

# REFLEXIVE COPPERS:

## ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES IN POLICING

Jonathan Rowson

Emma Lindley

Foreword by Betsy Stanko FRSA

April 2012

12

RSA

Projects

# CONTENTS

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Foreword by Professor Betsy Stanko FRSA                        | 4         |
| <b>1. Introduction</b>   | <b>5</b>  |
| Social Brain and Steer   | 5         |
| Research Overview  | 5         |
| Why Police?  | 6         |
| Adaptive Challenges  | 6         |
| <b>2. Preliminary Research: Culture and Cognition</b>          | <b>8</b>  |
| Habits   | 8         |
| Attention  | 9         |
| Decisions  | 10        |
| <b>3. Deliberative Workshops: Steer and the Police</b>         | <b>11</b> |
| Principle 1 – Use your habitat to shape your habits            | 11        |
| Principle 2 – Trust your gut, but pay attention                | 12        |
| Principle 3 – Take your time, literally                        | 14        |
| Principle 4 – Be influenced by others, but know your own mind  | 16        |
| Principle 5 – Don't let consistency get in the way of learning | 17        |
| <b>4. Assessing the Steer Approach</b>                         | <b>19</b> |
| What participants hoped to gain                                | 19        |
| Successfully implementing the principles                       | 19        |
| Barriers to implementing the principles                        | 20        |
| Intentions to use the principles in the future                 | 20        |
| <b>5. Discussion, Implications and Recommendations</b>         | <b>21</b> |
| New Leadership   | 21        |
| Police Culture: Soldiers or Social Workers?                    | 21        |
| Research   | 22        |
| Training   | 22        |
| Practice   | 23        |
| Transforming Behaviour Change                                  | 23        |

## **ABOUT THE RSA**

The RSA has been a source of ideas, innovation and civic enterprise for over 250 years. In the light of new challenges and opportunities for the human race our purpose is to encourage the development of a principled, prosperous society by identifying and releasing human potential. This is reflected in the organisation's recent commitment to the pursuit of what it calls 21st century enlightenment.

Through lectures, events, pamphlets and commissions, the RSA provides a flow of rich ideas and inspiration for what might be realised in a more enlightened world; essential to progress but insufficient without action. RSA Projects aim to bridge this gap between thinking and action. We put our ideas to work for the common good. By researching, designing and testing new ways of living, we hope to foster a more inventive, resourceful and fulfilled society. Through our Fellowship of 27,000 people the RSA aims to be a source of capacity, commitment and innovation in communities from the global to the local.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Dr Jonathan Rowson leads the Social Brain project at the RSA. Jonathan holds a first class degree in Politics, Philosophy, and Economics from Oxford University, an Ed.M from Harvard University in Mind, Brain and Education, and a Doctoral degree from Bristol University on the concept of wisdom. A chess Grandmaster, Jonathan was British Champion for three consecutive years 2004-6, and writes a weekly column for Scotland's national paper, the Herald.

Dr Emma Lindley is Senior Researcher on the Social Brain Project. Emma holds a first class degree in English Language and Literature from Liverpool University, an MSc in Educational Research and an ESRC funded PhD, both from the University of Manchester. Emma's research led to the development of the Inclusive Dialogue approach to education about mental illness and has received media attention from the BBC and the Times Educational Supplement.

*This exploratory study implicitly suggests that there needs to be institutional support for changing police culture.*

– **Professor Betsy Stanko**

## **FOREWORD:** PROFESSOR BETSY STANKO

Seeing oneself through the eyes of another is always useful. In the following exploratory study, through its Social Brain programme, the RSA asked how police officers can ‘choose and shape’ habits. Policing is known for its culture and its craft. Largely a profession moulded through shared, experientially based knowledge, the profession is now being soundly challenged to expand its craft repertoire to embrace the growing body of evidence about ‘what works’.

