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Explaining the pattern of growth in strategic actions taken by police services during the New Labour years: an exploratory study of an English police service

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After a decade of rapid spending increases under New Labour, this paper seeks to explain the pattern of growth in the range of strategic actions undertaken by police services during that period. Referring to a longitudinal analysis of documents, including annual reports, which related to strategic actions taken by one English police service (Blueshire), the common perception that 'police mission' has been subject to expansionary pressures is placed under scrutiny. An analysis is conducted which differentiates between new and cyclical policy issues and whether the strategic response is locally or centrally directed. Content analysis derived data has been supplemented with information secured during interviews with police leaders, to provide greater contextual depth. While it was observed that the capacity of police leaders to focus on core policing roles has, to some extent, been compromised, this cannot be explained purely in terms of central government pressure. The concept of path dependency is used to explain how this has occurred. A discussion is provided of the implications for the strategic direction of policing.

Keywords: strategy; policing; path dependency; mission

Introduction

This paper seeks to explain the pattern of growth in strategic actions taken during a period of sustained spending growth, when UK police leaders were striving to meet the mounting service expectations of government and the public. The empirical evidence presented is based upon a content analysis of key documents including annual reports from 1997 to 2009, supplemented with interviews conducted with senior officers in one large English police service (referred to as Blueshire) and a further interview with a chief constable in another English police service, which was used to validate conclusions. The study attempted to contextualise and trace the historical development of strategic actions, involving trends which the President of Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) claims amounts to 'mission creep' (Orde 2010). By this, he meant that the range of strategic actions demanded of police services had expanded in a manner that compromised 'core mission'. As the complexity of this phenomenon emerged in the course of fieldwork, it became obvious that a systematic approach would be required to categorise the diverse range

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of strategic actions observed, consequently the concept of path dependency and associated variables, have been used to make sense of key developments and patterns of strategic actions.

Background

Under the New Labour Government, the centrality of the police in maintaining law and order received significant endorsement, with government spending on police services in the UK rising in realterms from £9.8bn in 1999 to £14.5bn in 2009. Indeed, by 2009 police numbers reached record levels with 142,151 officers, which represented a 10% increase in the workforce since 1998 (Mills *et al.* 2010). In addition, civilian staff numbers have also increased at a similar rate, with the ratio of police officers to police staff (unwarranted) decreasing from 2.3: 1 in 2000 to 1.4: 1 by 2009 (Mead 2010).

However, in spite of such levels of central government commitment to the police services, there remain doubts about the capacity of police services to meet the demands placed on them by their paymasters. Growth in police numbers has, according to police leaders, also been accompanied by a parallel widening in the necessary strategic focus of police services to incorporate a range of 'new' tasks which were also prescribed by New Labour. This is potentially of great significance given the settled role which police services have historically enjoyed in the UK. As an institution epitomised by the British 'Bobby', the police have managed to retain their unique status in the UK as (relatively) independent arbiters of law and order (Emsley 2009, Topping 2008). It may be observed that since the inception of basic 'Peelian' principles in the UK, police services have enjoyed a relatively unfettered organisational trajectory in terms of delivering what might be considered 'core' policing functions (Topping 2008, Emsley 2009). Indeed, the fundamental 'pillars' of what might be termed the 'police mission' have remained as a relative constant when juxtaposed with the shifting social, political and cultural changes which have occurred in the UK over nearly two centuries (Emsley 1996, Reiner 2000, 2010). Order maintenance has typically dominated normative explanations of what the police *should* do at an operational and strategic level (Kelling and Moore 2005). In this regard, empirical evidence suggests that basic policing roles are dominated more generally through the provision of a visible and accessible policing service, such as patrolling, traffic control and responding to public concerns (Innes 2005, Rowe 2008).

With only a small proportion of time identifiable as direct 'crime fighting' per se, the investigation of crime and actual arrests are rare events for most officers. In practice, a far greater proportion of time is given to restoring order, responding to calls and providing assistance of a general nature (Bayley 1994, Bates and Carter 2010, Reiner 2010). Furthermore, with much police time relating to the rather nebulous task of 'sorting out situations', Reiner (2010) notes that such work involves the police talking to suspects and witnesses, along with collecting evidence before deciding on whether an investigation is merited. Indeed, the police are generally the first to be called to emergencies, as the necessary arbiters of 'dirty work' – involving interventions around community issues. In this regard, 'sorting out' such issues, along with crime fighting would appear to be what police officers *themselves* perceive as the core tasks of 'real policing' within their broader 'order maintenance role' – with mission creep implying a deviation from such a focus.

