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Unpacking the Blue Box: structure, control and education in policing

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ABSTRACT

Research addressing the relationship between Higher Education (HE) and police officers tends to fall into one of three camps. First, that which explores the relationship between police institutions and academic institutions, second, those which explore the appropriateness of the HE setting for the delivery of police-specific knowledge, and, finally, research which investigates the impact of police higher education engagement upon police officer attributes and practice (Brown. 2018). Do graduate police officers make a difference to policing? Results of an integrative literature review. *Policing: a journal of policy and practice, policing*, 1–22. doi:10.1093/policing/pay075). Thus far, little research has discussed the impact HE has on the relationship between officers and the police organisation. This research, derived from interviews with 31 police officers who undertook in-service degrees, explores police officers' engagement with HE study and the consequent changes to their perception of their relationship with the profession. This is contrasted with the relatively unchanged structural and cultural expectations the organisation places on officers regardless of their newly acquired graduate status as reported in the extant literature (Hallenberg and Cockcroft. 2017. From indifference to hostility: police officers, organisational responses and the symbolic value of 'in-service' higher education in policing. *Policing: a journal of policy and practice*, 11 (3), 273–288). The discrepancy can be explained through the recent scholarship on public sector isomorphism and the police's transformation into a hybrid organisation (Noordegraaf. 2015. Hybrid professionalism and beyond: new forms of public professionalism in changing organizational and societal contexts. *Journal of professions and organization*, 2, 187–206), as well as the competing knowledge paradigms within policing (Williams and Cockcroft. 2018. Knowledge wars: professionalisation, organisational justice and competing knowledge paradigms in British policing. In: L. Huey, and R Mitchell, eds. *Evidence-based policing: an introduction*. Bristol: Policy Press, 131–141). Importantly, however, the current paper takes this discussion deeper. It argues that the police's unique role in serving not just the public but also state interests inevitably shapes and constrains the process of professionalisation, the relationship between the police and HE, and officers' ability to use knowledge and skills gained through HE study.

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Introduction

The relationship between Higher Education (HE) and policing has attracted a wide range of commentary from academics for many years (see, for example, Young 1991; Punch 2007; Bryant *et al.* 2013). To date, there is a knowledge gap in our understanding of the ways in which HE can transform the nature of the relationship between the police officer and the police institution. This relationship is fundamentally important as it allows us to (a) understand the ability of HE to act as a catalyst for personal development, (b) appreciate how it may enhance professional development and practice, and (c) address whether or not HE has a positive, negative or negligible impact on officers' orientation to their work. Indeed, it also shapes the very *act* of policing, as the cultural, structural, intellectual and emotional ties between the individual and the organisation create the bridle that guides the officers' interactions with the public, with colleagues and with the profession as a whole.

This paper begins by identifying and exploring three areas of recent academic commentary, both empirical and conceptual. First, it explores the broader insights into the professionalisation agendas of the police and other public sector institutions, before discussing the competing epistemological paradigms which shape the distinction between the police and HE. Finally, the ways in which education can provide a lens through which to explore the asymmetrical relationship between police officers and police organisations is deliberated. By contextualising the data through three conceptual lenses, the authors adopt a 'theory knitting' approach which seeks to bring together elements of different theories and combine them with researchers' insights to offer a new understanding of phenomena (Kalmar and Sternberg 1988; Ward and Siegert 2002). In England and Wales, where the data was generated, the introduction of the Police Education Qualification Framework (College of Policing 2020a) has made policing a graduate profession though whether the move prompts a deeper cultural and structural change remains to be seen. Whilst acknowledging the ongoing impact of such developments, this paper aims to contextualise the discussion within broader debates pertaining to this subject area.

The public sector, professionalisation and institutional convergence/divergence

Recent years have seen the emergence of academic literature exploring the changing configuration of the relationship between public sector institutions and the state, and the central importance of professionalisation narratives and agendas to this novel environment. This has resulted in the identification of 'hybrid' institutions so labelled by their growing incorporation of 'hybrid professionalism' (Noordegraaf 2015). This refers to the tendency for pressure to be exerted, from above, upon 'new' professions, not least in respect of the growing expectation that members of such professions need to complement their professional knowledge with more generic organisational skills. In turn, professionals in such organisations are subjected to an increased level of responsibility for delivering organisational effectiveness. This adoption of increasingly common generic skillsets, within roles previously characterised by specific role knowledge, is driven by increased concerns for achieving legitimacy and for the increasingly complex requirements of partnership architecture.

A critical reference for any exploration of the reorientation of public institutions to meet the new demands of contemporary society is the work of Clarke and Newman (1997), not only in respect of the ideas it presented but in its influencing of a key contemporary thinker in this regard, Mirko Noordegraaf (Noordegraaf 2006, 2011, 2015). To Clarke and Newman (1997) the late modern shift leads to the evolution of the 'managerial state' which, in turn, demands an amalgam of the 'professional' and the 'bureaucratic' in order to meet the evolving characteristics of the time. These include, although are not limited to, restricted financial budgeting, new shapes of public preferences and a re-casting of the dynamics through which individuals relate to both each other and the institutions which they engage with.

Social change is seen as a key component of professionalisation (Elliott 1972) and its relationship with higher education (Jarausch 1983). It is important to note that, to date, limited commentary has been published which seeks to explore the connection between contemporary policing and broader

social change and its implications (as noted by writers like Clarke and Newman, and Noordegraaf). The reasons for this may be, partially at least, due to the inherent challenges of making sense of social change and its impact on the work of particular professional groups. This, in itself, raises a further question regarding whether our understanding of contemporary professionalisation agendas within the police share similarities with the experiences of those within other professional sectors.

The starting point here is to attempt to engage with the concept of late modernity, and its impact on policing. McLaughlin (2007) notes that Western institutions have been substantially impacted by the processes of late modernity such as, 'economic and cultural globalization, dematerialization of production processes, new information and telecommunication technologies and networks, commodification and mass consumerism, and profound and rapid social complexity' (p. 87). Similarly, such processes resonate with the characterisation of the impact of late modernity offered by Young (2007, p. 195) as one where, 'our concept of community becomes less territorialised, less tethered to locality, for the social and the spatial, once soldered tightly together, begin to drift apart'.

Whilst unpicking the dynamics of the relationship between late modernity and policing is difficult, conceptual characterisations of contemporary police work have attempted to reflect the shifting configurations of the police institution. In particular, the concepts which we use to understand processes of police reform and police professionalisation inevitably draw us back to reflecting on the ways in which we organise policing structures against the backdrop of late modern relations.

