



Police Pracademics

ESSAY

– the merge of tacit and scientific knowledge in an old profession/young science

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Abstract

Practical work (craftsmanship) usually profits by science and vice versa, but conflicts may appear. Knowledge in empirical science is declarative and general. Practical knowledge is »silent« and reflects the cumulated individual experiences within a profession. In a mature discipline like medicine, recognition of the unique value of the two kinds of knowledge protects against conflict. The police have only recently added science to govern practice. In addition, much of the police work is rule-governed and politically controlled – it does not reflect empirical knowledge. Explanations in natural science refer to **Causes** in the objective world. **Meaning** is the corresponding humanities key concept which is also highly relevant for police work. When conflicts arise – a dominant discourse may warp discussions. Examples of a set of such relevant conflicts are provided and discussed. Awareness and acknowledgement of the virtues and limitations of various knowledge forms are often lacking and leads to mutual disrespect. Such conflicts are currently difficult to resolve because the police leadership usually lacks practical police experience as well as training in empirical science. The presently weak voice of science should be strengthened by a full academization of the police in all Nordic countries.

Key words

Police, Empirical science, Proven experience, Academization, Pracademic

Introduction: What is Pracademic?

Hens lay eggs which can be sold; to feed a chicken until it turns out to be a rooster is waste of money. Hence, the earlier the sex of a chicken is determined, the better, but it is difficult. There are two ways. After proper training, chicken Sexers can do it immediately after hatching by just observing the chick. The other method is to look for specific scientifically identified signs which require the use of technical equipment. The chicken Sexers learn the trade



in the same way as Artificial intelligence (AI) machines (Bishop, 2006). During training such machines are fed with objects that vary multi-dimensionally and gets feed-back about their binary kind. Inside the AI black box hidden algorithms are created which after enough training provide decisions which are more often correct than decisions based on formulated algorithms derived by statistical regression techniques. Human decision processes are either intuitive (silent, tacit knowledge), or declarative, and is based on either a »gut feeling« or a rational science-based calculus. The first is proven professional experience (PPE), the second is the Science model: objective, group based and general (not linked to specific observers and individual cases).

Pracademic is a new word for an archaic concept – some say it was used for the first time in the 1970es (Wikipedia), others claim that it is less than 15 years ago (Posner, 2009; Hollweck, Netolicky & Campbell, 2022). In 1891, PPE and Science was identified as the basic principle for medical decision-making in Norway and Sweden – probably first in the world (Sahlin, 2021). Decision-making in medicine has always been based on PPE (4000 years), natural science was added during the 19th century.

What is Science?

In **Natural science** we study the real objective world. Scientific explanations according to logical empiricism (Popper, 2002) specify generative mechanisms (causes). *Heart infarction is caused by a blockade of one of the coronary arteries*. This explanation constitutes a theory – and it is backed up by empirical observations. A number of additional rules are added to this core definition when we define this kind of *scientific method*, e.g., consensus by replicating findings and using statistics to calculate effect size and rule out chance findings. This works well when the generative mechanisms are simple. Human behaviour and social processes are complex and in addition require the use of multiple levels of observation (macro, meso- and micro perspectives introducing conflicts – the Ecological fallacy, see the net). Within medicine, psychiatry gave up diagnoses based on causes (DSM-III, 1980); hence we cannot explain such disorders by referring to well-defined generative mechanisms.

A move in the opposite direction is represented by the Cochrane collaboration (www.cochrane.org) which upheld strict criteria for scientific knowledge. Too strict? The issue whether cognitive-behavioural treatment reduce criminality among juveniles was subject to a literature review by scanning around 5 000 international publications in scientific journals. All were excluded because of methodological shortcomings (Fisher, Gardner & Montgomery, 2008). Hence, there is no scientific knowledge according to these strict criteria.

Summing up, the concept of evidence-based medicine is diffuse, particularly for psychiatry. This applies to all other scientific disciplines studying probabilistic and complex generative mechanisms, including the police.



Within the **Humanities**, another kind of science, **human experiences** are in focus. Explanations refer to Meaning and data are usually qualitative. Meaning is the home ground for mankind – and is compatible with PPE knowledge because objectivity is meaningless. Hence conflicts are scientifically acceptable which does not stop such scientists to fight. Qualitative research (PPE interpreted according to the Humanities) is common in the police context.

What is (Natural) Science and PPE?

Since 1891 it should guide medical decision-making in two countries (Sahlin, 2021). Until 2015 it was only a placeholder, the meaning of which was regarded as self-evident, perhaps because it referred to medicine. The same phrase will soon govern social work by law in Sweden. Logically it should govern work within a range of other professions, nursing, occupational therapy, and the police. A project at the Lund University has addressed this issue. Citing the aim of the project (Science and Proven experience; Sahlin, 2021):

Decisions should be founded on scientific evidence – and on practical experience, two types of evidence with uncertain natures. This program seeks to understand these two fundamental forms of evidence in terms that allow making best use of each in our decision making. In so doing, we will clarify an uneasy truce between the two.

