

Unearthing Hidden Keys: Why Pracademics are An Invaluable (if Underutilized) Resource in Policing Research

Abstract

At the core of evidence based policing is the belief that research should be the outcome of a blending of police experience with academic research skills. Within this paper we argue that no individual figure embodies this perspective better than the 'pracademic' - that is, the experienced police practitioner with the training and knowledge to conduct rigorous, independent scholarship. Despite their apparently increasing numbers, the pracademic remains an underutilized resource within both academia and police institutions. Through an exploration of some of the central problems plaguing contemporary policing research - from lack of receptivity to barriers to knowledge creation and uptake - we demonstrate how the pracademic role can help both police and researchers resolve these issues.

Intro

#pracademic? identifies problems you didn't know existed in ways you won't understand then operationalises them by increasing complexity
– Tweet, 2016.

The definition above, while clearly intended to be facetious, illustrates a not uncommon view of the pracademic within police organizations: as an individual who consciously or otherwise complicates policing matters through the introduction of new ideas, new tools and new modes of evaluation. We might say, in an equally joking manner, that they carry with them the taint of academia, and, in particular, the academic inability to treat any subject in a relatively straight forward fashion. More seriously, though, the term 'pracademic' is a portmanteau of two words – practitioner and academic – intended to signify someone who straddles two different worlds. As a practitioner, the pracademic works in an applied setting responding to 'real world' problems. As an academic researcher, they have the requisite training to treat aspects of 'real world' issues as problems amenable to measurement, systematic observation, intervention and/or other forms of hypothesis testing.

In this paper, we focus much-needed attention on the police pracademic. As skilled police officers with academic training, they embody two particularly disparate, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives that can be frequently difficult to reconcile (Bradley and Nixon 2009). However, such reconciliation is necessary for the creation of quality criminal justice research. Within the pages that follow, we identify four key areas in which we believe pracademics can make significant contributions to fostering a climate in which policing research is valued, understood, produced and consumed. These areas are in relation to building institutional knowledge, translating or brokering between institutions, increasing research receptivity and directly through knowledge production. We also consider some ways in which we can better employ this underutilized resource.

What is a 'pracademic'?

Although the term 'pracademic' has been gaining recent currency within policing circles, it has a broader usage and can be found in earlier works in the education, business and public administration literatures. The origins of the term are unclear; however, it has been claimed that it was coined by Volpe and Chandler (1999), who employed it as a descriptor for academics who function as dispute resolution practitioners within academic institutions. Since then, we find the term being used in a more general context to represent any individual who is dually recognized as expert in both academia and within a community of practice (Murphy and Fulda 2011; Panda 2014).

Aside from the invaluable knowledge they bring as individuals with learning and experience in two often disparate fields, what makes the pracademic an invaluable resource to both is their ability to act as a knowledge broker (Posner 2009). As Posner (2009: 16) explains, "these adaptable and cross-pressured actors [can] serve the indispensable roles of translating, coordinating and aligning perspectives across multiple constituencies." Their ability to function as knowledge brokers can be indispensable to successful cooperation between institutions, and we are thinking particularly here of policing and academia, that have "very different institutional incentives, ways of thinking and traditions" (ibid.: 16). Such cooperation is often vital for the development and implementation of innovations within and across public and private sectors.

In the context of policing, a pracademic is typically a current or former police officer with University graduate level education and training in a criminal justice, legal, psychological or other related research area. To acquire this education, most apply to standard university graduate programs as mature students, pursuing their studies in classes that are neither uniquely geared towards advanced police education or containing significant numbers of fellow officers as students. That said, we have recently begun to witness the development of a number of graduate-level programs for both police and community safety practitioners more generally in the U.K., Canada, the U.S. and Australia, among others. Indeed, as Lee and Punch (2004) observed over a decade ago, there has been an increasing number of opportunities available for police officers to pursue full-time or part-time degrees related to their professional field, opportunities that continue to expand as universities and colleges recognize the lucrative nature of professional degree programs. As a result, not only has the number of police officers with undergraduate degrees grown, but so too has the number of officers with graduate training.

And yet, generally speaking, pracademics remain an underutilized resource within the field of policing research. We base this contention on our experience. Aside from being policing researchers ourselves, and one of us a ‘pracademic’, we both run national policing research groups whose members are largely constituted of pracademics. A frequent occurrence at the various rounds of conferences we attend is the pracademic complaint that their research experience is not valued within their own organizations. It is seen instead as another qualification that may or may not lead to career advancement (see also Lee and Punch 2004). In the next sections, we discuss four specific ways in which we believe pracademics can offer invaluable service not only to their institution, but to the research generation and mobilization process itself.