There is a growing expectation that public servants use best evidence to provide the best service. Adapting to this innovation in policing requires challenging old habits, as this research suggests. Yet the question remains as to whether any one individual within the police profession can swim against the traditional tide of doing things. As the researchers themselves propose:

*Thinking about police work from the perspective of adaptive challenges, it seems that in a working culture defined by strict adherence to protocol, rank structure, and risk aversion, communicating clearly and honestly may not come easily, whether internally or out in the community.*

This exploratory study implicitly suggests that there needs to be institutional support for changing police culture. Better decision making and use of information needs to be an expectation of leadership. Transparency of decision making of the police, the use of robust information and an outcome focused service will, I believe, encourage more public engagement and public accountability.

Policing is changing, but perhaps not at a pace we would like. This piece of work seeks to stimulate debate, and to help lay the ground work for future research, and ultimately improvement in a vital public service.

### **Professor Betsy Stanko**

Metropolitan Police Service

Emeritus Professor, Royal Holloway, University of London

Fellow, RSA

*We recognise that the police service is a diverse organisation, and there is no monolithic ‘police brain’, but we worked on the understanding that there are common concerns and a shared culture that plays out differently depending on varying individual profiles and professional contexts.*

**1** Grist, M. (June 2010). *Steer: Mastering our Behaviour through Instinct, Environment and Reason*. RSA.

**2** In Steer, the five principles were: 1. Habit is king, 2. Go with your gut, but take a moment to think when something new is happening, 3. When it's difficult, just let it sit, 4. When you feel swayed, step back and say so, 5. When you can't trust yourself, ask others to help.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## SOCIAL BRAIN AND STEER

This project took place as part of the RSA's Social Brain programme of research. We have developed a perspective on behaviour change that is holistic, in the sense that it targets both automatic and controlled thought processes, and reflexive, in the sense that it tries to improve the efficacy of our actions by enriching self-awareness and recognising that such self-awareness is always grounded in relationships and culture. These points were examined in depth in our Steer report, <sup>1</sup> which described a deliberative research process with the general public on five principles of decision-making. <sup>2</sup> The focus of our work has since expanded and we are now interested in exploring how we may become better able to choose and shape our **habits**, become more mindful of our patterns of **attention**, in addition to becoming more aware of the basis on which we make and justify **decisions**.

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

This report describes exploratory research with uniformed members of the police service in which the RSA sought to understand how our approach to behaviour change might be applicable to police work. This exploratory study represents an investigational stage in a broader attempt to further develop our distinct perspective on behaviour change. Drawing on a range of research from several disciplines, Steer enables people to appraise situations and make judgements about when they should trust, or be wary of, their gut instincts, rational convictions or environmental influences. It has been tested with members of the public and taxi drivers, and this study was designed to establish whether the approach might be appropriate to use with the police service.

We began the process by making contact with senior police officers who are RSA Fellows. We arranged to interview four officers on a one to one basis. The purpose of these interviews was to find out more about cultures within the police force, and to begin to explore whether and how the principle of RSA's Steer approach to behaviour might be applied in these distinct settings. We recognise that the police service is a diverse organisation, and there is no monolithic ‘police brain’, but we worked on the understanding that there are common concerns and a shared culture that plays out differently depending on varying individual profiles and professional contexts.

With the input of the four senior officers, we modified the core principles from the first Steer report in an attempt to make them pertinent to the police. The next stage was to recruit a larger number of police officers to participate in a series of two deliberative workshops. The intention was to explore Steer principles with participants, who would then experiment with applying them, and keeping diaries of their experiences, before sharing and examining these in a second workshop. The first workshop was well attended, but only a small number of participants kept diaries and attended the second workshop. Nevertheless, we generated a rich corpus of data, which gave considerable insight into the challenges facing police and the ways in which RSA's engaged approach to behaviour change might be able to help them better rise to these challenges.

Our central objective was to explore with police officers whether engaging with these kinds of considerations is feasible and useful. The aim was not to gather evidence for the efficacy of our intervention, or demonstrate the impact of taking part in the workshops on the participants, though we hoped we might learn something about what works in that regard. Rather, it was important to us to clarify whether working in this way is tractable in the context of important public services that are under pressure to change in various ways, in this case the police service.