Furthermore, it may be argued that the broad delivery of the 'police mission' from both police and public perspectives had remained stable, in spite of being subject to various reinventions and pressures over the past 50 years – including community policing, zero-tolerance policing, best-value regimes, technological revolution and the ever changing nature of criminality itself (McLaughlin *et al.* 2001, Jones and Newburn 2002, Brodgen and Nijhar 2005, Reiner 2010). However, since 1997 there has been a significant shift in government focus from the police *per se* to 'policing'.

The 'traditional' police role of 'order maintenance' has been modified through a variety of legal and policy levers in a bid to engage with broader community safety issues (Newburn 2002, Loader and Walker 2007, Crawford 2008). Indeed, key examples of such a change included the emergence of community safety and quality of life policing, established under the auspices of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 (Crawford 1998) and the introduction of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) under the Police Reform Act of 2002, as uniformed civilians vested with limited policing powers to deal with 'quality of life' issues, providing a reassurance function as part of an increased visible and accessible police presence (Johnston 2003, 2005, Crawford and Lister 2006). Furthermore, managerialism and actuarialism were also re-invigorated as the means to systematically control the strategic shaping of policing. This is supported by the active monitoring of service provision levels through key performance indicators (KPIs). Involving police services in inter-agency cooperation is another element in public policy aimed at securing a shift towards problem-oriented styles of policing (McLaughlin *et al.* 2001, McLaughlin 2007, Reiner 2010). It is claimed that such policy developments have enhanced the ability of central government to micro-manage police activity from the centre, while at the same time dispersing responsibility for policing to communities and other agencies (Johnston and Shearing 2003). The rise of inter-agency partnership working, along with ever increasing overlaps between crime and social policy (or the 'politics of behaviour'), has increased the range of police activity (Deacon 2004, Knepper 2007, Rodger 2008). Furthermore, the advent of the 'rights' agenda – health & safety, human rights, equal opportunities, duty of care and risk management – has further imposed new burdens on police service policy and practice in terms of demands to adhere to prescribed central edicts (Zedner 2003, Hughes 2007, Flannigan 2008).

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that in spite of what appears to be the expanding nature of police resources, role expansion and increased demands across a number of fronts have led to a certain level of discomfort in relation to what is demanded. It has been stated by the ACPO that:

There is currently a significant and growing lack of capacity in the police service to deliver what the public and government need and demand. The service is expected to increase productivity (bringing more offenders to justice and responding to increasing calls), roll out 'Neighbourhood Policing' across the country and address the substantial gap in 'protective services' (tackling organised crime, terrorism, etc.). There is a wealth of evidence from previous reports that despite the excellence of the majority of individual officers and staff, the police workforce model is in many respects obsolete with inefficient and restrictive practices causing waste and suppressing latent capacity. (ACPO 2005, p. 1)

It is clear that central government have become more controlling in the UK with respect to social order and the use of the police to deliver those aims. Central to this conclusion is evidence in the form of the volume of criminal legislation passed by Labour – calculated at approximately 3000 criminal offences created through new or amended legislation (Hillyard 2009, Jenkins 2009). With such increases in *policing* direction from the centre, the arguments around ‘mission creep’ can more easily be observed (Chriss 2007, Hughes 2007). At the same time, a provisional examination of annual reports, which records strategic actions taken by police services, indicated that the stretching of strategic focus was not wholly attributable to central government policy edicts. A certain amount of local agency appeared to be evident with respect to the adoption of strategic actions. Evidence of a more complex pattern quickly emerged as an alternative to the mission creep explanation. The analysis presented below explains the development of the range of strategic actions chosen in Blueshire.

