

It's not just time away: The value of secondments in policing

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A research secondment in a potentially long career

In the summer of 2016, I found out that I was accepted on a three-month secondment (later extended to six months) with The Open University (OU). I joined a research team to study public value in policing. As an officer for Thames Valley Police (TVP) for 10 years, I continue to view policing as a vocation, one where I am fortunate enough to enjoy a sense of job security for the next 27 years should I choose to. By then, I would have been an officer for 37 years. That is plenty of time to perhaps become institutionalised. A lot of time for a mind-set to become fixed. Even more time for an officer to potentially become detached from the public whom they serve.

Secondments might just be a way to help prevent this, perhaps even reduce turn over and increase morale. As I will explain later, unfortunately the current climate is such that there is both a lack of interest and opportunity for such secondments. This article will urge for more officers to be given the opportunity to spend time away working and immersing themselves in other organisations. When such opportunities are advertised, they come along very rarely and tend to be targeted towards senior officers. Even when they appear and are open to everyone, there is still the real risk that a police force is unable to release the officer due to lack of resources, i.e. the department the officer works in does not have the spare capacity to let the officer go.

A short three-month secondment would merely represent less than one percent of the potential career of many officers and for me, this figure is a minuscule 0.7%. I will begin with explaining why I applied for the secondment in the first place before describing my time with the Open University as a Senior Practitioner Fellow. I will conclude by summarising what I have gained from the experience and leave some final remarks hoping for more officers to be encouraged to pursue such opportunities.

I applied for the secondment because I was interested in policing research and wanted to learn from academics. I wanted to see for myself how the Evidence-Based Policing (EBP) movement was seen from the outside as it is something still relatively new from within policing. The term EBP was first defined in the 1990s by Prof. Lawrence Sherman, with research into policing dating back decades before that. Yet, it took until 2010 for the formation of the UK Society of Evidence-Based Policing. It took a further two years after that before The College of Policing (formally the National Police Improvement Agency) placed an “evidenced-based approach to policing” at its core. Why has it taken so long? I also felt that this practitioner and academic “co-creation and use of research” (Hartley, 2017) was an ideal environment to de-mystify what academics do. Police officers and staff are inundated with emails, newsletters, and reports informing them of policy changes or invitations to take part in research by completing online questionnaires. It could be said that frontline officers generally do not have a complete understanding of how such policy changes were decided upon or what was the evidence base used to support a decision. Is there actually any practical purpose of completing these questionnaire requests, or is it to help a colleague or academic obtain a qualification from a thesis that would end up gathering dust on a desk, having no impact on day-to-day policing and ignored by policy makers? I hoped that accepting the secondment would help strengthen my position about the value of research when arguing against such cynicism and negativity. From my perspective, I believe the secondment has fulfilled this goal, as I will explain.

The work of the secondment

I started my secondment in July 2016. I worked within a research team examining public value in policing. Given the range of activities that the police undertake, and the pressure on budgets for policing, a substantial part of my work was to develop the