The conclusions have recently been summarized in a number of publications, e.g., Persson, Vareman et al, 2019 and Dewitt, Persson et al, 2021. There must not be a conflict between the two kinds of knowledge – hence the word truce. But frictions remain.

In medicine, practical problems based on professional experience are relayed to the academy, analyzed there and then fed back to practitioners. This process is circular and cumulative. There are problems. What if the academic level is unable to understand the problem because they lack practical experience, and practitioners are unable to understand and accept academic advice? In medicine this problem remains only in psychiatry (lack of well-defined generative mechanisms). Furthermore, there is a seem-less career pathway from being a young practicing physician in primary health care to the appointment as a clinical professor – and such double competence persons lead research as well as clinical work in university hospital clinics.

In comparison, police academics as well as leaders often lack the experience of police-work (no PPE). Furthermore, leaders with an educational background in law, with or without PPE, have no training in empirical (evidence-based) sciences.



PPE knowledge

Such knowledge usually has a base which developed over long periods of time. In contrast to Science it refers to the real world with all its multiform complexities boiled down to images (Gestalts), not declarative statements. It is not objective but displays a high degree of local inter-personal consistency. Culture affects the knowledge base as well as charismatic individuals and political directives. Common sense violations are rare. Changing PPE takes time – »We have always ...«. There is often contempt of PPE versus science and vice versa: »desk-top criminologists« do not understand police realities; non-academic police professionals are »unintelligent, lazy and narrow-minded« (Ericsson, 2008).

Police pracademics

Citing Braga (2016): »In what is a relatively short historical time frame the police began to reconsider their fundamental mission, the nature of the core strategies of policing, and the character of their relationships with the communities that they serve.« This was an initiative from within the US police force – and paved the way for the current police science. So far most of the police-relevant research has been performed by external experts without PPE – and an important aspect is thereby lost. If such research should be police-led, then there is a need for police pracademics with PPE as well as Scientific competence (cf. Piza, Szkola & Blount-Hill, 2021) and hence a need for fully academized police academies.

Four examples to reflect upon

We assessed the efficacy of using risk assessments by the police to govern interventions for victim protection, mainly in partner violence cases. These methods were developed in forensic psychology/psychiatry based on the modern definition of psychopathy (Levander, 1979) and associated individual characteristics (Webster et al, 1995). These methods work well in such settings and work well in the police setting if supervised by risk assessment academics (Belfrage et al, 2012). It did not work without such supervision, and a particularly poor outcome was obtained using a purely police-developed assessment instrument (Mellgren, Svalin et al, 2012; Svalin, 2018). The findings (it does not work) was met with hostile negligence by the Swedish police leadership.

The effect of a »Cease shooting« intervention in Malmö compared to three other Swedish cities was analyzed at the Department of Criminology in Malmö (Ivert, Mellgren, 2021). The effect was statistically insignificant, the effect size



(which may have been by chance) was close to none. This was not accepted by the police authorities and the political level. The intervention was characterized as a »great success« and is planned to be introduced nationally.

A group of police employees in Scania noted that they seemed to have a capacity to affect perpetrators of domestic violence in a prosocial direction by switching role, from investigator to partner in a Socratic dialogue. This is good thinking but the pilot project they designed made it difficult to assess it scientifically. Still worse, the data recorded were impossible to analyze (Svalin & Levander, 2022). The project has recently been appointed as the Swedish candidate to the European Crime Prevention Award competition.

Shootings and Open drug scenes in Stockholm were studied by a pracademic police at the Department of Criminology in Malmö (Magnusson, 2022). She was criticized for using »too much theory«. Another doctorand is studying the investigative process in cases of every-day violent crimes; why do so few of these crimes lead to conviction? She is criticized for using too few or wrong theories. These projects address important social issues and police practices. The criticism may be fair with respect to highly developed scientific traditions. Much of the current police science projects are, and have to be, exploratory rather than theory-driven because the generative mechanisms are highly complex or unknown.

Conclusions

Conflicts between PPE and scientific knowledge are usually possible to solve (declare truce) if we acknowledge the merits and drawbacks of the two kinds of knowledge. Scientific knowledge is more objective but fails to recognize the complexity of an issue. PPE knowledge is safe in terms of common sense and practical applicability in a complex world, but less general/objective. These perspectives are complimentary, but require mutual respect for a working dialogue. An additional problem is associated with the set of judicial rules – difficult to change even if obviously counterproductive.

One problem is common in the interphase of police PPE and science, as exemplified above: practitioners' non-acceptance of empirical science. If science suggests that you are wrong this is interpreted as unfair and uninformed criticism. Another problem is: »We can on par with them« (amateurism). One way to change that is to integrate police pracademics in the police leadership, like professors in clinical medicine. Furthermore, it is high time to academize the police in all Nordic countries.

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