fundamentally managerial, about establishing the most effective strategies for intervening in the social world for the least possible cost. Given the required scale of the research underpinning evidence-based practice and the scientific standards applied to establish the most useful evidence (see Sherman 1998), the model is also *researcher-centred*, rather than *practitioner-centred*. Practitioners are expected to provide the studies upon which researchers will build, and are expected to draw on the principles established through the researchers' activities in conducting their practice. This does occasionally happen, but the most common use of research is tactical (Nutley 2005). Sherman (1998) notes that, even in

medical practice, doctors rarely turn to the research in the desired manner, and special supports and processes are needed for evidence-based approaches to become embedded in practice.

The failure to turn to research in medical practice is likely to be an even greater issue in policing, which has historically been very suspicious of outsider views on policing, including researchers' perceptions (Reiner 1998). Even though there are, indeed, areas of police work that have been affected by research findings, there is little to suggest that a turn to research is embedded in either managerial practice, through its concern with outcomes rather than outputs (arrest rates) (Sherman 1998), or at the coalface of frontline policing.

A further problem lies in the appeal to science, and to the scientific method, as the means of social progress. It is intuitively appealing, but ignores the conceptual presuppositions which generated the processes of inquiry in the first place (which are inevitably skewed), the ways in which the narrowing of any study for practical or for other purposes mean that there will always be the possibility of conflicting evidence, that data always requires interpretation, and that, in many instances, progress is made when mistakes are identified, rather than when things run as expected (Doyal & Harris 1986).

Although the tendency is to blame the managers, or to blame the people at the frontline, for their failure to adopt an improved approach to their work, the reasons for non-adoption may lie altogether elsewhere. It is possible that the reasons are far more to do with the nature of practice in a complex social world than ignorance, suspicion, conservatism or recalcitrance. The problem lies in the action-choices as they unfold for people in specific, unpredictable situations, and in the relationship between knowledge and action.

The issue lies in what it is to be a human being - far more than in cognition and reason (Burkitt 1991; 1999). Faced constantly with new situations, similar to but never exactly the same as those one has encountered before, one has to improvise, trying to 'guesstimate' the responses of others and their interpretation of one's actions or remarks (Mead 1987 [1934]; Goffman 1972; 1976). The practitioners have to take account of the affordances of the context as they understand them at that moment (Burkitt 1999).

Novices will turn to the rules, and maybe even theory, although there is plenty of evidence that novice practitioners actually focus on the strategies that will help them survive/save face (Zeichner 1982), such as checking what others in the immediate environment are doing, and leaving those with whom they are in contact to deal with their own survival. Expertise brings with it the capacity to 'reflect-in-practice' (Schön 1983), a process that is likely to draw in cultural and emotional, as well as rational, cues as to which improvisations are most likely to have the desired effect (Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985; Boud & Miller 1996; Damasio 1996; Lave & Wenger 1991; Layton 2004).

Thus, when a group of local people come together to deal with a crime problem, the context is one of multiple uncertainties and improvisations. The way in which these are worked out has been characterised as a process of group forming, storming,

norming and performing (Forsyth 1983). These phases are about relationships and inter-relationships more than they are about product. Ignoring them, and assuming the problem itself, or research-based evidence, is sufficient to guide action and outcomes, has the potential to deny the importance of communities' commitment to, and involvement in, addressing a problem.

Also ignored is the role of chance conjunctions in determining the outcome of a particular project. Becker (1994) illustrates the important role that *chance* plays in people's lives and actions, and finds it curious that academics, whose lives, like anyone else's are so much affected by chance, place such faith in science and rational order. When people get together to address a crime problem, if the process is to be a collaborative one rather than a consultative process with minimal impact on an already established direction, much will inevitably depend on who likes whom, what shared interests and values there are, the resources to which people happen to have access and so on.

Given these premises, then, where does the evidence drawn from an evidence-based approach to crime prevention in policing come into action? It will potentially come in to the problem-solving processes used, be this SARA, PROCTOR, or through *action research*. The difficulty with SARA and PROCTOR is that they are fundamentally rational approaches to problem solving, which can be undertaken without drawing on communities as equal participants in the action. ***Only action research recognises that the participants in the research have a vital role to play in the processes of problem-solving, as well as the outcomes.***

Evidence-based crime prevention

Let us now look at how this might relate to crime prevention practice. Crime prevention as a field is itself relatively new and the term is applied to a wide range of activities, and it has subtle and ambiguous meanings (NCAVC 1999). Moreover, it draws on a wide range of conflicting disciplines to try and address a wide spectrum of crimes in a wide variety of ways. Nor should we forget Crawford's (1998: 6) reminder that crime prevention is somewhat problematic for practitioners, in that it is an activity which results in non-crime. However, distinguishing whether a reduction in crime is actually a consequence of a particular intervention is inherently extremely complex and elusive. Sherman's view of crime prevention as being defined by consequences (the number of criminal events and the number of offenders) (Sherman et al. 2002: 3) shows a far narrower focus than the several suggested by Hughes (1998). These are: reform, deterrence or protection, and prevention of social harms or the promotion of social goods, such as community building.

