Practical Points of Failure in Police-University Collaboration: Reconceiving Knowledge Exchange

Katharine A. Boyd
University of Exeter, United Kingdom

Brian Rappert
University of Exeter, United Kingdom

Dreolin N. Fleischer
University of Exeter, United Kingdom

Abstract:
Collaborative projects designed to generate research evidence involve knowledge exchange which hinges on the expectations and practices within the collaborating organisations. Existing literature about academic-police collaborations – and why they break down – has largely focused on different knowledge agendas, research timeframes and organisational cultures. In contrast, we offer a case example that attends to the failures in knowledge exchange stemming from the basic logistics, legal administrative procedures, and buy-in associated with collaborative projects. These failures in KE meant our planned study involving innovative research methods to assess (de)escalation in use of force incidents using policy Body Worn Video was not feasible and required adaptation to find another source of data to successfully complete a project. This case offers many lessons learned that can inform future collaborative projects as well as expanding upon the simplified way knowledge exchange is often conceived. First, formal agreement from both organisations and the co-production of a project does not imply it is feasible. Second, knowledge exchange needs to account for the socio-technical networks that are required for successful collaboration and the range of skills this requires to achieve agreed aims. Third, collaborations should recognise the multidimensionality of organisations and expand networks to optimise flexibility and adapt to change so projects are resilient.

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Introduction

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (2022) defines knowledge exchange (KE) as 'the two-way exchange between researchers and research users to share ideas, research evidence, experiences and skills.' This Practice Paper discusses some important stressors on realizing such two-way exchanges by examining what could be regarded as a 'failed' project between a university and a police force, and how we pivoted to successfully complete a project. Our purpose is to highlight considerations that are less prominent in discussions about obstacles to effective knowledge exchange and academic-police collaborations specifically. In this article we focus on the everyday logistical, technical and buy-in considerations associated with KE projects. In particular, we examine how projects and associated KE activities are enabled, but also complicated by the networked, multidimensionality of organisations.

Case Background

The police-academic collaboration between one force in England and the authors' university has spanned a variety of research projects and involved numerous individuals across both organisations. One of the authors served as an Embedded Fellow within the police for over five years prior to this specific case, coordinating research collaboration and promoting evidence-based practice in the police. The Fellow developed relationships and connections that facilitated knowledge exchange circuitry between organisations. This position set the

foundation for the co-production of the proposed project, and for how the project was able to pivot from the failure described in this article.

The basis for our learning was a project that can be described as: 1) research—focused on use of force and the (de)escalation in police-public interactions to inform practice around safety; 2) interdisciplinary—drawing on methodological and substantive skills from criminology, social epidemiology, and computer science; and 3) co-produced—conceived of in conjunction with our collaborating police force in England.

The project aimed to 1) identify causal pathways for escalation and de-escalation in police use of force using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) and conversation analysis and 2) develop a supervised machine learning technique which considers pitch, language use, and body language to identify escalation and de-escalation in police-public encounters captured on Body Worn Video (BWV) footage.

Funding was secured from two distinct sources to enable Research Fellows to undertake the research with support and oversight from the academic leads for the project (i.e., Principal Investigators from Criminology, Medicine & Health, and Computer Science). Funding for the first aim came in the form of a small monetary grant requiring the project to be developed with members of both the university and the police.[1] Funding for the second aim, also a small monetary grant, came in the form of a Research Fellow to focus on data science. The successful funding applications were endorsed and signed off by leadership within the partnering police force.

The project, proposed as a pilot, was intended to begin in April 2020 and end in September 2020 with AUTHOR serving as the PI and AUTHOR serving as the Research Fellow. The Covid-

19 pandemic led to disruptions in the project timelines and ultimately—with a series of no-cost extensions—the project concluded two years after it began at the end of March 2022.

Stressors in Knowledge Exchange

The primary foundering within this project was the inability of the academics to access the Body Worn Video (BWV) necessary to conduct the analysis. This section focuses on the key stressors that contributed to this 'mission critical' failure.

Securing buy-in is a key step at the start of any project that additionally requires support for the evidence, or knowledge, the project proposes to deliver (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2019). In our case, the project was supported by leadership within the police force we partnered with—for example, the proposed project was championed by those in the executive level, signed off by a Head of Department who was keen to collaborate with academia and promote evidence-based practice within the force, and the Force lead for BWV was also named on the bid.

Police organisations are known for being hierarchical and therefore top-down decision and tasking is the norm. Looking back, our familiarity with the partner organisation and their way of working may have lulled us into believing that securing buy-in from senior leadership meant subsequent buy-in from those who were going to be tasked with assisting the project. Of course, this is not best practice, but it is not uncommon.