Methodology

The data referred to in this study has been derived from annual reports presented by one large English police service between 1997 and 2009. Upon examining Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) Baseline Assessments relating to the period under review, it can be concluded that Blueshire, serving a population of approximately two million people, is a high performing police service achieving results in the upper quartile of English police services (HMIC 2005).

In an era where organisations have been required to keep extensive records for audit purposes, archival research of documents to account for organisational actions is of growing importance as a methodology (Ventresca and Mohr 2002). The information extracted from these documents has been supplemented by interviews conducted with senior police leaders in two English police services. Annual reports represent the best published source for identifying strategic actions completed by police services over an extended period of time. While they are not complete records in the sense that they document every single action taken by a police service during the course of a year, it is reasonable to regard them as a basic record of the strategic course taken over time.

In addition, the researchers were able to gain access to further document evidence relating to certain important issues, which included the record of partnerships in which Blueshire was involved; resources devoted to corporate performance audit; activity analysis by police station; and full economic cost related to police posts by rank. The content analysis was conducted to identify and categorise key strategic actions. This involved three researchers who read through all the available archive documents and between them, in an effort to ensure reliability, agreed a list of strategic actions to be considered for further analysis (Neuendorf 2002). The researchers subsequently employed a common coding frame to identify key characteristics of the strategic actions identified (Krippendorff 2004).

Interviews with a small group of senior police leaders were conducted during July and August 2010. In total, two police leaders and a civilian member of staff were interviewed at Blueshire, with an opportunity also taken to conduct an interview with a police leader in a different police service to discuss emergent findings and help verify conclusions. In total two chief constables, an assistant chief constable and a

civilian were interviewed. The researchers organised interviews around the principle of conducting a 'grand tour' of the subject matter, whereby subjects are guided towards a small number of subject 'destinations', but are encouraged to range freely across related issues in their responses to questions (Undheim 2003).

Discussion of the context of the expansion of the role of the police and the identification of patterns

By way of background, it should be noted that the majority (but not all) of the pressure upon the 'police mission' is of an incremental character. Step changes nevertheless are thought to have increasingly tested the capacity, integrity and flexibility of policing institutions derived from the Police Act 1964 (Emsley 1996, Garland 1996). Moreover, recently during the period of the New Labour Government from 1997 to 2010, as noted above, there is a common perception amongst senior police leaders that 'police mission' has been subject to expansionary pressures. One senior officer interviewed in the course of the study described the situation as 'unsustainable' – with the service close to 'breaking point', as it tried to support this expanded role which he said comprised some 'extremely complex twenty-first century problems' (Garland 2001, Loader and Walker 2007, Wood and Shearing 2007).

Contextualising this point further, it must be noted that the last fundamental review of policing took place in the early 1960s as a response to the acknowledgement that the UK was no longer a borough, or even a city-based society. Indeed, significant social change from the 1960s onwards, such as 'the car and the M1' (the UK's first motorway) changed the capabilities of criminals and how they operated (Garland 2001). By the 2000s, crime had become a global activity (Findlay 2000, Brodeur 2010).

Not unexpectedly, the sheer volume of legislation passed under New Labour was acknowledged by respondents to be unprecedented. In this regard, interviews in Blueshire and elsewhere, raised the need to respond operationally to new legislation and the implications this had for police resources. While recognising that there was a potential reduction in Blueshire's capacity to focus on core policing roles at the BCU (Basic Command Unit) level, surprisingly, police leaders did not necessarily express any great resentment at the volume of new offences they had to deal with. One senior officer even talked about the new legislation in reasonably positive terms, describing it as providing more 'structure' for the delivery of police services. There is a case for concluding that if debilitating mission creep has occurred, it is not simply a consequence of the volume of new legislation.

New legislation, while significant, also needs to be seen as part of a broader set of policy events. Central government role 'stretching' policies emerged with the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998, which introduced Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) – causing police services to engage with broader social policy issues as well as the traditional policing of crime (Crawford 1995). The Police Reform Act 2002 also placed an onus on the Secretary of State to produce an annual National Policing Plan (NPP), which included strategic priorities, objectives and performance indicators for police services on a three year cycle. The Act also introduced a new category of civilian staff, Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), whose subsequent role and impact on the ground has often been questioned (Johnston 2003, 2005, Crawford and Lister 2006). The Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005

further established the Serious and Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) on the basis of merging earlier national units, created to meet the challenge of national/international crime.