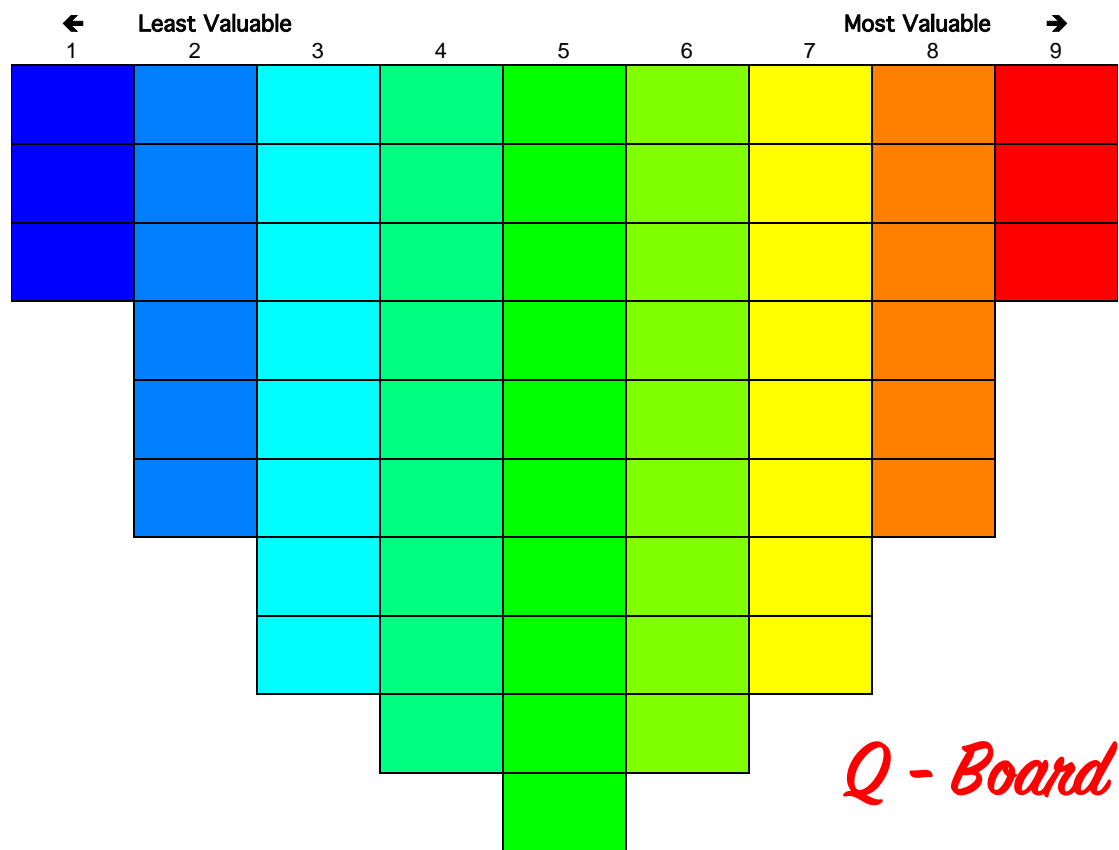
use of a particular method (called Q methodology) to identify how stakeholders view policing priorities. These stakeholders are: the public, the police and policing partners. What someone values most or least about policing is heavily dependent on their own personal experiences. Q methodology is a research method that aims to provide a systematic and rigorous means of studying subjectivity (Mckeown & Thomas, 1988) by examining social issues where there is “*much debate, conflict and contestations*” (Barry & Proops, 1999, pg. 339). It is this ability to study subjectivity that makes the method well equipped to study such a contested issue like policing priorities. It is a mixed method approach, combining elements from both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Until I joined the secondment, I did not even know such a methodology existed.

My secondment with the OU was extended from three months to six months because it was felt by both Thames Valley Police and the Open University that the extra time would benefit the research project, enable me to contribute to writing up the research (Vo et al, 2017) and allow me to learn more to take back to my organisation. I led the design of what we called the Q-Board. This is a magnetic board where participants are asked to rank 62 policing statements relating to priorities that are written on acrylic tiles. One of the advantages of a Q sort over a survey with Likert scales (range of answer options) or binary questions (two answer options) is that the participant is forced to prioritise some statements over others. This is possible because the shape of the Q Board means that only a particular number of statements can be given a high priority, while others must inevitably take a lower priority. The 62 statements were obtained from a number of sources, such as Police and Crime Commissioner Plans, focus groups, neighbourhood surveys and other literature.

The analysis revealed four distinct views amongst the participants about what policing should prioritise: 1) Personal Harm - reducing serious personal psychological and physical harm; 2) Engagement - reducing community harm and creating a fearless society; 3) Crime-fighter - a focus on crime itself; and 4) Good Cop - policing that is committed to serving the public. It found that there were more similarities of views across the stakeholders than differences. In other words, the public share very similar views to police officers about what is most important, contrary to many neighbourhood surveys. This might be as a result of the methodology requiring participants to view all the statements and be forced to prioritise in such a manner that

not everything can be most important. Doing so reflects the reality that there is a limited police budget with a finite number of officers. The study also unexpectedly discovered that the Q Board worked well as a community engagement tool and a means to educate the public about what the police do. To reach the findings briefly summarised above, I organised the fieldwork to collect the ranking of policing priorities from police, partner agencies and members of the public. I also drafted a how-to guide on Q methodology to help police and other public organisations use this research method.

