

Researching Behind the Badge: Challenges and Politics for Emerging Scholars in Police Studies

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Abstract

This study aims to find that the organizational structure and culture of the police have a significant impact particularly in terms of facilitating access, ensuring research independence, and developing long-term relationships. Police research has enabled the integration of grounded theoretical findings with the practical application of police strategies. However, scholars in police studies, especially those new to research, often face intricate dynamics and limitations, particularly concerning police culture and organizational obstacles. This paper seeks to examine the challenges and political barriers that new researchers have when studying the police. Employing an empirical qualitative approach, this study combines semi-structured interviews with six researchers who have different levels of expertise in police research. Additionally, auto-ethnographic reflections offer a thorough understanding of the subject matter. The research findings suggest that the organizational structure and culture of the police have a significant impact on research, particularly in terms of facilitating access, ensuring research independence, and developing long-lasting connections. We conclude by proposing that establishing an effective research collaboration with the police necessitates finding a balance between the interests of academics and the police institution. To achieve this, we advocate implementing mentorship programs that pair experienced researchers with junior researchers and create collaborative infrastructure to help new scholars.

Keywords: Institutional Barrier, Organizational Dynamics, Police Culture, Police Research, Research Partnership

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INTRODUCTION

In the twentieth century, there needed to be more understanding between academics and the police. The researchers' theoretical conclusions did not have an impact on police tactics. The police culture of secrecy and isolation made them resistant to giving researchers access (Brown, 2017). Over the past few years, collaborative initiatives between police and researchers have diminished mutual suspicion and led to more productive research endeavors (Henry and Mackenzie, 2012). However, Rojek et al. (2015) noted that due to the effectiveness of the cooperation program, they could only accommodate a limited number of researchers, which implies that new researchers will

have a difficult time breaking into the police research barrier. Studies have yet to address junior researchers' difficulties when researching a political entity like the police. This is significant because an increasing number of academics must enter the police research field to enhance the relevance and advancement of police science discourse, ultimately leading to improved policing (Mayastinasari et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, Rojek et al. (2015) observed that the cooperation program's effectiveness necessitated a restriction on the number of researchers it could accommodate. Consequently, new researchers may need help accessing the field of police research. These issues involve managing the intricacies of the distinct culture within police organization (Kuntjak Ivković et al., 2020), overcoming cultural barriers and forming a collaboration with the police (Hoggett et al., 2020), and overseeing the impact of the researcher's engagement with the research on both the researcher and the research itself (McCandless and Vogler, 2018). Moreover, entry-level researchers often encounter situations where they aspire to establish a research portfolio but face hindrances due to their insufficient qualifications, credibility, and professional connections, which are essential for securing research projects or even gaining access to a police institution (Davies and Biddle, 2018).

It should be noted that experienced researchers also face difficulties. Both research partnerships and established connections with police institutions, although enhancing research, nonetheless require careful management of competing interests to foster an effective relationship (Nix et al., 2017). This is evident when the police institution exerts pressure to influence the research results to get a favorable outcome that contradicts the actual findings (Davies, 2016). In a study conducted by Sausdal (2020), it was asserted that experienced scholars have consistently underscored the significance of autonomy in research and the ability to resist institutional influence. However, when considering junior academics, they may need more self-assurance and backing to maintain their position.

Karagiannopoulos and Winstone (2019) have emphasized the necessity of adopting a more comprehensive approach that caters to the needs of both junior and senior researchers. However, he still needs to provide a solution that is targeted explicitly towards junior researchers. The partnership program, as described by Brown (2017) and Rojek et al. (2015), has been found to mitigate researchers' difficulties. However, these studies should have specifically addressed the issues faced by new researchers or guided how they can acquire entry into the partnership program. The studies conducted by Coxhead (2020) provided valuable insights and advice for conducting research with the police. He emphasized the significance of establishing trust and developing formal and informal connections with the police institution to facilitate the research process. However, the studies should have elaborated on specific strategies for building connections within an institution as rigid and feared as the police. By addressing these gaps, we aim to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for new researchers interested in pursuing a career in police research.

Thus, this research seeks to bridge the gap in the literature using empirical research, which aims to explore the challenges and politics emerging researchers face when researching the police. First, this paper will assess the impact of the organizational structure of the police on research. Subsequently, an analysis will be conducted on the obstacles that newly established researchers encounter while establishing a link with the police. Finally, we will discover the impact of a research relationship with the police on the research process.