Eck (2002: 93) points out that many interventions are small scale and tailored to individual contexts, and goes on to delineate an evaluation process, within the context of problem-oriented policing, which shares many characteristics with the action research process (Eck 2002: 109-110). He sees the *problems* as being practitioners' lack of relevant theories (a difficult hurdle to leap, given the historical preference for the practical over the theoretical in policing), low quality analyses, and a failure to look at what others are doing (the aim of evidence based policing). We would also add that policing style may be as important as substance: Sherman and Eck (2002:

295) remark that a striking recent finding is the extent to which police bad manners create a risk factor for crime.

However, the *advantages* of problem-oriented policing which he identifies include: the fact that theory and practice can be integrated; practitioners will generate solutions that will work better than off-the-shelf solutions; it is a practical tool, not requiring an academically rigorous approach; it increases accountability; and it is suited to changing circumstances - and circumstances will change as a consequence of the intervention. He concludes, in relation to small-scale projects, that 'adherence to rigorous evaluation criteria is misguided' (Eck 2002:111).

Partnerships in crime prevention

Alongside the impetus for evidence-based policing has been an increasing reliance on the use of partnerships to develop and implement crime prevention initiatives. This focus on partnerships extends and deepens early concerns about the distance between police and the community (Sherman 1997), and goes beyond processes such as Neighbourhood Watch to require real, active partnerships in which power is shared (Homel 1998). Crime, like any other social problem, is increasingly recognised as having multiple causes that cannot be addressed in a piecemeal fashion. Indeed, partnerships between agencies are currently seen as the most effective way to develop and implement effective crime prevention initiatives, so the fostering of participation is an inherent requirement of the crime prevention officer's job. Bright (2001) outlined the issues relating to multi-agency partnerships as being a means to overcome the vertical silos of public agency objectives and services; a means of reducing the costs associated with reactive rather than proactive approaches to crime; and an uncertain process, given that the responsibility for multi-agency partnerships is dispersed, and it is not always easy to show that multi agency partnerships really add value.

It is in the *processes of partnerships* that the issues lie. Community policing, and problem oriented policing, both of which imply relationships with people outside of policing, have had uneven implementation, and evidence-based policing may yet follow suit. This is, we assert, related to the lack of attention to process, and to the particular demands of partnerships. Contact with police, for communities, is generally characterised by the lecture/guest-speaker model, where groups listen to an expert and have the opportunity to ask questions.

This model of contact with communities is just one form of participation on a 'ladder' of participation (Arnstein 1969). We have not included all of Arnstein's eight categories here, because some of her distinctions are too fine to be useful. The categories of participation which we consider to be useful are: manipulating/providing; informing; consulting; partnering; delegating; and community control.

The most tokenistic and least participative approach is that of *providing for others'* needs without asking them what they need, and *manipulations* which include hand-picking 'worthies' who will toe a particular line. Bull and Stratta's (1994, 1995) research on consultative committees indicates that the latter is often the case, and that it is also a matter of drawing solely on established organisations. *Informing* people

(that is, the lecturer/guest-speaker model) is the first step to legitimate participation, although it is a one-way street. *Consulting* with people (through conducting surveys, and certain types of neighbourhood and public meetings, and so on – common practices in crime prevention) is one step higher, but the ultimate decision still rests with those who have the power. *Partnering* involves negotiations about power, and developing an appropriate balance between partners. It is in this situation that crime prevention workers need to be particularly clear about what they can legitimately offer, and when, how and to whom they should be listening. So, too, with *delegating*, in which individuals or sub-groups have decision-making power, and are accountable for their decisions and actions. The highest degree of participation comes with *community control*.

The more participative the process, the more the crime prevention worker needs to pay attention to the varied relationships that underpin participation. *Networks* involve the development and maintenance of positive relationships with diverse players who have the potential to contribute something of value, and who are drawn from both inside and outside of policing. They need to be distinguished from *stakeholders* (although the two may often coincide), as the people in the crime prevention officer's network are for her benefit (keeping her informed), as she is for them, and stakeholders generally fall into one or more of the following categories:

- those whose **interests** are affected by a problem, plans or strategies, as well as those whose **activities** contribute to it;
- those who control or influence the **management** of the problem;
- those who possess important **information or expertise** in addressing the problem (McCallum 2000).