Fig. 1: The Q Board accommodating 62 statements (Vo, et al 2017, pg. 20)



The secondment was not just about conducting research. I was able to participate in various seminars, conferences (including presenting at an international public management conference in Budapest), held meetings with partner agencies and the public about the research and attended events such as the PMM Live! at the House of Lords. PMM Live! was an opportunity to meet Lord Bichard along with academics

and practitioners to discuss the problem with government access to knowledge. I was introduced as an example of how knowledge could be shared between different organisations. In my case, this was between the Police and academics. I spoke with attendees about my experience and how arrangements like this could be beneficial for their own organisations. To give an idea of what my typical work pattern looked like, it involved doing a lot of reading focused on the research topic; time to think about the research design, method and analysis; organising focus groups; travelling to complete these focus groups and collecting data using the Q-Board; writing up the research; record what is being done and why in order to be able to lead the writing of the final report at a later stage.

A learning culture

As I became immersed into the academic working environment, I was immediately struck by how friendly and engaging everyone was at the OU. This was a feeling that was replicated when I met with academics and partners from other institutions in the UK and abroad. Everyone I spoke to was genuinely interested in what I did as a police officer on a day-to-day basis and keen to discuss how we (as academics and practitioners) could work together. Through close collaboration between academics and practitioner, we have the real potential to contribute to the literature and knowledge through rigorous research. If done correctly, the research we complete could also be of real practical benefit from senior leaders in the police right down to front-line officers.

The different types of meetings I sat in, both as an observer and as a contributor highlighted something very different to what I had become accustomed to in policing, at least from a front-line perspective. Whilst there would usually be someone who chairs the research team meeting, it was sometimes not clear to me who was the most senior member of staff. Discussions were open, with feedback and constructive comments to challenge thinking expected and welcomed. It was done very professionally and thoughtfully. It was a safe environment for staff to improve their own research and learn from each other (including discussing any mistakes to avoid in the future), regardless of seniority. The OU also held regular seminars where academic staff presented to colleagues their current, recent or future research. Such

activities help to foster a learning environment. Experiencing this first hand allowed me to take away two points.

Firstly, for the majority of meetings I had been involved with in policing, it was abundantly clear who was the most senior member of staff. Does such an atmosphere inhibit learning, prevent challenge and hinder openness? The experience has definitely made me more aware of how I deliver briefings or chair certain meetings. When young officers approach me to ask a question and say “Sarge”, I cannot help but cringe on the inside. This never used to be the case before I went on the secondment because I was so used to hearing it around me on a daily basis. It was the norm. I can sometimes sense the nervousness in their voice, especially those who do not know me. Whilst I appreciate the term, along with “Ma’am” and “Sir” are used out of respect, evoking a sense of tradition and perhaps even nostalgia, I can’t help but feel they create a barrier. As soon as I say to the officers to call me by my first name, I can immediately see that they are less tense and appear to speak more freely. Some refuse to do so, reinforcing the idea that it is deep within the culture of such a hierarchical organisation. However, even for those who are not used to dropping the formalities, the invitation alone was enough for me to see they felt more at ease to talk. Does something so simple like dropping a formality enhance the flow of information and ultimately lead to better decision-making? This is only my observation, so in the spirit of EBP, it is not evidence but might be something worth exploring through further research. It’s such a small thing, but to me, it makes such big difference in improving communication between ranks. I accept that a transactional style of leadership is without doubt needed in certain scenarios like a public order situation or commanding a crime in action (such as a kidnap), but how often are officers in that situation?

Secondly, it feels to me that policing has some way to go before it can have such an open mind towards learning, at least on an individual level. A number of officers and staff can have negative feelings towards any form of “*constructive criticism*” and become defensive. They may be inclined to immediately think about how they can defend their actions or decisions rather than actively listening to the comments being made. Perhaps this reflects the nature of policing. The police are in the public eye and the media are quick to react to our apparent failures and slow to report our positive contributions. The current discourse internationally about public trust in and

engagement with the police adds to this scrutiny. It may also be how feedback is delivered internally in such a hierarchical organisation, where the use of terms such as “*negative feedback*” and “*constructive criticism*” can set the wrong tone. As a supervisor, I still have a hard time convincing officers that “Development Plans” or that a meaningful Continuous Professional Development entry on their record are not terrible things. I think part of the reason for this is because they are used to be called “Action Plans” and would only be given to underperforming officers. Their mindset could be such that if they are asked to improve regardless of whether or not they are performing well, it is seen as career damaging criticism. This is a branding and cultural problem, where the old negative perceptions and reputation of such learning discussions still prevail.