Two works that seek to do so are Terpstra *et al.* (2019) and Cockcroft (2019). The former is helpful in that it allows us to appreciate the impact of both contemporary police reform agendas and police professionalisation processes upon the reality of policework. This represents a significant contribution in that it shows how policing has essentially become disconnected, contextually, from its previous relationships. The interruption and restructuring of both internal and external relationships (often through technology) described by the authors, strongly resonates with the notion of late modernity (Reed 2000). It is in this sense of disconnection that the synergies between the processes of late modernity and the sense of the increasingly 'Abstract' within policing can be found. To Terpstra *et al.* (2019), policing becomes abstract through the growing formality of policing and the increasingly removed and decontextualised nature of relations both internal and external to the organisation. These changes, in turn, are driven by a combination of information-led policing, the continuing influence of techniques associated with New Public Management and shifting perceptions of what policing, at its core, entails. One central example, provided by Terpstra *et al.*, that illustrates these changes is the continuing reduction of discretion within contemporary policework.

The work of Cockcroft (2019), whilst acknowledging the growing abstraction of policework identified by Terpstra *et al.* (2019), positions such consequences as the result of broader trends towards professionalisation occasioned by the needs of the 'managerial state'. As a result, he suggests we are witnessing an increasing trend towards 'normative' isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) across the public sector. This represents a slightly different conclusion to that reached by Terpstra *et al.* Whereas, Terpstra *et al.* explore the growing abstraction of policing in isolation, Cockcroft supports the view that similar processes occur across the contemporary public sector. In this way, isomorphism comes to represent the growing convergence of organisational skills, across the public sector, to meet the needs created by late modernity. In practice, for example, such changes might lead to professionals in 'new' professions needing to complement their role-based knowledge with more generic forms of knowledge and competency (for example, in respect of the effective organisation of partnership work). Increasingly, therefore, professionalisation involves serving those broader needs of the organisation, that fall beyond the immediate requirements of service users. To Noordegraaf (2015, p. 10), late modern society creates increased demands for public sector organisations to be effective and these lead to the emergence of 'bureaucratic/professional regimes'. The commonalities of these demands across the public sector provoke similar needs and responses regardless of the services being provided and lead to the identification of 'isomorphic' or common professional practices.

Both papers, however, converge in their acknowledgement that contemporary approaches to policing offer reduced opportunity for the application of professional knowledge and autonomy by officers, themes that resonate particularly within the work of Noordegraaf. Accordingly, they provide a critical lens through which to explore contemporary positions on police professionalisation, and aid our understanding of the consequences of such processes on traditional occupational characteristics such as professional autonomy.

Much of the value of Terpstra *et al.*'s work lies in its ability to explore changes at the operational and structural level of policing and to equate these with organisational changes and new ways of thinking about policing (Cockcroft 2019). However, Cockcroft (2019) draws on Clarke and Newman (1997) and Noordegraaf (2006, 2011, 2015) to suggest that the developments associated with the Abstract police are, as described above, determined by wider changes that impact on institutions across the public sector. This connection is important in that it allows, and legitimises, an analytic lens that considers the issue of police reform in parallel to that experienced by other public sector occupations. This, in many respects, offers itself as rational approach given the fact that some of the tensions between the state and the police function in the United Kingdom are also readily perceived across the other areas of the public sector through the context of the historical push and pull between centrally defined and controlled standardisation and consistency on one hand, and local responsiveness, engagement and accountability on the other.

Such tensions also speak to issues of training and education within the broader public sector and it appears that there are some synergies, or at least similarities, in this respect between policing and other public sector areas such as health and education. For example, Maureen Cain, in 1972, noted that policing and nursing share similarities in that they are both hierarchically structured occupations where the, 'distinctive technical (professional) skills' (p. 217) reside at the bottom of the hierarchy. However, some limitations remain in respect of this comparison. These can be viewed, as in the work of White and Heslop (2012), in terms of the unique relationship that police practice has both with the academy and the profession of policing, and with broader 'philosophical contrasts' (p. 342) such as the central importance of control to the police role. Whilst similar pressures (commonly around legitimacy and credibility) are brought to bear on different public sector institutions (a category which includes, for example, nursing, teaching and policing) the differentiated nature of their work, symbolically and structurally, orientates them in subtly different ways to the task of professionalisation.

Cultural and structural dissonance and the police/HE nexus

Current commentary on the growing adoption of partnership with HE institutions as the platform through which to achieve professionalisation of the police occupation tend to underplay the challenges of achieving a seamless synergy between the two (see Bryant *et al.* 2013; Tong and Hallenberg 2018). A fundamental distinction between the two institutions stems from the ultimately pragmatic nature of the police's occupational culture (see Bowling *et al.* 2019). This can be viewed as encouraging negative views towards HE (and those who practice within it), influencing the leadership of the police in such opinions and, finally, driving opposition to developments such as Evidence Based Policing (EBP) (Cockcroft 2020). Hallenberg (2012) described this perceived cultural and epistemological divide as 'Two Worlds Thinking' where differences, rather than similarities, are emphasised. Abstract, theory-driven academia with a focus on research, analysis and long-term goals, and practice-oriented 'real world' policing, with its valuing of experience and led by short-term operational and management needs, are viewed as difficult to combine, if not entirely incompatible.

The tension between evidential and experiential knowledge bears further exploration. This conceptual conflict can be seen as reflecting some quite substantial symbolic divisions within the police. EBP (see Sherman 1998) provides one potential driver for closer relationships between the police and the academy by advocating that police practice should be informed by research. By doing this, Sherman suggests, we would be better placed to engage best practice, remove inconsistencies in

policing practice, increase legitimacy and to enhance efficiency and effectiveness (Sherman 1998). Furthermore, according to Lum and Koper (2014), EBP can act as a neutralising factor to cultural influences within policing that are resistant to reform. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the antithesis of the evidential approach advocated by Sherman and others is the experiential approach. This represents a bottom-up approach to transmission of knowledge about skills, with informal socialisation assuming substantial importance (Charman 2020). It is epitomised in the following extract taken from the work of van Maanen (1978, pp. 297–298):

By observing and listening closely to police stories and style, the individual is exposed to a partial organizational history which details certain personalities, past events, places, and implied relationships which the recruit is expected eventually to learn and it is largely through war stories that the department's history is conveyed. Throughout the academy, a recruit is exposed to particular instructors who relate caveats concerning the area's notorious criminals, sensational crimes, socio-geographical peculiarities, and political structure ... The correlates of this history are mutually held perspectives towards certain classes of persons, places, and things which are the objective reality of police work.