The good relationships upon which networks depend are characterised by information exchange, trust and confidence (which are underpinned by treating people with respect and empathy, adhering to organisational values and standards, competent performance, and a capacity to adapt to differing social and cultural environments – matters of style), being a conduit linking people in the network to each other (with due regard to potential conflicts), and conscious attention being paid to the establishment and maintenance of the network. Particular attention may well need to be paid to those who might not routinely have the opportunity to contribute to the prevention or reduction of crime, but whose contributions are likely to inform actions in ways that would not otherwise be possible.

Action Research

It seems to us that action research provides a methodology which enables the crime prevention officer to focus on both collecting *evidence* and the *process* by which it is collected, and on how social change interventions are planned, implemented and evaluated. It helps us escape the limitations of separatist models of the relationship between research and practice, which demand intermediaries to ensure each can influence the other (Nutley 2005). In contrast, it allows for the development of crime prevention workers as what Leigh (2005) has termed 'practitioner-researchers' (see also Jennett et al. 2003 for application to the policing context).

There are many varieties of action research, some invoking the scientific method and some the interpretive method in order to justify the validity of their approach. Two

types of action research which are appropriate for police officers to address crime prevention issues are (1) organisational action research (as outlined by Coghlan & Brannick 2001) and (2) community based action research (as depicted by Stringer 1999 and Dick 1999; 2005).

Action researchers are *change agents*. Traditional academic researchers work to create knowledge but action researchers work to produce both action and knowledge outcomes. According to Coghlan and Brannick:

Action research works through a *cyclical process* of consciously and deliberately: (a) planning; (b) taking action; (c) evaluating the action, leading to further action and so on. (Coghlan & Brannick 2001: xi; emphasis added)

Action research is appropriate when the research topic is an unfolding series of actions over time in a given group, community or organization, and the members wish to study their own action in order to change or improve the working of some aspects of the system, and *study the process in order to learn from it*. Hence action research is akin to experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and reflective practice (Schon, 1983). (Coghlan & Brannick 2001: xi-xii; emphases added)

Action research involves all stakeholders (not their representatives) in defining the problem to be researched, planning the research, reviewing the findings and planning an intervention to address the problem, evaluating its success and subsequent cycles, as necessary. It provides stakeholders with the experience of ownership of the project and, hence, they will be committed to it, but this will only happen if all stakeholders respect each other's interests and points of view, and negotiate a way forward rather than impose a plan with which some stakeholders are not happy. Stringer says that:

Participation is most effective when it

- Enables significant levels of active involvement
- Enables people to perform significant tasks
- Provides support for people as they learn to act for themselves
- Deals personally with people rather than with their representatives or agents. (Stringer 1999: 35)

Community based action research relies upon the 'type, nature, and quality of relationships'. Therefore, the establishment and maintenance of 'positive working relationships' is crucial. Stringer characterises the necessary relationships for community based action research as ones which:

- Promote feelings of equality for all people involved
- Maintain harmony
- Avoid conflicts, where possible
- Resolve conflicts that arise, openly and dialogically
- Accept people as they are, not as some people think they ought to be

- Encourage personal, cooperative relationships, rather than impersonal, competitive, conflictual, or authoritarian relationships
- Be sensitive to people's feelings. (Stringer 1999: 29)

In order for relationships to have these characteristics they require effective communication. Stringer cites Habermas' four fundamental conditions that need to be met in order to facilitate effective communication:

Understanding: The receiver can understand what is being communicated.

Truth: The information is accurate and is not a fabrication.

Sincerity: The communicator is sincere in his or her attempts to communicate and has no hidden agendas.

Appropriateness: The manner, type, and form of communication are appropriate to the people, the setting, and the activity.

(Habermas (1979) as cited in Stringer 1999: 32)

Writers about action research set out a series of stages through which a research project must go in order to be a transparent, collaborative and, therefore, democratic, process of inquiry and evaluation. Stringer's (1999: 19) urging for researchers to 'look, act and think' is the most simply articulated version of it. Coghlan and Brannick (2001: 16) present an action research cycle which involves a pre-step: context and purpose; and four basic steps: 'diagnosing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action'.