METHOD

The researchers opted for the qualitative research approach for this study, as its objective is to comprehend the structure of the detective's process in investigation prioritization (Boddy, 2016). This study commenced with a comprehensive review of existing literature on police initiations, police-research collaboration, and the impact of such cooperation on the overall process. After acquiring substantial knowledge, the researchers semi-structured interviews with six academics previously engaged in police research. Given the ongoing presence of COVID-19 and limitations in terms of time and location, all interviews were conducted through video conferences using Microsoft Teams, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. A collection of questions was established as a reference for the interview; yet, the interview did not strictly follow the script and deviated from the predetermined list of questions if intriguing discoveries were made that could potentially yield fresh perspectives.

The six interviewees were selected using purposive sampling based on recommendations from links within the researchers' faculty. These individuals were chosen from a list of academics who have expertise in studying the police and possess diverse levels of experience in their respective fields. This selection was made to ensure alignment with the focus of our work. In this paper, their name will be pseudonymized as Andrew, Betty, David, Emily, Lucy and John to protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality (Jensen and Laurie, 2016). Andrew is a highly accomplished researcher who occupies a prominent position at a top British university. Betty is a renowned researcher in the country. David and Emily are both experienced researchers who work in a well-established center for police research partnership. Lucy is an emerging researcher who has achieved acclaim for her groundbreaking doctoral studies on the police, while John is a novice academic in this particular area of study. The researcher has included an auto-ethnography of his own and a classmate's experiences as entry-level researchers to enhance these findings (Adams et al., 2017).

DISCUSSION

The politics of the police and its impact on the research

The police are a highly hierarchical organization with a distinct command structure where each officer performs a particular role (Campeau, 2017). As a result, before going into the field to conduct empirical research on the police, official access must be obtained. Every police institution has its gatekeeper; for example, Police Scotland implements a single-entry research access request handled by the Academic Research Team (Police Scotland, 2021). Although this process has advantages, it also poses several obstacles. The critical factor is that the gatekeeper and potential study subjects are distinct individuals, which may result in contrasting willingness to engage, especially if the police institution lacks effective internal communication. For example, when the police academic board grants approval for the research but after that mandates a constable's participation solely based on a superior's directive, questions about their voluntary agreement arise (Belur, 2014). David and Emily observed that this process has led to a certain level of hesitancy from the participants, leading to a low turnover of questionnaires and a lack of engagement during the interview.

It could also suggest the opposite, where the gatekeeper, an authoritative decision-maker for police research, has concluded that the project is not advantageous for the institution, even though the police officers, who are the subjects, are genuinely willing to participate. This decision effectively stops the potentially beneficial research (Rubio et al., 2021). The first writer faced this limitation when conducting a previous study on officers' perspectives of policing during the pandemic. Nevertheless, the academic board of the police considered the project unsuitable because the institution believed that externally analyzing organizational strategy and effectiveness was not appropriate. In the end, the organization concluded that the primary duty of its officials is to carry out strategy rather than assess it. Lucy, a mid-career researcher, offered her experience in addressing a similar situation with the researcher:

"The police didn't accept my proposal since it was deemed too political and could spark a heated debate amongst staff. So, what I did was instead use the Police Federation as gatekeeper, and thus, I did not fall short of willing participants."

Academics aspiring to join the research sector may face difficulties in dealing with such rejections, feeling irritated due to the lack of support for their noble mission of developing the subject of police studies, which could benefit both the police and society in general (Baker, 2016). In line with this, we will narrate the first author's experience with the rejection of his research project by a police organization in the United Kingdom:

"I have some experience with police research, but this is my first time conducting it in a foreign country. Accessing the police institution here was quite challenging for me. At first, they sounded welcome to research from our university and especially welcomed research on policing during the pandemic, so I focused my research project assignment around the topic. However, it's been quite a frustrating experience for me. I've had months of unanswered emails, and unfortunately, I haven't been able to visit the police

station in person to inquire about it due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Finally, I received a response to my research after sending multiple emails per day. Unfortunately, it was a rejection. I felt incredibly disappointed and stressed. I had dedicated weeks to perfecting my research proposal, and to make matters worse, I only had a month left until my project deadline. Before this experience, I had planned to write my dissertation on the police institution in this country. However, after reflecting on what I have learned, I now believe it is best to avoid the disappointment and time constraints that come with the possibility of another rejection."