Part of the problem could be that as a fast-moving organisation, reacting to the environment around us whilst also actively preparing for what could happen leaves little to no time for genuine praise and meaningful coaching at the individual level. Officers may feel as though their hard work goes unrecognised or that their career aspirations become stifled because their personnel records do not show them to be a perfect police officer. It should be the norm for every single officer at every rank to be improving on something. I am talking about meaningful and genuine personal development and not just entries on their records for a compulsory force wide or departmental-wide course. This shift in mind-set is going to take more than just time and cannot simply be driven from top down. There is a recognition of this within my organisation. An example of this is how TVP have invested in getting outside speakers and organising conferences for front line supervisors such as Sergeants and Inspectors. These days also include workshops designed to reinforce the message that we are striving to be a learning organisation. Such opportunities used to be reserved to more senior members of staff.

If the police fail to rid itself of a blame culture then officers would be reluctant to make decisions. This would only serve to foster a climate of fear and unfairness that would prevent learning (Chase, 2018). This may create an imbalance that could lead to a workforce that feels undervalued, demoralised and insecure. I am aware that nationally and definitely within my own organisation, there is a push to move away from a blame culture to one that is learning. I expect this to take considerable time and imagine that as the policing culture changes, there will be moments where the

urge to blame is too strong to resist. We are all human after all and our natural instinct is on self-preservation. As a result, strong leadership at all levels is required to resist any political pressure or personal temptation to find someone to blame for a mistake regardless of how catastrophic it may be (except in cases of serious misconduct or gross negligence). In addition, the message that the organisation is striving to become a learning one must be continually re-enforced. Failure to deliver the right leaders who would support the message being delivered will result in a workforce who is not convinced and reluctant to report any mistakes. It would only take one example of someone being blamed unfairly for all the hard work and progress to be undone, and trust to be lost.

Escape or co-creation?

Everyone I met was not only interested in what I did as a police officer, but equally how I was able to find and “*escape*” onto such a secondment. *Escape* is not my word. It was a word repeated several times to me by some of the people I met. It is as if from an outsider’s perspective, they see policing as quite insular, inward looking and the only time an officer can experience the outside world is by escaping. Is there an ‘us’ (the public) and ‘them’ (the police) attitude? If that is the case, then it’s a far cry from the Peelian Principles: “*the police are the public and the public are the police*”. Similarly, officers who have used this term to me may be implying that they are trapped within something. Whether or not such a view reflects reality is debatable. They could have said it as a way to make conversation or merely repeating what the media portrays, but for people to use such a word is interesting in itself. Now that I have returned to Thames Valley Police, I have held training sessions, conducted presentations and advised on various aspects of policing research within my own organisation and with other police forces. The Q-Board has been adopted by Thames Valley Police and other police forces to train police officers and also using it as a public engagement tool. Some front-line officers who have used the Q-Board have reflected on the many activities the Police as whole pursue and it has helped to remind them that they are part of something much larger than the specific department they work within. The work has interested police forces as far away as Australia where I was invited to present as a keynote speaker on the Q Board and Missing Persons (another area of policing I am interested in). However, I believe my most valuable

contribution are not these various outputs, but in changing views of officers who approach me and ask me where I have been and what I have been up to for those months away. Some of these officers had the impression that the time away was like a holiday. Fortunately, when they understood that what I ended up doing was of real use to them, they could then see the benefit of the time away and how useful research can be. For example, the possibility that the Q-board could help reduce police complaints because the public better understand police priorities. In addition, it has introduced a tool that has the potential to start a dialogue with harder to reach communities which may help make their jobs easier.

I have realised that police practitioners and academics conducting police research are not at all that different from one another. Both groups have one main common goal: to improve the society we live in. They achieve this goal in a different manner, but arguably no method is inferior to another. In fact, they naturally complement each other and it is a shame that real collaborative forms of research where practitioners become part of an academic research team are not the norm across the UK. This brings me back to the Evidence-Based Policing movement. Policing in the UK and some other countries have started to push for a better understanding of the benefits and harms of police activity. An understanding that is grounded in good research. The aim is to try to ensure that police action and decisions are based on the best available evidence. However, I can't help but feel that there is a key missing component. There needs to be an equal push towards the co-creation of research. We need to get beyond the days when academics completed research only for the police to disregard because their response is either: "*we knew that already*" or "*we can't apply this practically to real day-to-day policing*". Equally, when police do their own research, only for academics to say: "*it's not real research*" or "*the methodology is flawed so the findings are unreliable*". There needs to be a more symbiotic relationship between police and academics. EBP is substantially advanced when both groups no longer work in silos. Simply for the police to provide data to academics and waiting for the results is not collaborative, nor is it co-creation. Both parties need to have a vested interest in the research being conducted and understand both the academic *and* the police operational decisions that are relevant to the study. The research needs to have the flexibility to adapt and grow according to needs of both to ensure it is useful. This may actually mean for certain types of studies, the

research question is changed or improved, either in the planning stage or part way through. Without this continuous dialogue, a research project may continue on rails heading in a direction that is of little or no use to police officers and practitioners. One of the best ways to avoid this, in my opinion, is to second an officer or police staff onto the research project itself. This may not be practical or possible in every research project, but it should be something that is seriously considered.