Fraser (2008, p. 163) calls this kind of 'common sense' approach as the 'knowledge engine' that drives the organisation where, 'you don't need rigorous evidence to back up any argument or decision, just personal experience'. And so, even *formal* training allows for the cultural transmission of the informal 'craft' rules of policework. The substance of the taught content relies on subjective (often cultural) knowledge, as opposed to that drawn from evidence as proposed by EBP. This distinction prompted Williams and Cockcroft (2018) to use Eraut's (2000) pedagogic distinction between 'codified' and 'personal' knowledge to explore this division of police knowledge into formal and informal paradigms. The importance of this distinction to debates about the shape, content and mode of delivery of police knowledge, training and education is that it identifies a struggle between contrasting views of policing, one rooted in science, the other in the informal knowledge generated through operational interactions and received wisdom. Furthermore, this schism has significant implications for the adoption, and ultimately, the success of police reform agendas. As Sklansky (2014) notes, one of the criteria for a profession is that it draws, 'not on experiential knowledge, but on a legitimate, established and tested knowledge base' (Cockcroft 2020, p. 111). Beyond this, it is the abstraction of the knowledge base that provides the various symbolic and practical benefits to the professions, including legitimising the occupational monopoly (e.g. Jarasch 1983; Abbott 1988; Sciulli 2009). An oversimplified interpretation of this would suggest that, for professionalisation of the police to be achieved, the influence of informal, cultural or 'personal' knowledge (to use Eraut's term) has to be minimised. The authors of this article, however, subscribe to a more nuanced view where 'abstracted' and 'personal' knowledge are intertwined and each can be understood, and developed, in the context of the other. It should be noted that there are alternatives to the knowledge-based framework of professionalisation. For example, Clark (2005, p. 186) outlines another perspective on professional expertise, residing 'in the character of the professional as the person' and consisting of qualities such as empathy, spiritual wisdom, trustworthiness and sense of justice. It is similar to Holmes' (1981; cited in Astley 2006, p. 83) alternative model of professionalism based on the 'central importance of affective knowledge based on interpersonal understanding'. A common thread here is the concern over the sidelining of moral and existential values, and the narrowing of opportunities for creativity, inspiration and interprofessional communication knowledge which focused professionalisation frameworks risk (Kunneman 2005).

In this context then, police educational reform can sometimes appear as something of a land grab predicated on the allure of professional status rather than any explicit upskilling or reinvigoration of a profession's workforce. Likewise, recent occupational reforms targeting professional status by sections of the public sector rarely secure the degree of autonomy enjoyed by more established traditional professions (see Fournier 1999; Evetts 2013). This points towards co-opting of HE into police reform practices as one of enforcing conformity rather than one which, in the words of the emancipatory educationalist Paulo Freire, would become, 'the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of

their world' (Freire 2000, p. 34). Whilst Freire's position is unashamedly politicised, it does draw our attention to a very real aspiration of education as a tool for individual and social change and raises the concern over HE engagement being used as a presentational aid with which to enhance external credibility. The argument about 'rubberstamping' of academic degrees is not new. Collins (1979, 1988; both cited in Sciulli 2009) characterised instructional abstraction as a purely symbolic, ritualistic exercise, which ultimately only served to exacerbate the structures of privilege, the discriminatory and yet ultimately arbitrary hierarchies within and between professions. In other words, university education of police officers may be less about skills, knowledge or transformational growth than the development of 'qualities, behaviours and, even appearances that embody professionalism' (Schwirian 1998, p. 8, in her commentary on professionalisation of nursing), i.e. learning the major cultural traditions legitimising the status and privilege of expertise (Rueschemeyer 1983). One of the associated issues here is the extent to which the EBP agenda can limit the scope of what is considered appropriate content and the extent to which knowledge can be limited to that which reflects *particular* information, methodologies and ideologies allied to the EBP position. Furthermore, this issue appears to directly link to accusations that policing is increasingly falling victim to what Ritzer (2004) termed 'McDonaldisation' (Heslop 2011b; Goode and Lumsden 2018) where practice, effectiveness and outcome are reduced to simplistic positive or negative categories, devoid of subtler nuance and context. In short, the issue here is the extent to which the road towards professional credibility will limit the scope for critical engagement through drawing content from a limited field of knowledge. One is reminded of the prescient words of John Berry, 'If your library is not "unsafe", it probably isn't doing its job' (1999; cited in Novotny and Lear 2019, p. v).

HE and the asymmetrical relationship between police officers and police organisations

That police officers, especially at the lower level, often feel lacking in control over their work or in their relationships with superiors, is not a new concept within police studies. Indeed, from the police oral histories of Brogden (1991) and Weinberger (1995) through to the work on organisational justice conducted by Myhill and Bradford (2013) scholars have noted the importance for officers of a sense of being actively engaged by the organisation. These ideas are, of course, not limited to the sphere of policing, and organisational research has increasingly identified employee-organisation relationships (EORs) as a critical element in nurturing trust, loyalty and productivity in workers (Men and Stacks 2014; Men and Jiang 2016; Kang and Sung 2017), in particular in respect of the degree of symmetry of internal communications. EORs characterised by symmetrical internal communication are, for example, more likely to be identified in organisations founded upon an 'organic structure' and where a 'participative culture' (Grunig and Grunig 2011, p. 15) exists. The work of Wright and Pandey (2008) identifies similar processes at work in the public sector when they show that job motivation and satisfaction both increase when there is a perceived congruence of values between the employee and the organisation.

When one explores the contemporary agenda for police education some inherent challenges emerge. In particular, the application of a novel and far-reaching education framework, provided in partnership with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), draws attention to the barriers posed by the current structural and cultural orientation of the police. Whilst it should be noted that there exist some optimistic accounts on the future for university educated police officers (see Punch 2007), these tend not to contextualise their findings in respect of wholesale university engagement but in terms of more limited projects involving a smaller and more select group of officers. For example, in Punch's work, the research focused on officers who were generally already at the rank of Inspector who were then effectively given a three-year sabbatical to study at the University of Essex School of Social Sciences. These officers were generally promoted to a higher rank after returning to the force. There is a scarcity of research dealing with the concept of 're-entry' post-HE engagement and Punch's work is of value for the insights it provides here. For these officers,

Punch notes that there were a few petty prejudices on the part of officers who they worked with on their return, but that, overall, their re-entry was unproblematic. In terms of the benefits, these officers enjoyed increased 'personal and intellectual self-confidence' (2007, p. 117) and this facilitated effective working both internally and with stakeholders in the wider world. This is a clear improvement from the experiences of officers who had attended university in the 1960s and 1970s and who, upon returning to the police, often were deliberately marginalised both socially and occupationally, at times assigned to 'punishment postings' with the aim of integrating them back into the 'real world' of practical policing (Young 1991).