Condensed time scales for bid completion, individuals doing the bid development on top of their regular workload, and the delicate dance of getting a number of people 'on board' with the idea while not overly taxing them undermined conducting extensive planning and coordination at the proposal stage.

Though we were told accessing the BWV footage would be possible, it would have been prudent to include the key individuals instrumental in assisting the project team to access the BWV footage in developing the proposal and research plan. Using BWV footage for research is not widespread, particularly in the United Kingdom and there is a lack of guidance on what is acceptable to share from a legal and ethical standpoint, especially in large quantities.[2] What this meant in practice for the project was that there was no clear precedent for sharing BWV for research purposes that could be pointed towards. The police felt uneasy about transferring large batches of footage to an external location without knowing the content of the videos first. This presented a substantial hurdle to acquiring footage as it seemed the only way to determine whether a video is relevant to the project would be to review it, which is time intensive. Beyond the ethical implications of sharing the video footage externally, the police also voiced health and safety concern for the researcher who would see the footage prior to anonymising and could easily come across disturbing content. When concerns were raised around sharing footage, therefore, it was difficult to problem solve.

Additionally, the 'knowledge' this research project proposed to produce may not have been immediate enough to be rated as 'a high value form of information that is ready to apply to decisions and actions' (Davenport et al., 1998, p. 43), and therefore did not garner the widespread support in time and effort that the project subsequently realised would be required. In other words, there can be a gap in wanting to better understand 'the art of the possible' but still grappling with the reality of the time-sensitive pressures in the current status quo. While policing organisations as a whole may be focused on tackling the immediate concerns, which can make them short-sighted, we impress that this specific organisation has individuals in high-ranking positions who championed the

long-term potential of this project. While there are organisational cultures that characterise behaviour and norms of group members, there is variation in each, which can complicate anticipating the hurdles for KE activities. Ultimately, the ramifications of not bringing those key individuals into the planning stages, not securing their buy-in for the project, and not compensating them for their time reverberated throughout the project.

The failure in our project shows the importance of effective KE in the planning stages of collaborative work and engaging all relevant parties. The fact that this proposal had high level support in the university and police force, in addition to the history of collaboration between leading members, illustrates the significant trust and close ties between organisations. In our case, however, this may have made us overconfident that the partnership would be able to overcome any concerns. Our example also shows how relationships are necessary for KE, but not always sufficient for success.

Our experience also showed how essential effective communication is to the success or failure of a project. Each member of the multidisciplinary academic team brought methodological and/or subject area expertise to the project, however, we found it difficult to convey the technical and analytic strategies effectively both within and between organisations. An indirect line of communication caused issues detailing what technical needs were required for the university's development of a secure hub and led to difficulties explaining the intended methods to anonymise video footage to the police. Specifically, the people problem solving, including the PI and Research Fellow (authors), and co-I, were not as technologically informed, but were liaising between the computer science academics, the professional service staff at the university and with the police.

These communications were also unduly affected by the numerous individuals on this small project who changed roles or went away on leave.[3] The difficulty communicating to ensure understanding–both within and between organisations–led to confusion for the academic and police members leading the problem solving of how to access the BWV for the research. This highlights the importance of having academics who can speak in an accessible manner about their work to those outside their academic discipline or area of study, in particular when doing knowledge exchange and working with non-academic partners. The KE literature highlights how frequent, good and strong communication can promote engagement and facilitate KT (Chen et al., 2014; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2019). Our case, however, shows how this communication existed throughout a long-term relationship between organisations, but the communication broke down when dealing, in particular, with the complexity of a specific discipline and translating this without jargon and in practical terms. This adds to the literature in KE as well as police-academic collaboration which, as noted above, have concentrated on communication complications between rather than within individual organisations.

Lastly, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the project was paramount, but because this disruption was global it may be argued it should go without saying. However, the failure in knowledge exchanges that led to the difficulties completing this project were specific and perhaps unique in this time due to the type of organisations involved. While the pandemic caused a shift in operating for almost all industries, the police suddenly had a new remit and set of obligations during lockdowns which was also impacted by police having greater exposure as they were identified as essential workers. Responsibilities shifted a great deal in the police, to manage a workforce where a number of officers and staff were cycling through isolation and illness and being moved to different roles to support the new demands of the force response to the pandemic. On the academic side, one Research Fellow had to pause work for three months to take on caring responsibilities during lockdown (May-July 2020). This was not overly problematic, in a sense, as our police partner was simultaneously faced with much more pressing priorities in their response to the pandemic and did not have time to engage in the research project.