Institutional Knowledge/Expertise

Modern police organizations are tasked with responding to an ever-increasing array of complex social issues. Whereas in times of economic prosperity the police have typically had greater latitude in their choice of responses, austerity imposes upon them the necessity of implementing responses that are both effective and efficient. This, in turn, entails greater reliance on research – that is, in knowing ‘what works’ (Sherman 1998). While it is the case that many police organizations have some internal research capacity, executive-level decision-makers are likely to be unfamiliar with the relevant research and to lack the capacity to adapt research, which is often written for academic audiences, and make it actionable within their institutional environment (Lum, Telep, Koper and Grieco 2011). Thus, they frequently must turn to external experts for research assistance, which can raise both institutional anxieties and another set of conundrums. For instance, other than referrals, how best to identify individuals with the appropriate research expertise, and then ensure that studies commissioned or otherwise participated in will meet operational needs?

It has been our experience that such research decisions are frequently made by senior officers relying on the advice of analysts within their department. This is, of course, when such analysts and advice are available, which is not always the case. What we have yet to routinely encounter in our combined experience are agencies consulting with another internal resource whose expertise upon which they could easily draw: pracademics. And yet, these are individuals within their own organizations who have the necessary knowledge to appreciate if not all, then many aspects of the types of methodological, ethical practical and other issues that may arise in the research context. [some illustrative examples here of how pracademics have or could provide support in this area]

The translation piece

The policing research literature abounds with commentary concerning the well-established belief that police and academic researchers suffer from an inability to communicate (Fleming 2010; Griffiths 2014; Cockcroft 2014). Most notably, such failures have been termed a ‘dialogue of the deaf,’ in which neither side hears or understands the other (Bradley and Nixon 2009). As Cynthia Lum and her colleagues have put it: we are dealing with two different sets of expectations and worldviews, including “divergent interpretations of that knowledge and, more generally, different philosophies about the role and meaning of science in policing” (2011: 62). Then there is the issue of trust, or rather mutual mistrust, which is exacerbated by competing needs of police and academic researchers. Police frequently want to maintain control over research output, whereas academic researchers strive to maintain academic freedom, including the freedom to publish and discuss their results in various fora (Laycock 2015).

Complicating matters further are language issues. Police operate within a highly pragmatic environment centred on practical concerns. Thus they require research that is not only framed in accessible language, but includes concrete policy and programmatic recommendations leading directly to actionable outcomes (Greene 2014). By way of contrast, academic researchers work with theoretically driven, empirical models, and have spent years learning how to discuss those models in dense, technical language.

At a glance, these communication problems may appear insurmountable. However, there are solutions. The solution we seek to advance is the employment of pracademics as conduits or, as we have suggested in the subheading above, as ‘translators’, who can enhance communication and thus cooperation between academics and police-practitioners (Posner 2009; Robertson 2012). [illustrative example here]

Increasing receptivity

A significant benefit of open dialogue between police and researchers is the potential to increase receptivity to research within police organizations. As we know from studies on this subject, police organizations sometimes manifest a distinct lack of willingness to read or consult research on operational matters, to commission external studies and/or to participate in research through project collaborations (Telep and Lum 2014; Griffiths 2014). This lack of enthusiasm for research has historically been cast by academic scholars as part of a more general insularity, as resistance to change and/or unwillingness to listen to outside opinion (Van Maanen 1973; Reiner 1992; Chan 1998). In relation to the cause of generating quality policing research, lack of receptivity equates to a lack of access for researchers, which, in turn, leads to critical gaps in the evidence base. It is this evidence base upon which we rely for the formation of effective and efficient policing developments.

What research also tells us is that the potential for police to be more receptive to research increases when officers feel their experience is valued by researchers and employed in research design and implementation (Wood, Sorg, Groff, Ratcliffe and Taylor 2014). Our own experiences validate this position: the most effective research collaborations with police agencies have begun with detailed discussions between researchers and police officers on what is to be achieved and what is the best way to achieve those results given both methodological and operational necessities and constraints.