More contemporary research, although focusing on a very different set of police officer experiences of engagement with HE, unfortunately tends to echo the more negative outcomes. Work previously published by the authors (Hallenberg and Cockcroft 2017) focuses on the experiences of serving police officers undertaking in-service degree programmes and addresses officers' perceptions of what Punch referred to as 're-entry', that is, their experiences of applying their new knowledge and skillsets after their studies conclude. Whilst the notion of 're-entry' will be substantively different for officers undertaking in-service as opposed to extracted study (for example, through sabbatical or leave), the experiences of graduates in this research pointed towards a quite negative orientation of the police, structurally and culturally, to these officers with degrees. In particular, interviewees reported a range of negative experiences in respect of their graduate status ranging from indifference to tokenism to hostility. Whilst many of these responses appeared to be consistent with culturally-derived tendencies towards pragmatism (see Bowling *et al.* 2019), they do point, the authors argued, towards two wider areas of discussion. The first is the *value* of a HE qualification in the police. Certainly, to the respondents in our study, there was little acknowledgment by the organisation to either their achievement or its potential value to the police. Furthermore, respondents suggested that they perceived that those with in-service degrees (typically in policing or closely related subjects) were treated differently to officers who entered the police as graduates in any subject area. Likewise, respondents believed that a significant factor accounting for the different value of graduates within the police was that of rank. Simply, it was perceived that HE qualifications were more greatly valued by the organisation when they were held by officers of a senior rank. This presents a considerable structural issue in respect of the relationship between policing and HE. The collegial and meritocratic values often associated with HE tend to sit uneasily within a complex hierarchical organisation like the police. Such structures tend to place great value on formal and informal (and non-qualification related) measures of credibility with the former relating, for example, to rank and the latter, for example, to length of service. Indeed, these examples provide a clear indication of the extent to which structure relates to culture. As Rowe (2006) rightly notes, practical experience is seen by many officers as the ultimate measure of police expertise and competency and is often drawn upon in the verbal culture of the police as a means of undermining the credibility of senior ranking officers, removed from the reality of day-to-day policing. In this sense, formal measures of seniority or competence provoke a cultural, and again *pragmatic*, response. In an occupational milieu where police professionalism or expertise has traditionally been assessed in respect to either hierarchical or cultural standards, we are drawn back to the work of White and Heslop (2012) and the challenges of positioning policing within the academy. They somewhat depressingly conclude: 'On the one hand, there is no rationale for educating student officers ... And on the other, there is no professional justification for "police studies"' (p. 355). Against such a backdrop it may be interesting to reflect on the fact that the comparable occupation of nursing introduced requirements regarding Higher Education qualifications over a decade ago (Royal College of Nursing 2017). Furthermore, a recent interim report of the evaluation of the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (College of Policing 2020b) reported one criticism of the programme as being that students often found it hard to recognise the relevance to their role of the academic content that was delivered to them.

This is reflected in another significant finding of Hallenberg and Cockcroft's work, the absence of structural integration of police graduates. In other words, none of the sample found their role

expanding to accommodate new skills, attributes and confidences. Whilst, in many cases, the officers' organisation had supported (in some cases financially and, in others, through study time allocation) their studies, the skills and knowledge accumulated and developed by officers was rarely put to meaningful use within the organisation.

Methodology

An in-depth discussion of the methodology employed in this research is presented in an earlier paper derived from the same research (Hallenberg and Cockcroft 2017). Accordingly, a briefer account will be provided in this section.

Thirty-one officers, from a sizeable urban police force in England and Wales, and with experience of undertaking some form of HE degree whilst in service, engaged with a piece of qualitative research based upon semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the research was to explore these individuals' experiences of engaging with such a programme of study and represented an extension of an earlier feasibility study on the same topic (Hallenberg and Cockcroft 2017).

The present research drew upon a considerably larger sample than the feasibility study and was sponsored by an officer in the chosen police force. Information regarding the research was circulated within the organisation and, through this, a sample of interviewee participants was developed. Demographic data was not central to the aims of the research but was collected to a limited degree. This showed that 16% of the participants were female. Furthermore, participants' ages ranged from 20s to 50s and length of service from 3 years to 30 years. Two of the sample were employed as special constables (i.e. in a voluntary capacity) while the other 29 officers were drawn from the rank of Constable up to Superintendent. Members of the sample were involved in a variety of different police roles and almost half held a HE qualification prior to joining the force in addition to the one they worked towards whilst in active service. As this data was collected prior to the advent of the PEQF, none of the sample were engaging with specific professional policing educational programmes as part of the PEQF. In terms of the subject areas being studied, the majority (25) were studying in areas pertaining to policing.

The interviews drew on themes identified by the feasibility study: drivers of officers' HE study, facilitators/inhibitors of their HE engagement, organisational and individual responses, outcomes of the experience, and the resulting identity change. The qualitative nature of the methodology similarly allowed for experiences beyond those pertaining to the themes identified above to be captured. Subsequent to the interviews, data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2006) facilitated by the use of the NVIVO software package.

Findings

Motivation to engage with HE

Thematic analysis of the data resulted in the identification of both personal and professional motivations to engage with HE. The majority of the participants referenced some of the former, citing enjoyment and interest in the subject area, intellectual challenge, sense of achievement, setting an example for one's children and having a second chance at education. Over half of the interviewees also openly discussed the motivation to 'future-proof' themselves for careers beyond policing. However, it is the subgroup of explicitly professional drivers that the current paper focuses on. This theme is further differentiated by the degree of agency articulated in the responses, labelled as 'Active Choice' and 'Passive Choice', reflecting the two axes which emerged as common delineating themes. The more passive accounts were characterised by a degree of fatalism and resignation, coupled with a sense that individuals were being pushed towards engaging with HE as a result of changes in the police institution. The more active accounts displayed a sense of active choice in respect of decisions to engage with HE. In summary, the passive accounts conveyed pressure being applied to the participants beyond

their control, whereas the active accounts highlighted a more positive approach to career progression. Echoing the wider structure-agency debates within sociology (and the sociology of education), the issue here is not of binary opposites but of what Willmott termed the 'necessary interdependence and irreducibility of strata' (1999, p. 11). Similarly, this distinction between 'activity' and 'passivity' helps us to understand the perceived developmental needs/desires of police officers and the emerging trajectory of the police institution in respect of professionalisation agendas and, importantly, the overlap between these. Furthermore, any incongruence between these two loosely defined and interconnected positions allows for a platform from which to understand any existing 'asymmetricality' (Grunig and Grunig 2011) between the views and expectations of police officers and the broader police organisation.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the categories of 'Active Choice' and 'Passive Choice' were not necessarily mutually exclusive and some participants expressed elements of both when discussing their decisions to engage with HE. Likewise, participants referred to both professional and personal motivations. This is effectively articulated by Participant 28, an Inspector working in a leadership position:

I started to get little kind of murmurings of graduates and needing degrees and stuff like that. I thought actually from a personal point of view going out and getting a degree would give me a massive amount of personal pride and it would be a thing that I can concentrate on which is associated with my career as opposed to just something completely random which I might have done had I gone to university after school. And if I'm able to get it, it could be something that just gives me an edge when it does come to promotion. It's a combination of the three really. (Participant 28)

The delineation between and 'Passive Choice' and 'Active Choice', whilst necessarily artificial to a degree, effectively illustrates the two facets of professionally oriented drivers. Examples of the former include:

It's something that people have said, if you want to get anywhere you need to have a degree. (Participant 15)

Just looking at the way policing was going, professionalising policing and the writing was on the wall basically for something that you would think would put you in good stead within the organisation and if it ever became a job that I didn't want to be part of, having a degree is a better place than not having one. (Participant 18)

I didn't think it's ever going to harm anything. It's not going to harm me if I stay in the police, it's certainly not if I decide I'm going to leave. It's always handy to have those letters isn't it, after your name. (Participant 11)

Similarly, Participant 12, a Detective Inspector studying at Masters level, responded to the question regarding their postgraduate study ('Did you do it thinking about your future after the police?') with 'Absolutely not, no. It was really because I'd been told to'.

Examples of more active explanations of motivation to engage with HE study include:

I didn't think much of the training in the police in that we got told the practicalities of what to do. There was no theory behind why are people breaking into houses? Why are they committing sexual assaults? Why are they? All these questions weren't answered at all during the six months I was in training. So I sort of started thinking about courses that I could do to – because I became very interested in it. I was thinking why? (Participant 7)

I thought it was a boost promotion wise. I felt that way. I've tried several times for promotion – not got it. The exam's only valid for five years. That expired. I studied again and passed, applied and still not got it. So I'm thinking ... [...] It might be that I'll never get there so why not develop myself outside. (Participant 9)

And yes, I was promotion orientated and I thought well if it's beneficial it's a bonus then along the way. (Participant 15)

I did it to progress within this organisation. (Participant 18)

I had aspirations to be a [rank] and [...] the police [...] did suggest if you want to get on a degree would be favourable. And I'd been challenging myself to – looking around about doing one. I thought well ok, bit of an opportunity, let's give it a go. (Participant 25)

Impact on professional orientation

Thematic analysis of the data suggests a number of outcomes resulting from HE study, including a deep sense of self-satisfaction on having achieved a degree. In addition, almost all participants reflected on future uses of their degrees, either for postgraduate study or career progression, within or outside the police. It is, however, the internal changes, noted by most, though not all, participants that are of interest here. In summary, the experience of undertaking a programme of HE study appeared to result, for many, in perceived developments in cognitive ability, strategic focus and confidence. These correlate closely to a broad body of research that associates engagement with HE to more developed skills of critical thinking (Siegel 2013; Dunne 2015).

Examples of participants suggesting that their skills of critical thinking had increased include:

When you're briefing police officers it's all the 'how' and the 'what' ... But when you start talking about, 'look why have you got to do it?' [...] And actually I start getting quite argumentative with some of the rubbish that they get sent through – 'well why am I doing this? Why am I wasting my time doing this?' So definitely that why is a real driver for me. (Participant 2)

I think it broadened my knowledge. I think it made me think of a bigger picture. Because I think there's a tendency as a police officer, you're surrounded by lots of pressure, if you have the ability to step back and think, why is that pressure there? And think maybe the theory of it makes life a lot easier. (Participant 7)

It was the learning, it was everything. It was reading these things, all these theories about crime control and things like that and I thought that was really good, really, really good, and it certainly opened my eyes. (Participant 27)

It just changed my whole perspective about policing. Totally altered it and gave me so much more of a – not just a strategic view but it gave me more of a sort of fundamentals and some of the theory about what we do. So instead of just doing it because I'm called to do it – which of course you do and that's what you do. It showed me why we do it. So it gave me the why and I think that's so important now because one of the massive failings I think in this organisation is the fact that people are never told why. (Participant 24)

These are balanced by some participants who viewed HE as having an altogether more limited impact on their professional practice:

I don't think it changed me in terms of my style of policing. I think if I'd been more robust and more closed thinking then it would probably have opened me up more but I always thought I was fairly open minded to things. (Participant 15)

I don't think I'm a different police officer as a result of it. Nothing's really changed. (Participant 8)

Similarly, Participant 24, responded to the question regarding their postgraduate study ('Do you police differently now?') with 'When I'm allowed to, yes'. This suggests a potential discord between the opportunities for enhanced practice and knowledge encouraged by HE study and the willingness of the police to use these to benefit the organisation, thus suggesting a failure of HE to routinely meet the needs of those police officers who engage with it. Examples to support this include:

I am an expert in [subject] ... I've written, I've peer reviewed ... And so then the service are organising how they're all [subject] ... do you think they'd involve me? Despite me writing to them and this that and the other. No, not interested. I've written to the College of Policing five times because they are doing the work that I've already done. And they don't even bother to write back to me. (Participant 2)

There was a guy came in he had a PhD apparently and on his email signature it sort of said you know – PC452ST, PhD at the end of it. And apparently his sergeant said to him 'take that off you ****, that means nothing'. And there is still very much a culture of a degree is something that you ought to hide. (Participant 3)

I mistakenly thought that the police would recognise your achievement [laughs] but obviously, nowadays the [removed to protect anonymity] police doesn't care whether you're the cleverest person in the world or whether you're the stupidest person in the world. (Participant 23)

The tension between in-service and pre-service exposure to HE

The occupational repetition, transactional management and limited scope for agency provide some context for our understanding of graduate experiences in the police, be they graduate entrants or officers taking 'in service' degrees. Likewise, credibility and experience continue to be the trusted measures of officer competency. Interviewees stated that:

There are lots of other graduates in this organisation that aren't getting the same opportunities and it's not fair ... This job is all about credibility. We have so many leaders and senior leaders that have gone through without any credibility or experience and might have very poor decision making because they haven't been having to deal with the blood on your shoes. (Participant 2)

They obviously see a value in officers with degrees – coming from the outside. But they don't appear to value officers who are already in the police who have degrees. (Participant 7)

I think the organisation looks far too much at what is outside rather than what is inside. We've got fantastic people in this organisation at different ranks, all the rest of it, who've got some fantastic ideas but are effectively overlooked. (Participant 28)