Despite these complications, the funders were exceedingly understanding about delays to project timelines and the project received two no-cost extensions from the one funder and the computer science Research Fellow received a six-month extension for the project (before the funding was declined as we were unable to acquire the BWV).[4] The no-cost extensions did mean, however, that at the end of the project the remaining Research Fellow ran out of time on the project, so the academic leads on the project had to finalise the project deliverables (a final report) and dissemination of the results.

The above shows how, despite the relational advantages we had already developed for successful KE and collaboration, external and environmental factors impacted our ability

to engage in effective communication and progress as shared goals shifted for individuals at both organisations.

Salvaging failure: Factors that helped the project pivot

Ultimately, we could not secure the BWV data to do the analysis, so the project returned the funding for the computer science portion of the project, and we had to pivot.

Thankfully, our partner was open to problem-solving alternatives that aligned with the original proposal of looking at escalation and de-escalation between police and the public in police use of force incidents. Practically speaking, we were given access to the data from the Use of Force Monitoring Form officers complete. These forms include both quantitative and qualitative data, as well as a significant amount of additional data when TASER is drawn, so we opted to look at TASER incidents specifically. We completed the qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), using the Use of Force Monitoring Form data to identify patterns of factors associated with two outcomes: 1) TASER drawn and discharged and 2) TASER drawn and not discharged across 22 incidents identified between October 2017 and December 2019 (see Boyd et al., 2023). We also interviewed 10 police officers within the Force who ranged in rank, role, and geography but who have fired TASER in their careers. Thus, in reconfiguring the project, many of the concerns experienced associated with hardware, software and skills pertaining to the original formulation of the research project could be bypassed as the collaborations shifted to more accustomed hardware, software and skills.

From our perspective, the greatest factor contributing to our ability to renew the research project was the existing relationship between the partner organisations which predated this collaboration. While the strong relationships were not sufficient to facilitate the proposed project going ahead successfully, a history of working together meant that there was an existing level of rapport, trust, and goodwill already in place that facilitated the rapid paced knowledge exchange required to consider the logistics, ethics, and recruitment issues associated with the acquisition and use of a new data source.

Additionally, the primary Research Fellow on the project also worked separately as an Embedded Fellow in the partner organisation. This role, though separate to the role on the specific project, was active within both organisations at the time and focused on KE activities with the goal of promoting evidence-based practice within the evolving organisational culture in the police. The partner organisation's willingness to be flexible and responsive (as time scales were beginning to be pinched by the reality of the *no-cost* extensions) made it possible to identify another source of data (i.e., the Use of Force Monitoring Form). We cannot emphasise enough how essential it was that the Embedded Fellow was working on this project and facilitating communication to make this redirection possible. While the long-established relationship between the organisations was crucial, the KE necessary for this project to be salvaged was successful due to the specific individual connections between members of the two organisations. We were also fortunate that we had two separate funding sources to support the two Research Fellows, as it meant that when the funding for the computer

science Research Fellow was declined, the other source of funding remained and we could use those funds to support the pivot.

Discussion

Abstracting beyond the specifics of the collaboration examined in the previous sections, in this penultimate section we draw some lessons learnt.

Knowledge exchange as a socio-technical process

The previous section made reference to a range of elements that need to align if KE activities are to realise their aims including legal agreements, digital images, body worn cameras, patrol officers, graphics processing units (GPUs), funding and so on. In doing so, research collaborations were not simply understood in terms of the 'interchanging [of] information and information residing in different organisational members' (Shu et al., 2012). Instead, KE activities entail attempts to realize complex 'socio-technical networks' and 'assemblages' (Bijker & Law, 1995), in which hardware, software, procedures, people and much more need to align together. This means that those seeking to successfully coordinate knowledge exchanges need to possess a range of technical, administrative and substantive know-how in order to hold together the varied elements that constitute collaborations.

Organisations as multidimensional

The treatment of research collaborations as consisting of socio-technical networks has its parallel in how the collaborating organisations are conceived. Specifically, within collaborations it is vital not to treat organisations involved as monoliths with each characterised by a single organisational culture. This is not to deny or minimise the impact of organisational culture. Police organisations, in particular, have been described as having specific organisational cultural traits, such as hierarchal structure, masculinity, and an in-

group loyalty (Brough et al., 2016). And yet, despite the in-general validity of such characterisations it is important to acknowledge that large organisations with differing parts may have contrasting motivations and concerns from other members in their organisation.