Moving away from policing tasks directly created through legislation, it is pertinent to consider some of the indirect effects of central government regulatory policies on the basic policing mission. For example, the Police and Magistrates Courts Act 1994 gave the (then Conservative) Home Secretary a role in determining key national objectives, which local police authorities, who oversee police services, were instructed to use in performance monitoring activities (Reiner 2000). National police objectives also began to emerge as a staple feature of police regulation, with the Home Office (2010) reviewing these objectives on a regular basis. New Labour (elected in 1997) continued to promote and develop their predecessor's centralist, managerial reforms (McLaughlin *et al.* 2001). By 2004, a new set of Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs) was created with a view to informing performance management with a larger number of output (for example detections) and outcomes (for example surveys of public satisfaction) indicators (Collier 2006). While the associated target setting and performance monitoring may have made a positive impact on service delivery, it is nevertheless the case that the scale of the managerialist reforms meant that police services were required to use resources to construct a corporate audit capacity, a task in itself arguably a potential source of distraction from mission.

Such performance management pressures exerted upon police services by central government have been compounded by regulatory pressures associated with health and safety, risk control and operational best practice compliance directives. It was put to the research team by one police leader that the implementation of a recent Health and Safety Executive directive around first aid training would, if followed exactly, have tied up the equivalent of 200 police officer 'years' in meeting associated training requirements. In this regard, the rise of performance audit, the demands of the 'risk society' and the need to respond to multiple audit agencies has produced a costly commitment, which may have further detracted from the ability to focus on core policing roles (Loveday 2000, 2006, Maguire and John 2006).

Respondents in Blueshire also discussed how they were obliged to ensure operational activity complied with 32 'codes of practice' issued between 2004 and 2009 by the National Police Improvement Agency (NPIA) – the non-departmental governmental body created in 2007 to help strengthen the governance and efficiency of police services across the UK. A diverse range of operational areas were targeted including *Multi-Agency Interoperability* (2009), *Guidance on the Management of Police Information* (2006) and *Code of Practice on the Police Use of Firearms and Less Lethal Weapons* (2004). Additionally, Blueshire complied with 27 Practice Advice instructions from the NPIA, which included, for example *Practice Advice on House-to-House Enquiries* (2006) and *Practice Advice on Tackling Cannabis Cultivation and Head Shops* (2009). There were also 11 briefing papers produced between 2008 and 2009, along with five strategic de-briefs on specific policing operations to respond to. In all, 75 such 'doctrines', as they are been termed, were issued by the NPIA over a 5 year period which Blueshire was required to comply with in terms of operational practices.

It also became clearer in the course of the interviews that a marked feature of the strategic management of public services, including policing in the 1990s, was the

stress placed on building partnerships between organisations involved in delivering public services (Joyce 1999, p. 143, Newburn 2002). Much evidence was provided to suggest that the creation of collaborative relationships has been a key driver in the strategic 'stretch' which police services have undergone. In this regard, the Government has relentlessly pursued a range of policies which have obliged the police to become involved in partnerships with other public service providers, such as the NHS, local authorities and the voluntary sector as well as the private business community. Interviews also raised the significance of national requirements for police services to invest heavily in neighbourhood policing under the National Reassurance Policing Programme (NRPP) (Innes 2005) and to provide a counter-terrorism role necessitated by post-2001 era (HM Government 2010).

In summary, there is certainly an evidence trail of new tasks being given to the police by central government, with demonstrable consequences for the strategic focus of police services. However, it is important to recognise that police services in the UK still maintain a strong degree of control over operational matters and consequently, there is a need to pay attention to internally generated strategic actions. In this respect, what could be termed 'self-propelled mission creep' cannot be discounted. This point was made clear in interviews with senior police leaders, whose discussion of strategic actions taken over time indicated that considerable agency is still exercised locally in relation to the deployment of resources, albeit within the boundaries of central government influenced policy-making frameworks. Discussions with police leaders also led the researchers to suspect that a 'ratchet effect' has been at work in the sense that strategic actions will tend to grow cumulatively, as opposed to being adopted on a 'one-in, one-out' basis. Thus, 'mission creep', if it is of value as an explanatory term, should be viewed as a complex process in which response to pressures both exogenous and endogenous are evident in strategic choices taken. This makes the task of categorising and interpreting the significance of relevant strategic actions problematic. In an effort to identify patterns, the concept of path dependency is used below to make sense of the processes involved in producing an expansion of the range of strategic actions undertaken by police services during the New Labour era.