When joining the police, graduate entrants receive a full, uninterrupted socialisation experience. However, those who gain HE degrees during service have their current police socialisation disrupted and often actively challenged. The resulting graduate officers then form a 'double threat' to the organisation, bringing with them both the practical, insider experience of the profession (the 'credibility') and skills and willingness to challenge the status quo. One respondent stated:

The cynic in me wants to say that the new people coming in can be moulded. They're coming in new, they're coming in fresh, they've come in selected. They are given specific mentors. Those mentors won't have just been randomly picked, their path, their career is pretty straight forwardly set out whereas if you're looking at people already they're probably harder to mould. (Participant 28)

The 'Blue Box' conundrum

As detailed in an earlier paper drawn from the same data (Hallenberg and Cockcroft 2017), the respondents overwhelmingly reported a lack of recognition of their academic achievement by their employing organisation or, indeed, any utilisation of their graduate skills. Furthermore, reactions to those who completed in-service degrees ranged from disregard to animosity. This points to two key issues (according to Hallenberg and Cockcroft 2017). First, that despite the positive language and arguably genuine intentions about the relevance of HE education to the police organisation, there remains some ambiguity surrounding the outcome for this. In particular, whether the value added by HE resides in the enhancement of skills held by police officers or in respect of more external factors such as credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of external stakeholders. The second key issue to consider is the extent to which graduate status is compatible with the structural and cultural integration of new officers. This latter point has subsequently been identified as an issue by the College of Policing (2020a). For example, one respondent cited in the College of Policing's interim report into the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship programme noted that:

And the lecturers keep saying how we're going to go out with this broader knowledge, but I'm talking to my colleagues on my cohort and it just sounds like they're trying to sell it to us, but it doesn't really work in the aspect of if I'm being taught what the arguments of a sociologist says about this crime, I don't see the relevance of that to practical policing at all. Because I'm not going to go to a victim's house and start telling them what some sociologist has said about what's happened to them. (College of Policing 2020a, pp. 49–50)

Such insight draws us closer to an awareness that it is the structural context of policing which provides the greatest barriers in respect of the integration of academic ideas into policing. Whilst much has been made of transformational rhetoric in policing (Cockcroft 2014), many of the core roles, and the procedures designed to service them, remain resolutely transactional. Policing persists, largely, as a reactive endeavour focusing, much of the time, upon the management and temporary

resolution of problems occasioned by the structure of society. Whilst the discourse might have more finesse, and the practitioners be better educated, they remain as powerless to implement change in any real sense as those whose police training amounted to, 'about ten days' and involved, 'digging up the chief constable's garden and hoeing up his gravel drive' (Inspector Astley, recruited to West Sussex police in 1933; cited in Weinberger 1995, p. 27).

The following quotations, drawn from the research interviews, illustrate that structural impediments exist to the application of academic knowledge to policework:

If you were to walk down Leicester Square you would see constables in Geltex jackets standing on blue boxes, putting off pickpockets and telling American tourists how to get to Leicester Square. And if you're a graduate and you've got a first and your job is to stand on a blue box to be a visible deterrent, you're soon going to become very disillusioned in that. [...] If you're a PC you can get a PhD in policing, it doesn't mean anything, it really doesn't. That's not what you're being employed for, you're standing on that blue box. (Participant 8)

Everything's never different – you go to the same locations and you deal with the same calls over and over and over again. Then you move jobs, and although it's very exciting at the start and you do lots of different courses to perform roles, you still keep doing the same things over. (Participant 22)

There's very limited agency which I have over what I police and what I task and what I have and haven't asked. Other than being more keen to engage with maybe the policing and things which the other [officers] wouldn't find interesting. Other than that, I don't think there's anything different that I can tell. (Participant 1)

I'm aware there is a lot of research that says what we do at those calls is not currently right but I have no ability to influence that because policies are pretty strict. (Participant 30)

It is important to note that none of the above suggests that *all*, or even most, police work is simple, or *just* about control, or that policing would not benefit from HE. The paper does not dispute that police work is complex and clearly includes aspects beyond enforcing the law or maintaining order, which require the kind of intellectual capabilities HE has the *potential* to develop. Instead, it argues that the current structures of the organisation and the police's inescapable role as agents of formal social control constrain the result of this.

Discussion

The current research explored officers' experiences of HE in the specific context of policing in England and Wales at the time of profound changes to the educational framework. However, the analysis of it has prompted a much deeper reflection on the nature of policing, its role as an enforcer of state power and what this means for the relationship between police organisations, HE and individual officers. Here, the data act as a springboard for theory-knitting. Rather than applying a grounded approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) whereby the act of analysis leads to the emergence of conceptual themes from a data set, this paper is based on an altogether different premise. Instead, we seek to understand how the data derived from the research 'speak' to existing, although sometimes loosely articulated, debates about the police professionalisation agenda, the relationship between policing and academia (and academic knowledge) and the asymmetry of police officers' relationship with policing organisations. The key outcome of this approach, in this article, is the identification of the 'Blue Box Conundrum', which we believe to represent a new insight made possible by the theory knitting approach. This idea represents neither a new theory, nor an extension to an existing one, but a tool for understanding the synergies between three different areas of enquiry – contemporary professionalisation agendas, the relationship between academic knowledge and professional practice and the impact of these processes on officers both professionally and personally. This approach differs from grounded theory, theory confirmation or hypothesis testing approaches in that, in this case, the aim is neither to test nor propose new theory. Instead, and following the key work of two proponents of the approach, Kalmar and Sternberg (1988), we have adopted an 'integrative' approach (153) to existing relevant work in the area to provide an explanation which connects separate elements of knowledge within our area of enquiry. We have,

however, opted to refer to our insight as explanation, rather than theory, as we believe that to do otherwise would be to leave ourselves open to accusations of overstating the material from which we have drawn (see Malterud 2001). This, we anticipate, is a particular challenge when adopting an approach that draws on a combination of data and interpretation contextualised against multiple subject areas. In doing so, therefore, the paper seeks to explore more fundamentally some of the issues which inform and contextualise the relationship between Higher Education, individual police officers, and policing organisations. It should be noted that the following discussion is rooted in the context of England and Wales, and the international variance in the form, level and parity (i.e. whether all or just some officers are educated to degree level) of police education as well as the nature of police's relationship with its host state is inevitable although beyond the scope of the paper.

The findings appear to suggest that the relationship between degree level education and the police organisation is one where there is not a seamless connection between the needs of police officers and police organisations with the ability of the academy to meet them. Certainly, for in-service graduates who have often been supported (financially and through protected study time) there is some concern that their graduate status, although in line with the broadly articulated professionalisation requirements of contemporary policing, represents a missed opportunity of utilising added value to the police organisation. Further to this, those officers who engage with HE often appear to perceive a reluctance on the part of the organisation to meaningfully recognise their skill and knowledge sets.