Another problem with a single-entry mechanism is that Lucy discussed her early-career experience of being confrontational with the police following the release of her controversial research finding: *"For months the police just won't talk to me, all my inquiries for future research rejected."* Lucy finally stated that her adverse treatment from the police had improved after a change in chief constable, transforming the institution's stance on research from unfavorable to accepting. In Indonesia, the police culture has become less hostile and accessible to the people regarding service and overall relationships. However, the idea of conducting research on the institution is still unfamiliar and likely to be met with resistance (Kurniawan, 2021).

As a hierarchical institution, the research environment for each police organization is ultimately determined by the leadership's mandate (Hartmann et al., 2018). Lucy mentioned that the institution's leadership may be the most influential factor in determining the organizational research atmosphere. Andrew and David recounted their years of experience working with numerous police organizations across England, Wales, and Scotland. Betty further stated that the United Kingdom's research environment is improving yearly as *"more and more Chief Constables are moving towards an evidence-based, research-led approach in improving policing."* Thus, when researchers study the police, they need to consider the organizational factors that affect police work and the broader political agendas that limit it. In addition, they should examine how the implementation of evidence-based policing and the evaluation of research using the "gold standard" influence and control the nature of policing and research (Lumsden and Goode, 2016).

Building research connections with the police

A hierarchical structure is advantageous for researchers who have established a solid rapport with the institution's leadership (Fekjær, 2018). Andrew and Betty, as senior researchers, have proven that establishing connections with influential police people can mitigate bureaucratic obstacles and enhance the institution's willingness to embrace research. Regrettably, access to a government institution is not equally available to all individuals, which can pose challenges for novice researchers who lack prior connections with the institution (Stevens et al., 2024). It gets very troublesome if the researcher's initial studies are controversial. As Lucy has stated, *"This country is a small world; bad words quickly travel from institution to institution. The next thing you know, most criminal justice institutions were reluctant to accept my research proposal."*

Lucy's experience reveals a significant challenge researchers confront when they publish a

provocative result, not only in terms of policing research projects but also potentially undermining a researcher's career (Starheim, 2019). During the interview, Lucy offered a bit of advice to researchers considering a future academic career:

"You know, researching was never my career option, so if I continued with these (controversial) findings, I would have nothing to lose. The same cannot be said though if you want an academic future, you cannot get on their bad side this early on your career."

Therefore, building trust is critical for academics seeking to establish a profile in police research. During one of his earliest research studies, John, an emerging researcher, learned a technique for creating trust:

"During research design and data collection phases, I make sure to involve the officers and their superiors in charge of research. I want to make sure they feel a sense of ownership over the research, with the hope of them truly appreciating the study's value and becoming more personally invested in its success."

John's concept aligns with the conclusions of Huey et al. (2021), which suggest that establishing a formal or informal connection between police and researchers could effectively address conflicts of interest and overcome obstacles by clearly defining the roles, duties, and expectations of both parties.

However, this still raises the paradoxical question: how can junior researchers gain trust if the entry process precludes them from participating in the first place? David proposed several solutions to increase the police's trust in a researcher. These include becoming a co-researcher on a study with an established researcher and participating in projects with a 'shared academic-practitioner infrastructure,' such as the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR) and the Scottish Institute of Policing Research (SIPR). These infrastructures have been shown to transform a researcher's role in researching police from a passing observer to an engaged partner seeking to contribute to better policing (Fyfe and Wilson, 2012). In response to the conditions in Indonesia, several think tanks have emerged to support police research. These include the *Pusat Studi Pengembangan Perpolisian Masyarakat* (Center for Community Policing Development Studies) and the Center of Terrorism and Radicalism Studies (CTRS), both located in the Indonesian Police Science College (Gani et al., 2023). Building a research relationship can then be represented as a phase. The first is an entry-level researcher with no prior connection with the institution, followed by gradually building trust as the researcher's profile increases, and lastly, earning an established research partnership with the police.

The politics of the police and its impact on the research

Building effective research partnerships with police organizations requires a careful balance between academic interests and the practical needs of the police. As David aptly put it:

"Partnership works both ways; you need to ask yourself your motivation for doing the

research as part of an assignment. Or do you want to make better policing? If it's the latter, then you'd have no problem building a partnership because it's what they (police) want too."