Action research is political by its very nature and Coghlan and Brannick note that:

Political forces can undermine research endeavours and block planned change. Gaining access, using data, disseminating and publishing reports are intensely political acts. (Coghlan & Brannick 2001: 63)

Action research can threaten people because it is rigorous, examining everything, questioning everything, listening to everyone, advocating reflection on what is found then action which involves everybody who will be affected by the action (social change). Its strength is the sense of commitment to and ownership of the proposed change which its collaborative approach engenders. Its weakness is that if the processes are not handled well there can be backlashes and blocking behaviour on the part of those who feel that the proposed action will not be in their interests. Coghlan and Brannick argue that:

... you need to be politically astute in deciding to engage in action research, becoming what Buchanan and Badham (1999) call a 'political entrepreneur'. In their view, this role implies a behaviour repertoire of political strategies and tactics and a reflective self-critical perspective on how those political behaviours may be deployed. Buchanan and Boddy (1992) describe the management of the political role in terms of two activities, performing and backstaging. *Performing* involves you in the public performance role of being active in the change process, building participation for change, pursuing the change agenda rationally and logically, while backstage activity involves recruitment and maintenance

of support and the reduction of resistance. *Backstaging* comprises skills at intervening in the political and cultural systems, through justifying, influencing and negotiating, defeating opposition and so on. (Coghlan & Brannick 2001: 64)

Importantly, because action research in community contexts involves ongoing monitoring of projects and processes, and allows for adjustments to both, as issues, information and even blockages emerge, chance factors may play a far more significant role than would be the case for less participative and organic approaches.

Action Research for Crime Prevention students

Dick (1999; 2005) argues that the ‘action’ part of ‘action research’ involves change, which requires flexibility and participation, and the ‘research’ part depends upon high quality data and accurate interpretations (whether or not this data is derived from positivist research). The goal is achieving change, and, as such, there are various interpersonal processes to be managed (pre-planning, which is where relationships are negotiated and built; planning, where what is to be done is decided; and action and ongoing monitoring), all of which may need revisiting as a project progresses.

Dick’s formulation of the action research process, with its focus on building and sustaining relationships productive of change has been used for several years in a subject, ‘Partnerships in Crime Prevention’, in the Graduate Diploma/MA (Crime Prevention) offered by the School of Policing Studies at Charles Sturt University. Students are asked to form reference groups as they assist each other in developing an action research project about an issue of concern to them. The types of issues on which they focus include building and maintaining networks, identifying relevant stakeholders across diverse communities, and working with these stakeholders in ways that ensure their voices are heard. The focus for the students, therefore, is on learning the partnership *processes* that can build and sustain crime prevention initiatives.

Several years of delivering this subject provide some examples of the unpredictability of change-oriented research, where project development is highly dependent on the resources that people enthused by a project can bring to bear. The two examples below are drawn from one semester’s work:

- One student, who lived in a country town, drew together a small group of stakeholders in a forum, to practice using a brainstorming technique on a local problem, which was a required activity. The problem he was considering concerned youths congregating around a park at night, with some associated driving offences. The forum ended up lasting over two hours, the participants all drew out their diaries at the end of the session, and news of the ideas generated at the forum rapidly travelled the town. The local council was prepared to redesign the park; two local clubs offered financial support if the study-related project were to develop into an actual stakeholder partnership; a vacant shop opposite the park was offered as a potential youth club; and, even though all of this was in the ‘embryo’ stage, the local electrical store had sent some TVs, etc., as a donation. This ‘snowballing’ effect was totally

unanticipated by the lecturer and the student, whose concluding reflection on his learning in the subject included the point that action research was, he felt, a theory that could be used every day.

- Another student, whose primary focus was also on crime located around parks, lived in a developing country where road accidents were a major problem and were of concern to him, pursued his concerns and, as a result of the process of identifying stakeholders, managed to attract the interest of an international non-government organisation in his road-trauma reduction problem, and obtained some much-needed funding.

These two examples illustrate the benefits of taking the partnership component of crime prevention, and of action research, particularly seriously. Networks, and the active exploration of who might be the stakeholders, for example, can significantly affect the outcomes of a project. For police who may have received scant training in, and few work-based opportunities for, participative approaches, the action research model takes them beyond the limitations of existing practice and closer to their goals of preventing crime.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have argued that evidence based practice is a limited approach to social research and that it requires to be articulated with other approaches which foreground the processes by which information is gathered, analysed, used to implement social change policies and programs, and then to evaluate them. Problem-oriented policing and action research share some common features but action research is a rigorous method by which social problems can be researched and addressed by stakeholders upon whom the change will have an impact. Only by using such an approach are practitioners likely to achieve the stakeholder 'buy-in' to social change which affects them. In addition to action research's other strengths, it is, as Dick says, a flexible approach, one which can absorb chance occurrences and coincidences, as emphasised by Becker (1994), even ones which completely turn the project around. Action research is a democratic research method which is suitable for the development, implementation and evaluation of local crime prevention projects.

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