We believe that the data presented above speaks to the conceptual themes outlined in this article's literature review, namely; The Public Sector, Professionalisation and Institutional Convergence/Divergence; Cultural Dissonance and the Police/HE Nexus and HE and the Asymmetrical Relationship Between Police Officers and Police Organisations. Furthermore, we believe that the adoption of a 'theory knitting' approach allows us to bring these separate but compatible ideas together under a broader thematic area of 'professionalisation, knowledge and dissonance'. In doing so, we posit that the data provides some meaningful insight into our broader understanding of some of the more structural concerns which differentiate the professionalisation agenda of society's policing function from those of other public sector institutions. Referring to a quotation drawn from one of the respondents, we have named this the 'Blue Box Conundrum'.

Professionalisation, knowledge and dissonance

Whilst much of the insight which has been generated into our understanding of new professions, public sector professionalisation and the role which HE plays within this has facilitated a greater understanding of recent developments in police reform, these fall short of a total explanation. As we shall show, there remains scope to question the extent to which HE meets the professionalisation requirements of the police institution. Furthermore, there is certainly room for wider debate over the extent to what these professional requirements should be.

Whilst recent years have seen a growing acceptance of the suggestion that HE should play a major role in achieving professional development (Bryant *et al.* 2013), it is interesting to note that police organisations have been reluctant to use graduate skillsets already held by staff (Hallenberg and Cockcroft 2017). Police organisations have been supportive of officer engagement with HE with no apparent expectation of officers to subsequently work at a different level or utilise different skills upon completion. This would suggest that in some cases organisational support for HE engagement by officers, especially at lower ranks, has previously been predicated upon an expectation of personal as opposed to professional development. This is interesting in that it would suggest, counter to more orthodox interpretations of professionalisation, that HE might provide personal fulfilment and even upskilling to police officers, but the potential wider or deeper impact of the latter remains unrealised. The traditional cultural position of police knowledge being largely 'experiential' (Chan *et al.* 2003; Heslop 2011a) would appear to continue to have some residual utility at the

structural level. This seems somewhat at odds with the experiences of the ‘comparator’ profession of nursing. For example, research suggests that nursing has developed into a profession that, in addition to experiential knowledge, is largely dependent on high levels of critical thinking (Lisko and O’dell 2010) and high-level domain knowledge (Jacobs and Roodt 2011).

The cultural predisposition towards an ‘experiential’ understanding of police knowledge sits largely at odds with many contemporary tenets of police knowledge and education. For example, EBP has been defined as a philosophy which seeks to use ‘evidential’ rather than informally derived knowledge as the driver for law enforcement decision-making (Lum and Koper 2014). However, the data from which this paper is derived indicates there is no linear relationship between police officer HE engagement and an acknowledgment of the occupational utility of such interaction. Instead, the data suggests that key determinants of the formal utility of police officer HE engagement may be the stage of the career in which this education takes place and whether or not the stage of HE engagement precedes or follows the primary stage of police education or socialisation. For the majority of this sample, therefore, the ‘in-service’ nature of their learning followed their primary police socialisation and initial training. This provides an interesting focus for investigation in a period where degree level study has become both a prerequisite for new entrants and, in parallel, an expected and formally required rite de passage within one’s career to those already in service. Once again, we are drawn towards what appears as a fundamental dichotomy between experience and education as the criterion by which assessments of occupational credibility are made. Whilst much has been written about the cultural resistance to ‘evidential’ paradigms of officer learning, the data suggests that such processes may also be augmented by structural intransigence.

The qualitative data suggests that many police officers who engaged with HE experience strongly perceived transformations in their perception and understanding of police work, regardless of organisational indifference. The work of White and Heslop (2012) draws us back to the concept of control, and this is where we believe that there exists a dissonance in the relationship between policing and HE. This exists at two levels – role and procedure. Role is important in that control is a central concern that cuts across policing, pervading even the more service-oriented expectations (underpinned by legislation or statutory requirement). This differentiates policing from other ‘similar’ professions such as teaching (with a core base of pedagogy) and healthcare (with a core base of medical knowledge). Control is centrally embedded within many elements of the profession due to the emphasis on procedures (often underpinned by legal requirement) and this, in turn, might be viewed as a central driver of the transactional relationships long considered to be central to police organisations (Densten 1999). One of the perhaps unintended consequences of police education is that it might lead to increased perceptions, or knowledge, of the asymmetricality of police officers’ relationship with their organisation. For many officers in this research, the profoundness of their educational experiences on their knowledge and outlook was tarnished by the realisation that there would be little, if any, opportunity to use their enhanced knowledge and skill-sets in the occupational setting.

The ‘Blue Box’ conundrum

The earlier quotation by Participant 8 about ‘standing on a blue box’ is not, of course, a literal description of what all modern police work is like. It does, however, offer a useful *metaphor* to conceptualise the structural constraints of police work in terms of discretion and ability to apply HE learning, providing a succinct summation of the various strands discussed above. Taken together they appear to indicate a fundamental disconnect between the structural architecture of policing (incorporating procedural, policy and operational direction) and the opportunities provided by HE. Much police work relies on transactional relationships between the organisation and staff, reducing the need for professional decision-making in many areas of police work. In short, whilst discretion remains central to many issues of policing, equally, much police work offers little, if any, scope for the application of expertly-informed knowledge.

A central philosophy to policing is control, be it in the control of civilians or through its transactional control of officers' working practices. We believe that the professionalisation of policing represents a striking example of the assertion of control over those who work in a given occupation (see Fournier 1999; Evetts 2013). We argue here that whilst these processes can be witnessed throughout the public sector, they are intensified when applied to policing. The reason for this is described by White and Heslop (2012) who state: 'In teacher and nurse education, students become professionals *through* [italics in original] the HE process. In the policing model, officers become professionals through their training' (p. 349). Furthermore, they argue that 'the student officer does not need to know the sociology of public order to meet the national occupational standards' (p. 352). This discord around the relevance of HE level education to core practitioner police roles is a theme throughout the data in this study. For our respondents, academic knowledge extended officer understanding of their occupation and its context but was not seen as a prerequisite for 'fitness' to become a police officer. The issue here is not some inherent conflict between skills-oriented training and higher education as both are necessary. Rather, it is the unique role of the police that makes the *meaningful application* of HE more challenging than the application of training.