By engaging in research, police institutions are committing valuable time and resources to accommodate the project, which can be particularly burdensome during periods of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. While police organizations may be enthusiastic about research to improve policing, they can only accommodate some projects due to resource constraints (Davies et al., 2020). Reflecting on the first writer's own experience, he encountered resistance from the police when attempting to conduct research on policing during the pandemic. The police believed that an internal assessment of strategy and officer experiences during the pandemic was more appropriate, as they planned to conduct their review once the public health risk had subsided. This rationale appeared contradictory, given that a classmate managed to research the same topic, albeit with significantly reduced participation.

However, because only mutually beneficial research is likely to be undertaken, the issue became apparent that potentially sensitive research may not emerge, given the lower likelihood of finding interested institutions for contentious or sensitive projects (Murray, 2019). The course of action is to stop ruminating on what could have been and start thinking about what other valuable research we can undertake. I took this course of action when the first writer's police research was initially rejected, and I adapted the rejection into this rather exciting project. In retrospect, if the communication channel between the first writer and the police institution had been established more effectively and not hindered by factors such as COVID-19, which ultimately prevented face-to-face meetings, the rapport between the writer and the police could have been improved, resulting in a more thorough explanation of the research project.

The degree of partnership also poses the question of how much control the researcher has over their study. Betty noted that a researcher must discern between criticism and pressure: *"In partnership project, I will not accept dictation from them. I will address any fair critics, but I will not be pressured into changing the findings"*. However, junior researchers may lack experience in dealing with such pressure; Lucy related her own experience of feeling pressure from the police because her findings heavily scrutinize the institution: *"For months it felt like I was against the world. I would just go on long runs to escape from everything"*. Emerald and Carpenter (2015: 187) points out that part of the research process may cause harm to the well-being and mental health of early-career academics; in Lucy's case, this appears to be a significant issue because it emerges from her findings that significantly affects something big and powerful as a government institution.

Andrew highlights that communication is crucial when undertaking very critical research to minimize sudden pressure arising from an unfavorable report; he related his experience when he published significant issues on a recent Police Reform: *"(that research) was indeed very critical; however, during the research process, I was always updating the result with the police. As a result,*

they know what to do when the critical findings go public." Working collaboratively with the police does not imply that the researcher will be wholly dictated. This means that the researcher should 'encourage' the police to continuously discuss the findings throughout the research process, giving them a 'voice' during the research. While the power struggle between collaboration or control of the study will occur, early-career researchers will need to be tutored to deal with the pressure.

Challenges and politics researchers faced when researching the police

The police institution has unique difficulties for novice and seasoned researchers, influenced by their background and relationship with the police. Figure 1 (see p. 185) illustrates the comparison between the problems encountered by junior and senior researchers when doing police research.

Emerging researchers often need help acquiring access to police institutions, primarily due to institutional barriers and a lack of experience. This issue is exacerbated by the pressure they have to maintain control over the research in the face of police involvement. Moreover, dealing with the consequences of their contentious research discovery, which can provoke the ire of law enforcement agencies and hinder their access and career progression, could also adversely affect their emotional well-being.