A scheme for analysing the pattern of growth in strategic action

Following an initial overview of the strategic actions recorded in annual reports, it was clear that there were examples of Blueshire responding to central government policies, but also cases where, as Pollitt and Bouckaert (2009) note in their comparison of English and Belgian police services, internally driven professionalisation and specialisation were frequently the main policy drivers. In an effort to make sense of the complex pattern of strategic actions taken over the time period examined, historical institutional theory has been employed. Historical institutionalism is one of seven distinct variants identified by Peters (1999) in his review of institutional theory. In an earlier and similarly comprehensive review of institutional theory, Scott (1995) identified historical institutionalism as one of three main perspectives on institutions. Historical institutional analysis tends to concentrate attention on factors which influence agendas and the focus of actors' attentions, preferences and actions. The concept of 'path dependency' plays a significant part in this approach and has previously been applied to the case of strategic control over

policing in the Pollitt and Bouckaert study noted above. Path dependency approaches emphasise that institutional history matters in understanding how new problems are encountered and why strategic possibilities are identified, missed, rejected or adopted (Pierson 2000). The conceptual terms used in path dependency analysis can be made relatively straightforward and are readily adaptable to the problem of understanding the course of strategic control over policing. Path dependency refers to the experience past events have on subsequent events. For example, police services in the UK invested heavily in both capital and in the development of operational methods during the establishment of motorised patrols beginning in the mid-1950s. Up until then, a model of policing which relied on foot patrols and officers on bicycles had endured for over a century (Emsley 2009).

The adoption of the patrol car in path dependency terms represents a *punctuation* in the policy history of policing. To a certain extent, the punctuation had been forced on the police through the increasing realisation that the motor vehicle provided the criminal with greatly enhanced mobility, creating a new class of problem. On the other hand, the motorised patrol would impact heavily on the way in which pre-existing policing challenges were dealt with. The assumption that police officers work in patrol or response cars would quickly become dominant. Alternatives were difficult to conceive of, let alone accept. It could be argued with some conviction that much of what passed for standard policing quickly became reliant on the practice of placing police officers in motorised vehicles. With the establishment of a motor vehicle-based patrol and response, an option-limiting *path dependency* was created. Either new or old policy issues re-emerging in a *cycle* would be dealt with in terms which were to be found along the path. Unless police services break away from the path, they will continue to react to both existing and new criminal activity through a strategic action model which placed the patrol car in a prominent position. The practice of police officers patrolling and responding to calls therefore became a *self-reinforcing* process (Manning 1977). It became difficult to discuss policing in terms which did not include the patrol car as a key resource. The use of patrol cars produced *positive feedback*, in the sense of delivering results which were thus calculated around a range of post-patrol car policing concepts, such as speed of response and miles patrolled. In this case a technological action, the adoption of motor vehicles, had profound consequences for the subsequent path that policing took. As Pollitt (2010) concludes that technological innovation can have major consequences in framing the issues that future policy-making addresses in relation to policing. Changes in the law once made, such as for example that regulating the interviewing of suspects, may also have the same path defining impact on future policy and management of police services.

Analysis of data

Through a content analysis of annual reports the study identified 56 'strategic actions', which were defined as the conscious implementation of discretionary initiatives designed to deliver stated goals (see Table 1 for data referred to in analysis). Of these 'strategic actions', 32 were responses to central government policy, while the remaining 24 were local in origin. Only seven of the strategic actions could be deemed short-term, in the sense that the initiatives were formulated with a pre-determined timescale in mind and an exit point identified (at this point the ability to

Table 1. Analysis of strategic actions pursued by Blueshine. Derived from annual reports 1998–2009.