While it is the case that experienced police researchers may already be well attuned to the needs of police agencies and how best to work with them, here too the pracademic can serve as an useful bridge between two often disparate worlds. [illustrative examples here]

Building capacity and filling knowledge gaps

Given that much of the preceding discussion has centred on problems that create barriers to generating actionable research, it is somewhat ironic that one of the most significant problems we have observed in policing research is lack of research capacity. Whereas some countries have provided substantial contributions to the body of policing research literature, and continue to do so each year, this is not universally true. For example, one of the authors has written extensively of the deficit of Canadian policing research (author cite), a fact well supported within a number of public documents (Griffiths 2014; House Standing Committee 2014; CCA 2014). While some of the problems facing Canadian criminal justice research may be unique to Canadians, one is a more universal issue: independent researchers are a finite resource and the need for quality, actionable research as a result of ever-changing technologies, new laws and social and economic shifts, can create new policing challenges. The pace at which such challenges can arise can easily outstrip the ability of universities and colleges to supply research, if and when needed. Indeed, one of the authors has repeatedly heard criticisms from both police and academics concerning the ability to meet police demands for research in a ‘timely’ manner (ie. on demand¹). These problems stem from two sources: 1. lack of local and/or domestic research capacity and; 2. the fact that, like policing, academia is an institution and institutions are prone to inertia and to move, when they do, largely in response to their own bureaucratic concerns. While the use of pracademics may do little to address the second issue, the employment of pracademics can help us increase the volume of policing research produced, as well as contributing significantly to the shaping of its policy relevance and subsequent uptake by police organizations.

The question of how pracademics can contribute to the volume of policing research is easily answered by reference to the material they produce for their own graduate studies (theses and dissertations), as well as through their contributions as graduate members of research teams and in subsequent post-graduate work. We can, for example, point to a recent volume of the *International Criminal Justice Review*, which featured research on evidence based policing conducted in whole or in part by graduate researchers at the Cambridge Centre for Evidence Based Policing. Of those students, five were officers serving in U.K. police forces. Although academic scholars are frequently quick to dismiss the utility of theses (and sometimes dissertations) produced by students, treating them largely as stepping stones, we can see from pracademic work how valuable they can be, by helping us to identify and fill critical knowledge gaps. Indeed, one of the few pieces of research on police receptivity, and thus one that is frequently cited within the policing research literature, is a MA thesis (Palmer 2011). Similarly, one of the few studies to examine the role of police note-taking in the investigation process, and the use of such notes in assessing police testimony in court, was generated as part of the requirements for a Master’s in Law (Cyr 2014).

¹ In response to demands for more ‘timely’ research production, one cluster of academics and policy-makers came up with the idea to form a ‘rapid research response team.’ Perhaps not surprisingly, this endeavor failed to get off the ground.

Using resources wisely

At a recent talk to an audience of police officers and police governance officials, one of the authors was asked, “how can we make better use of pracademics?” This question cuts directly to the heart of our argument that pracademics are a valuable, but highly underutilized resource within policing research. To make ‘better use’ of their knowledge and skills requires both police organizations and academic researchers to take several important steps. The first is to identify pracademics within police organizations and graduate programs. If we want to employ their skills and knowledge appropriately, we need to know who they are, where they are, and the nature of their work experience and substantive and methodological interests. The answers will likely be highly varied. We have encountered police officers with Master’s and doctoral degrees in education, law, business administration, criminology and sociology. The substantive topics their work has covered include analysis of serial killing patterns, geographical profiling, hot spot policing, crime prevention efforts for the elderly, rural and remote policing and offender desistance policing, among others. The research methodologies pracademics have employed range from in-depth qualitative interviews to mixed methods and randomized control trials. In short, not only are these individuals who are experts on a given topic, but they have training in several modes of research and working knowledge of how to conduct research using at least one of those methodologies. We need to know who and where they are.

A second important step is to recognize and treat these individuals as domain experts within their own institutions. This means having police decision-makers consider consulting them on research-related matters, where they may be able to offer constructive input, ask necessary questions concerning methods, timelines and output, translate ‘academicese’ and otherwise facilitate smooth communications between police and researchers. We are aware that providing such recognition to pracademics may represent something of a radical shift. After all, many of the pracademics we encounter are at lower ranks, and to those within police organizations that remain more rigidly hierarchical, the idea of a senior officer treating a more junior officer as an ‘expert’ may seem problematic. That said, senior officers who ignore the potential for valuable input based on such flimsy considerations risk losing out on the ability to draw on a highly useful (and ‘free’) source of expertise.

Academics can also make better use of pracademics, both while they are in our programs and post-degree. Where possible, those of us who conduct policing research, should be attempting to liaise with pracademics and, where possible, bring them onto our research teams. Not only do they have an insider’s perspective on police culture, operations and institutional functioning unmatched by most academic researchers, but they can help us develop and frame our methodology in light of police operational and institutional concerns. To give one small example, in developing a piece of exploratory research on trauma and resiliency within a Forensic Identification Unit, one of the authors spent hours working out the methodology with the Staff-Sergeant in charge of the unit. While some academics might bristle at the thought of police officers participating in the shaping of a study’s methods, working that closely with the Staff-Sergeant meant that she was able to consult his operational expertise in order to develop a project plan that would best meet the needs of both the project and the Unit and its members.

[other examples here]

Final thoughts

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