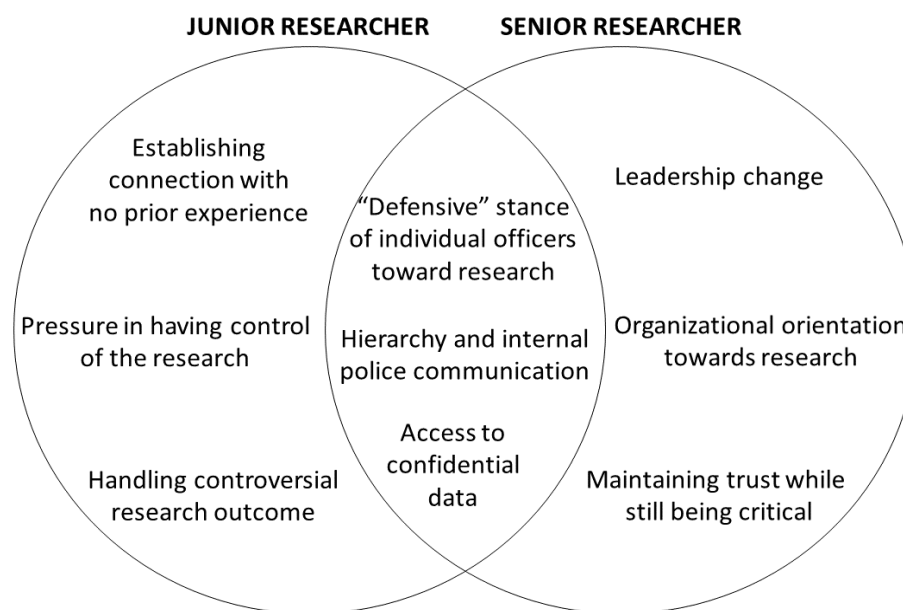


Figure 1. Comparison of the Challenges Faced by Junior and Senior Researchers When Conducting Police Research (Compiled by the Researchers)

On the other hand, the main problem for senior researchers in police research is managing organizational changes within the police force that may affect the leadership's attitude towards research, either becoming more or less supportive. In addition, established researchers must navigate

the delicate balance between being critical of the police institution that grants them access, as this is crucial for maintaining trust and upholding research integrity and credibility. Fortunately, there is a positive development in police leadership as they are increasingly adopting evidence-based policing and making policies based on research. Therefore, although a change in leadership may impact their attitude towards research, it should not be a significant problem since the police are inherently moving towards a more positive course.

Overall, every researcher must confront a similar-themed challenge firmly ingrained in the organizational culture of the police. Officers exhibit a cautious approach towards research due to concerns about critically examining their institutions. This creates an atmosphere of skepticism and resistance, hindering access to datasets and data collection. However, regarding their expertise, acquiring sensitive information, regardless of its level of confidentiality, continues to take a lot of work. This difficulty could be mitigated by engaging the police institution right from the initial stages of designing the research project. Yet, the issue is aggravated by the internal bureaucracy and hierarchical structure of the police, which makes it difficult for researchers to meet their deadlines while navigating the process of granting or denying access. Therefore, these everyday challenges are the focal point of the intricate dynamics that all researchers must confront to carry out significant and exceptional studies within police organizations.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study shed light on the challenges that academics encounter, which vary in nature depending on whether they are in the junior or senior stages of their careers. First, the approach that the police take to research is influenced by the fact that they are a bureaucratic and hierarchical institution with an inherent police culture. The second aspect is the significance of the researcher's interpersonal connection and the establishment of trust with the police, both in junior researchers. Lastly, junior researchers must create a research profile while learning to cope with pressure and maintaining connections with law enforcement professionals throughout the research process. By demonstrating an understanding of junior researchers' challenges, this empirical research helps to fill a gap in the existing body of literature on police research.

An issue that the writer was experiencing was transformed into a very intriguing project addressing the challenges experienced by every academic at his level due to the research conducted because the study process itself was successful. All of the participants who were contacted expressed great enthusiasm about participating in the study. All six of them were so satisfied with the interview that they decided to plan more time to discuss this matter with the researchers after the experiment was finished. This study is subject to several restrictions, such as the researchers' time constraints and the possibility that the problem under investigation is already widely recognized or not unique. Conducting a focus group discussion can effectively draw a more

significant number of participants in a shorter amount of time. Thus, conducting a focus group discussion can efficiently attract more participants within a shorter duration. Integrating qualitative data with a quantitative survey using a mixed methods technique could also significantly improve the study's content analysis. Additional studies in this area can gain advantages by assessing the success of research collaboration initiatives, such as the SIPR and SCCJR, in training new scholars to enhance their police research.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings of this study, we suggest that future research on police institutions should be undertaken more comprehensively and collaboratively. A practical approach for novice researchers is to create partnerships with experienced academics with a strong connection with the police. These collaborations can potentially lessen the gap between junior researchers and the rigorous bureaucratic nature of police institutions while also offering mentorship and valuable insights. In addition, institutions that facilitate police-research partnerships, such as the Scottish Institute of Policing Research (SIPR) in the United Kingdom and *Pusat Studi Pengembangan Perpolisian Masyarakat* (Center for Community Policing Development Studies) in Indonesia, should enhance their collaborative endeavors by providing opportunities for aspiring researchers to participate in small-scale projects and engage in joint research with seasoned academics in the field. This initiative seeks to enhance the calibre of research on police and policing. Furthermore, it has the potential to entice a more significant number of scholars to engage in research and advance the field of police science, particularly in regions such as Indonesia, where research undertaken by non-officer academics is still lacking in number.

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