	Number of actions	Short term	Medium/long term	New	Cyclical	Path-dependent	Punctuation	Capital resource	Manpower resource	Leadership resource	Local action	Central edict
1998	7	1	6	3	4	4	3	1	7	7	4	3
1999	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
2000	4	0	4	1	2	4	0	0	4	4	0	4
2001	7	2	5	4	2	3	2	3	7	7	1	4
2002	2	0	2	0	2	2	0	1	2	2	1	1
2003	4	1	3	1	3	3	1	1	4	4	0	5
2004	3	0	3	1	3	2	2	0	3	3	1	1
2005	10	0	10	2	8	8	2	2	10	10	7	3
2006	10	2	8	0	10	10	0	0	10	10	3	7
2007	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
2008	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	2
2009	6	1	5	1	6	6	0	0	6	6	5	1
Totals	56	7	49	16	40	44	12	10	56	56	24	32

categorise the time scale of specific actions was assisted by the practitioner experience of one of the research team, who had extensive experience of planning within a large police service, where he formerly served as a senior officer). For example, the Blueshire Annual Report 2003 makes reference to its response to the central government promoted *Street Crime Initiative*. This was formulated as short-term strategic response on the basis that a goal could be attained within a specified timescale and resources then moved elsewhere.

Most of the strategic actions identified clearly involved a medium or long-term commitment of resources. For example, the allocation of officers in 2001 to meet the requirements of the Crime and Disorder Act (1998), especially around partnership focus, is a medium or long-term commitment depending on the timing of further reform. Interviews confirmed the perceived timescale of investment made in this particular area. Managing and resourcing these actions makes police services path dependent in the sense that their ability to consider new issues is significantly reduced.

In total, the study identified 49 medium or long-term strategic actions, which in effect tied up resources for extended periods of time, thus eliminating a certain amount of discretion on the part of Blueshire to respond to alternative (or necessary local) strategic goals. It was not possible for the research team to cost individual strategic action, a task which would be very difficult to accomplish in any case. However, the nature of the investment made in relation to strategic actions is itself of some significance. None of the 56 actions involved solely capital (monetary) investment, which is predictable in an organisation which is delivering a principally people-based service. Virtually all of the strategic initiatives involved both leadership and manpower, either in the form of police officers or civilians. Given that many of the strategic actions required staff to be trained or possess specialist recruitment, with nearly all dependent on a certain level of experience, it may be argued that resources are not readily 'convertible' for alternative tasks beyond the immediate remit of the initiative. For instance, specialist forensic staff skilled to meet new standards in the presentation of evidence cannot be readily redeployed with any degree of immediate, equivalent effectiveness in, for example, traffic policing. Similarly, staff working on a business crime initiative will build up a specific range of skills which cannot be used as effectively outside the commercial sector. This is another example of the impact of path dependency in reducing strategic flexibility.

Only 16 of the 56 initiatives were classified as strategic actions relating to new issues. An example would be the response made in the form of establishing an Abusive Images Unit to combat child pornography, which is a crime facilitated by new technology. Another example of a new issue prompting strategic action would be the more explicit recognition of hate crimes as a separate category of offence, reinforced by various legislation passed since 1998. In response, Blueshire established 160 Hate Crime Reporting Centres in the BCU to enable the public to report crimes to agencies other than the police. However, the majority of strategic actions were in fact responses to issues which were coming around on a policy cycle. By this, it is meant that Blueshire would make a strategic response to an issue or problem which had been around for some period of time. This is consistent with the findings of Sabatier's analysis, who concluded that public policies tend to have cycle durations of at least 10 years (Sabatier 1999, p. 3). This is further evidence of the 'ratchet effect' at work and the narrowing of strategic options associated with path dependency. With

75% of the strategic actions pursued by Blueshire over a 12-year period in effect cyclical revisits to old problems, this is itself a strong indicator of the influence of path dependency in crowding out new strategic possibilities.