Policing as a unique public sector profession

Whilst HE becomes the perfect platform through which to enhance one's critical knowledge of policing, it is difficult to reconcile HE as the platform through which initial training is delivered. It is for this reason that we believe the wholesale move towards police training being grounded in HE serves to increase legitimacy (in a Bordieuan sense) but struggles to deliver on the potential for a critical academic grounding in, for example, sociology, criminology or law to enhance core occupational knowledge and skills. To return to an earlier argument, much policework can be more easily seen as a discrete set of roles drawn from a common need to affect control (either in a law enforcement or service provision sense) rather than a set of practices drawn from pedagogical (in the context of education) or medical (in the context of healthcare) knowledge.

To illustrate this point, we draw attention to the unique amalgamation of hard and soft police skills which need to be contextualised against the fact, articulated by Manning (1977), that, 'Policing cannot be other than a reflection of those interests that define the nature of the legitimacy on which they draw' (p. 102). Those interests ensure that 'distinctive technical (professional) skills' (Cain 1972, p. 217) do not juxtapose neatly to knowledge bases as enforcing control and order are the key institutional drivers. Consider the following quotation:

It is frequently emphasised to police officers, for instance, that they must not discriminate on the basis of the race of the suspect in making law enforcement decisions, while at the same time, they are urged to be sensitive to ethnic, religious or cultural traditions and differences in dealing with members of the public. The line between acceptable and unacceptable discrimination when faced with a situation involving a member of an ethnic minority may not be readily identifiable or easy to discern for a police officer who has not received good training on such matters. (Bronitt and Stenning 2011, pp. 321–322)

It can, therefore, be argued that policing (as opposed to comparator occupations), and policing as an institutionalised form of social control (as opposed to the professional practice or motivations of individual officers), is predicated primarily upon serving the state rather than enhancing the lives of individuals through the application of principles based on a body of academic knowledge. In a telling commentary on the mixture of legal knowledge and soft skills required in policing, a book on communication skills for officers involved in community policing observed that, 'Legitimate power is convenient, but it's not the only way you have to get people to do what you want' (Kidd and Braziel 1999, p. 177). Be it justified on legal grounds, or effected through verbal skills, policing is about applying control to society. This does not mean that individual police officers are puppets without agency, blindly doing the government's control work. They do, however, operate within the increasingly close and prescriptive structure of the police-state relationship. The paper's argument does not seek to detract from or devalue the professionalism, motivations

and good practice of individual officers or teams that nuance the coercive power they wield. Instead, it has sought to explain the context in which this happens.

Whilst there already exists commentary concerning the legitimising properties of public sector professionalisation (Abbott 1988), we would argue that such processes are distorted when placed within the context of policing due to, (a) the apparent challenges of mapping critical academic content to the key occupational standards of policework, and (b) the closeness of the police symbolically to the wider functions of the state. With regards to the former, there are questions to be asked in respect of the ways in which the 'transformative' properties of HE (Glisczinski 2007) will translate to police organisations. Whilst some research has identified some police roles suited for creative and critical thinking (e.g. Dean *et al.* 2007), it remains generally true that the structural and cultural properties of policing lend themselves to 'transactional' relationships. These may be partially mitigated by the widespread use of discretion in policework but, it should be noted, discretion generally offers a relatively small range of operational choices usually dictated by relevant police 'policies or guidelines' (Bronitt and Stenning 2011, p. 321).

It is these interrelated issues of discretion, application of learning, legitimacy and independence that define the shape, size and strength of the metaphorical Blue Box. They of course vary depending on the exact policing role, and the historical and contemporary social relations the police have in their specific locale or with a particular stakeholder. For example, the link between public trust, as based on experiences of fair treatment, and people's perceptions of police legitimacy (Hohl *et al.* 2010; Hough *et al.* 2010; Jackson *et al.* 2011) has relevance here. Levels of trust in the police tend to be relatively high in England and Wales at around or above 80% (Office for National Statistics 2020) and in European comparison UK groups amongst (though towards the lower end of) the high trust Western European countries (Barton and Beynon 2015; Staubli 2017). However, the public's expectations of fair and respectful treatment by the police in England and Wales are lower at 65% as a recent survey reports (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services and BMG Research 2019). Notably, trust in the police is related to trust in political institutions, the former tending to be higher than the latter in several European countries, the UK included (Staubli 2017). This raises further, related questions regarding political interference in policing, appropriate levels of police independence and impact on professional discretion. Detailed examination of these is beyond the reach of the current paper but the existence of tension between liberal values and democracy affecting the police in England and Wales (Wood 2016) should not be underestimated. For example, The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill currently going through Parliament has evoked concerns over both *existing* and potential excessive political interference in policing and politicisation of the police. Not least, this concern centres on the potential expansion of powers in a way that could, in certain situations, make the police 'law makers' as well as law enforcers (All Party Parliamentary Group on Democracy and the Constitution 2021; Liberty 2021; West 2021).

In short, therefore, policing remains a profession like no other, if, indeed, it constitutes a profession at all. Whilst elements of the officer role can be explained with recourse to discrete pieces of academic knowledge from different areas, the occupation as a whole resonates with no particular academic discipline. This lack of specific 'policing discipline' likely confounds the process of professionalisation but is ultimately irrelevant to the crux of the argument presented here. If the key potential benefits of HE are unrelated to the discipline itself, as suggested by the recent review by Brown (2018), it follows that the challenges in their application, as outlined in the current paper, are too. As a result, policing's trajectory along the professionalisation journey will be long, laboured and prone to critique, confusion and compromise, especially when contextualised against the experiences of other 'new' professions in the public sector. This, some would argue, is precisely why policing needs to be professionalised. Not because of its public sector status, but because of the subject matter at the heart of policing. This was ably demonstrated by Thacher (2019, p. 95) who, whilst describing the views of Egon Bittner (1974), noted that:

The whole point of concentrating the authority to use force in a single institution is to professionalize it – to ensure that it will be used less intensively and more responsibly than it otherwise would be.

This paradox, where the police's role as enforcer of state control both demands and impedes professionalisation, can perhaps only be reconciled at the individual and small group level through the professional and critically reflective praxis of officers and teams. Reconciliation at the whole occupational group level, however, is arguably unattainable without a fundamental restructure and depoliticisation of the organisation.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to understand the ways in which police officer narratives of HE engagement speak to broader conceptual and theoretical understandings of the police professionalisation process, policing's relationship with HE and the dynamics by which police organisations and their officers relate to each other. In doing so, we are drawn back to the ways in which police professionalisation and the ways in which we understand this process are intrinsically linked, not just to the academy but also to broader changes within the public sector. Similarly, the challenges of embedding education in policing relate not just to cultural resistance but also, importantly, structural obduracy. Through the identification of the 'Blue Box Conundrum' we suggest that there remain challenges for police organisations in terms of successfully embedding professionalisation agendas unless greater attention is paid to ensuring that the structural conditions of policing are more closely aligned to those of comparable graduate level professions.

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