So back to my question at the start about EBP: why has it taken so long? From my observations having spent time away, academics have always been enthusiastic about research in policing. I suspect it has taken half a century or more to get to where we are because officers have never felt the need for research. After all, we've lasted since the early 19th century (Metropolitan Police Act 1829), so why change how we do things? Who would really want someone to potentially provide evidence that what they've been doing all this time may not only be ineffective, but could potentially cause harm? As a result, I suspect academics have had a hard time in persuading the police of the benefits quality research could provide. Even once they gain access to some of the police data, there is then the issue of data quality. Front-line police officers would not have data quality that is sufficient for research at the forefront of their minds after dealing with an incident. Sherman (2013) presents a causal model that may help to explain the rise of EBP. It could be that the cumulative effect of external demands (political, social and financial) on policing over time has forced police leaders into action. These external demands are transformed by policing leaders who have the foresight and skill to identify critical issues that require research. These types of talented leaders can take 20 or 30 years to appear due to a lag in recruitment conditions, which is highly dependent on police salaries and research funding (Sherman, 2013).

Attitudes and cultures about secondments

Going back to my original comment about the 0.7% time span of a secondment in a career. Despite the period of time I've been away taking up hardly any of my potential 37-year career, the time away is not the issue. The real issue here is persuading officers that not only is it safe for their careers to gain experience by working with policing partners, but it could be beneficial for their personal

development and for the organisation. There is a need to develop “*a positive attitude towards these career decisions [to] encourage greater recognition of the value that external experience can bring*” (College of Policing, 2015, p. 27). Comments made in jest to me such as “*have you had a nice break?*” only help to reinforce perceptions that somehow secondments away from the police are a holiday and not seen as “proper” police work. In the same way it can be difficult to assess the value-added to society on a certain policing activity, it would be misguided to simply put a time or financial cost on the value of secondments. Officers not only bring back to policing the experiences they have gained but also add value to their host organisations, not least the public confidence and trust such engagement creates. Secondments such as the one I have just completed also allows time to reflect and think about what it means to be a police officer for that individual, allowing them to return more enthusiastic and committed. I recognise that with continued austerity, it is difficult to find the money to release officers on secondments unless they are funded fully or in part by the host organisations. I believe this is where many police forces maybe missing an opportunity and selling themselves short. Its greatest assets are in its people and it is not unusual to see over 80% of a Police Force’s budget spent on its employees. Officers are highly skilled and professional. If we are able to show potential host organisations the mutual benefit that could be gained, then I am confident that many will see the value in funding such secondments. Whilst there are many positive aspects to a secondment, one thing I was mindful of was ensuring that I did not de-skill or lose the networks I had created before going away. To mitigate this, I made a conscious effort keep in regular contact with my colleagues. The benefits of a short secondment far outweigh any drawbacks in my opinion.

It will take time for police culture to change. It will take much longer and will be more difficult if the vast majority of officers spend their entire careers without any experience away. I appreciate that whereas opportunities used to be few and far between, the current climate with constrained budgets, coupled with officer recruitment and retention difficulties mean that the situation is unlikely to improve in the immediate future. This is shame. Even if the situation improves to an extent that would allow the provision of secondment opportunities, this may still not be enough. Officers will need encouragement. There needs to be an active push to reassure officers that going away does not harm their careers. The Police should not fear

letting their officers go on secondments. If the right environment is created, it will draw them back and more importantly, that they would not be seen as less of a police officer on their return. From my perspective, the secondment has more than fulfilled what I had hoped to achieve from it. Not only have I further developed my academic research skills, but also I have taken away something much more valuable. It has given me a reminder that the public and our partners genuinely value what the Police do and are really interested in helping us make the society we all live in safer. I have returned more positive about the future of policing and feel a sense of responsibility to share everything I have experienced with my fellow officers.

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