Indeed, it is worth making the point that while prior knowledge or familiarity with some elements of an organisation may help people involved in KE activities, it may lead to assumptions and errors, such as assuming similar interpretations or considerations will be made by people in other levels of organisational hierarchy. EBP stresses the need for gaining buy-in from practitioners for KE to occur, however, our project shows the importance of not assuming buy-in from the top will trickle down. Relatedly, the multidimensionality of each organisation shows how formal agreement and co-production in research collaborations involving people in positions of authority cannot be assumed to translate to feasibility. It is important for all parties to consider gatekeepers and the elements of socio-technical assemblages that function as logistical barriers in each organisation (e.g., legal clearances, data sharing agreements, ethics approvals, etc.).

Even with shared regulation standards, like General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), there are differences in how the use of data for various purposes is legally interpreted by different people and organisations. Particularly with sensitive data, such as BWV, it is important not to assume that all staff within an organisation will interpret these concerns the same way. These tensions may not be easily sorted in the research planning phase but should be anticipated for deliberation and timed to resolve appropriately.

Reshaping Change

Recognising each organisation as multidimensional is demonstrated by the shifting, restructuring changes within each that impacts how the organisation and the people within

it behave and engage with external partners. In addition to internal decision-making causing change, the pandemic was a clear example of how organisations adapt to external and environmental factors. Whether such changes are driven by internal or external factors, they are likely out of the control of individuals involved in collaboration and KE.

While there is no clear solution to moving or changing personnel, perhaps these changes could be reframed. Rather than framing adaptation as a required response to changes imposed on our collaboration, future collaboration could embrace the anticipation for a need to be flexible and incorporate this into the organisational cultural ethos, or the collaboration ethos. The potential for change could be factored into research proposals, the structure of collaborations, and the governance of KE by including a wider network within each organisation. Perhaps the responsibilities of the project could be delegated to subgroups within each organisation, rather than isolated to the main collaborators driving the project. Embracing such organisational conditions may help facilitate responses to changes imposed on original plans.

Conclusion

This article considered a specific case of failure in knowledge exchange in a collaborative project between a police force and a university. In addition to the common relational, communication, and organisational culture factors that impact KE, we show how this case emphasises the need to consider the socio-technical aspects of KE and the multidimensionality of organisations. This requires flexibility from the start to respond to internal and external changes.

Some of the stressors that impacted our work may appear obvious, preventable, or easy to resolve, but we ask that readers consider that these issues were complex, interrelated, and

all needing resolution during the onset of the pandemic. It is possible that KE and our collaborative efforts could have been more successful if the combination of all these internal and external factors were not occurring concurrently. In choosing to write this reflection on KE, we reveal weaknesses, errors and lapses in judgement in the hope that they can inform future collaborative efforts.

The failure in our project shows the importance of effective KE in the planning stages of collaborative work and engaging all relevant parties, and the support of an Embedded Fellow to make redirection of the project possible. Prior knowledge and relationships were instrumental to allowing the project to continue and pivot. However, those same relationships appear to have contributed to optimism around the feasibility of the proposed project. Our project shows the importance of not making assumptions and the need for securing buy-in from practitioners and gatekeepers for KE.

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[1] Co-production of research involves groups with different priorities coming together to work toward "negotiating common purpose, forging shared priorities, ensuring appreciation of the divergent contributions of differing partners" to achieve an agreed outcome (Crawford, 2017, p. 203).

[2] There are a few studies using BWV footage in the United States (Piza et al., 2023; Sytsma, Chillar, et al., 2021; Sytsma, Piza, et al., 2021; Willits & Makin, 2018), and a single study that involved ethnographic research viewing BWV footage on a small scale (Rowe et al., 2018).

[3] Our project dealt with staff changes at both organisations. Within the university team, one of the lead academics went on maternity leave (June-December 2020) and the computer science lead academic moved employment to another university during the project, complicating the oversight and deliberations with those developing the university secure hub and coordinating requirements with the police. Additionally, the named Research Fellows had to step away for parental leave, which meant the project had short time to identify another Research Fellow with the skills and availability. At the partner organisation, the Head of Department who was the lead team member changed job roles to another area of the Force, meaning they could not participate in the project any longer. They did find someone else to take over the role within the project. Ultimately the changes and shifts in personnel left gaps in responsibility for the knowledge exchange about the practical and logistical requirements that were needed at each organisation.

[4] The funding was for a computer science Research Fellow to work on the proposed project. The funder agreed to redirect the fellow to work on another project due to the complications of the pandemic delaying our efforts to obtain the data. When we realised our efforts were futile, we explained the situation to the funder and declined the funding. Fortunately, the Research Fellow did not lose any funding or work due to the failure to get data.