Using another example, community policing has become an established issue in policy-making terms since the 1970s in the UK (Reiner 2000). Indeed, community policing provides a classic example of how problems are not resolved and policies are merely redesigned, repackaged or just re-launched time and time again. It appears that it is difficult for police services generally to conceive of solving a certain category of problem in terms that do not involve some variant of the community policing concept. Consequently, Blueshire was required by central government to establish Neighbourhood Policing Teams in 2005, which represented a redesigned strategic action made to offer 'better' community policing. Also in 2005, Blueshire established the Drug Intervention Programme to help break the link between drugs and crime by offering help to drug-using offenders. This was a direct replacement for the Criminal Justice Intervention Programme which was the immediate predecessor in an enduring policy cycle. A third example is a road safety partnership arrangement, entered into by Blueshire with several local authorities including the Highways Agency (central government) and local National Health Service bodies. In this regard, traffic problems are a typical example of those issues which fail to disappear and provide endless cycles of public policy.

When examined in more detail, 44 of the strategic actions were classified as path-guided, with only 12 punctuations identified. Examples of path-based strategic actions include a partnership initiative between Blueshire and the district general hospital involving police officers being in attendance at certain times with a view to reducing violent crime in the accident and emergency department. This was categorised as path-guided, since it was the latest action in a long series of actions dealing with broadly the same issue. To make the categorisation clearer, had the strategic action consisted of a Blueshire decision to fund the hire of private security guards then this could have counted as a departure from the path and been classified as a punctuation. Another example of a path-guided action was Blueshire's response to a central government initiative, 'Safer Streets', the funding of which allowed the police to employ a range of existing tactics to deal with different types of robbery. An example of a punctuation was Blueshire's creation of an Economic Crime Unit which was tasked with going through the finances of convicted criminals with a 'fine toothed comb' alongside criminal justice partner organisations. This was an action which took the criminal investigation strategy in a new direction and was facilitated by the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. Another example of punctuation was the creation of Family Liaison Officer posts in 2000-1 to support bereaved families in the course of murder investigations. This followed a national inquiry into the murder of a black teenager Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent identification of shortcomings in the way the police liaised and supported families of victims (Macpherson 1999).

In this exploratory study, the absence of data describing the nature of strategic action in other police services or public services means it is not possible to conclude that Blueshire as an organisation is unusually path-dependent in its approach to problems. Of some note however, was the correspondence between punctuations and issues which we classified as 'new'. Out of the 12 identified punctuations, 11 related to new issues. The only example of a punctuation in strategic response to a cyclical issue was a strategic action of Blueshire which supported witnesses through a

partnership with the Local Criminal Justice Board. It was felt that this was a new strategic direction to an old problem related to keeping witnesses under some degree of protection from intimidation.

Another similarly striking finding related to the nature of strategic actions. Out of the 56 recorded, at least 22 were dependent upon partnerships with other public or private bodies. A further 10 were firmly categorised as involving a response that was aligned with community policing practices. Some of these had a degree of implied partnership work involved. The researchers were given access to Blueshire's list of partnership-based commitments, which currently add up to over 230. The list of senior officers involved in partnership meetings was extensive. Interviews indicated that a significant back office capability had to be employed in servicing partnerships.

Partnership responses had been set up in relation to a huge range of problems. For example, Blueshire are partners with the UK Border Agency, District Authorities and police services from two neighbouring counties, housing providers and asylum groups. There are also a number of partnerships operating in the Youth Justice Field, where Blueshire will work with the local Council, an education NGO and the Council for Voluntary Services. Following incidents of child abuse, a *Safeguarding Children in Faith Setting* partnership was created. These are examples of partnerships created to change behaviour or identify problems before they occur, so-called 'diversionary' and 'prospective' policing. Partnerships were frequently created to pursue such strategic actions, which do not correspond with what may be conceived in the literature as 'traditional' policing roles in the UK. In addition to the path dependency associated with policy cycles, inflexibilities associated with the investment of capital and the training of specialist staff, there is also the impact of 'fixed thinking' about problems to be considered as an impediment to strategic change. Partnerships may well be a solution to many problems which police services engage with, but the sheer number that Blueshire operated causes concern about the amount of freedom of thought involved in conceiving of appropriate actions.

Conclusions

While this article has reported on an exploratory study of one English police service, there are grounds for claiming that at least some of the conclusions are likely to be generalisable, given the common operating environment in policing takes place across the UK. The study concluded that only 16 of the 56 recorded strategic actions pursued by Blueshire between 1997 and 2009 related to new issues. Also, while central government is a major source of new demands for strategic action, Blueshire was itself almost as active in increasing the range of initiatives launched. Policy cycles dominate, with long-standing problems being readdressed in strategic terms on a regular basis. These findings confirmed our initial view that the police were not simply being stretched by government in terms of the strategic actions they pursue. Our analysis additionally showed that some 44 out of 56 strategic actions also stayed within a policy 'path'. Therefore, while a degree of mission creep may have occurred, a more telling trend relates to path dependent driven strategic action. The police, like other organisations, are able to cope with potential pressures on institutional capacity by pursuing, for the most part path dependent strategic responses. Path-dependent strategic actions will normally involve an implementation process which is

tried and trusted. The impact will also be relatively predictable. Strategic actions tended to be replications – more partnerships, more special units – becoming the stock responses to problems old and new and providing strong evidence of path dependency. The longer term institutional consequences of such a coping mechanism cannot be ignored. A constrained form of decision-making is in effect used, which means not all possible strategic action options are necessarily considered in relation to new or cyclical problems. The alternative response involves strategic punctuations, which imply shifts in organisational imperatives and police working practices, potentially alien to current modes of ‘thinking’ and capacity (Chan 2003).

There are good reasons for suspecting that path-dependent strategic actions are sub-optimal and punctuations, while more risky, may better match chosen action to desired outcome. This is of course speculative and it is precisely the danger of embarking on genuinely new strategic actions without high probabilities of either implementation success or avoidance of unexpected consequences which make path dependency tolerable or even desirable. However, there are further problems with a path dependent dominated strategic direction. In the case examined, path-dependent led strategic actions appeared to have a lengthy ‘half-life’ in terms of their practical impact upon police activity. The vast majority of strategic activities uncovered in the study were of a medium and long-term nature, tying up both police leadership capacities and resource commitments for indeterminate periods of time at a local and regional level with consequent impact on manoeuvrability.

Where punctuations did take place there usually needed to be particularly pressing circumstances evident, such as a legislative response to a new manifestation of crime or a major inquiry. New issues rather than problems coming around on a policy cycle tended to cause the punctuations which took the Blueshire off established paths. Strategic decisions leading to punctuations are to a large extent event driven. Path-dependent responses to policing issues, while providing a coping mechanism for the services involved, also stifle local innovative strategic thinking.

While pressures arising from increased partnership working, professionalisation, specialisation, performance management and new legislation have produced circumstances in which significant organisational change has occurred, a key task for institutional analysis is to identify the context of response to such cross-cutting institutional pressures (Friedland and Alford 1991). In this respect, path-dependency is nowhere more evident than in the seemingly unbridled creation of partnerships to deal with strategic issues. Viewed in institutional terms, the strategic field has become more complex, with partnerships linking previously disparate organisations (Hoffman 1999). In some cases, the results will be positive as a consequence of more holistic approach to problems afforded by the participation of a range of service producers and consumers. In part however, it was acknowledged during interviews that collaborative police working had ‘gone out of control’, with police leaders forced to commit significant resources to ‘service’ such partnerships, without evidence that any real value could be anticipated from these efforts. Partnership ‘solutions’ would in certain circumstances appear to be derived from a potentially debilitating ‘institutional learning’ process, which means they emerge as the standard ‘tool’ for responding to a diverse range of problems, when it may have been more effective to consider other options. Although path dependent institutional responses in the form of partnerships can be relied on to produce measurable process outputs in the forms

of meetings held, information exchanged, agreements, this does not guarantee the realisation of outcomes and indeed may deflect attention away from end-result orientated strategic thinking.

The pattern of growth in the range of strategic actions pursued, influenced as it by path dependency, is at least as significant as the impact of central government tendencies to stretch the mission of police services beyond core roles. In view of the evidence presented, future reviews of policing in the UK should consider the impact of path dependency effects on the capacity of the police to respond appropriately to new demands. If police services are to succeed strategically within an ever more complex policing environment, where resources are also becoming scarcer, the present study strongly suggests the case for allowing and stimulating local manoeuvrability and autonomy in respect of strategic action, should be examined closely.

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