*It appears that the police service is concerned with at least three different kinds of interrelated behaviour change: the behaviour of officers, the behaviour of criminals, and the behaviour of potential and actual victims of crime.*

## WHY POLICE?

*You need a service that can understand its own information. – Betsy Stanko<sup>3</sup>*

We chose to work with police for a variety of reasons. It appears that the police service is concerned with at least three different kinds of interrelated behaviour change: the behaviour of officers, the behaviour of criminals, and the behaviour of potential and actual victims of crime. Secondly, most police are responsible for their own actions, but work in teams and in contexts where social norms have a strong influence on behaviour. Thirdly, the police service is an experientially based occupation, so there is a need to direct theoretical knowledge towards explaining and informing practical know-how.

Fourthly, as Professor Stanko's quotation above suggests, there appeared to be interesting challenges about the role of information in the police service. Our aim was not to add to the enormous research data on policing, but rather to suggest some reasons why that information may not be readily utilised or understood on the ground. Fifthly, exploratory interviews suggested that although police officers receive lots of training, the status of that training varies enormously, with many reporting that advice like "forget all that - this is the real world now" is pervasive. Again, we wanted to make some sense of why that might be the case. Finally, the Flanagan Report's suggestion that improving the quality of interactions between police and public was imperative suggested that fresh insights into cognitive frailties, including various forms of bias, of police and public alike, may usefully inform this objective.<sup>4</sup>

Previous RSA research carried out in 2009 found that, for reasons highlighted by Flanagan, police were working against their advantages in terms of collaborating effectively with the public and other organisations.<sup>5</sup> While the police continue to be inspected against a range of performance measures and are also accountable for delivering against a range of locally defined targets and priorities, they do not seem to be making the most of their interactions with the public. Future challenges pointed to the need for the police to build systems and a workforce that are better at making and facilitating decisions, managing risk, using information and intelligence, and team working. It was argued that officers will need greater emotional intelligence, greater ability to use discretion, and will need to be more outcome rather than process-focused.

These improvements are needed to provide greater efficiency at a system level and also to support broader strategic ambitions to better engage with the public and other partners. The resulting notion of 'qualitative productivity' requires not only that service delivery becomes more efficient, but also that there is a shift in the focus from outputs to outcomes, i.e. the concern not only with measuring what has been done, but also with evaluating the impact of what has been done. The police therefore also need an impact and performance assessment framework that captures and drives qualitative outcomes. The research described here seeks to play a small part in informing the development of this 'qualitative productivity'.<sup>6</sup>

## ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

*The most common leadership failure stems from attempting to apply technical solutions to adaptive challenges. – Ron Heifetz<sup>7</sup>*

Police work involves a variety of complex communication challenges, both within the police service and in dealings with the public. Taking these relational challenges seriously means recognising that both these types of communication stem from deeper challenges of intrapersonal communication between different parts of oneself, and the need to develop an internal language to explore and resolve these personal challenges that all police inevitably encounter. We seek to show below why this challenge should be recognised as important to police work, and argue that there is a danger of relying on technical (policy) solutions to address such profound

<sup>3</sup> Head of Research, Strategy and Analysis, London Metropolitan Police Force, while speaking at the 2020/ RSA Public Services Summit.

<sup>4</sup> Flanagan, R. (2008). Review of Policing, [Online], Available: [http://www.polfed.org/Review\\_of\\_Policing\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.polfed.org/Review_of_Policing_Final_Report.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> RSA Projects, NPIA Qualitative Productivity: Neighbourhood Policing Service Design Investigation, [Online], Available: [http://www.thersa.org/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/274430/RSA-NPIA-Symposium-livework.pdf](http://www.thersa.org/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/274430/RSA-NPIA-Symposium-livework.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Heifetz, R., Linsky, M. & Grashow, A. (2009). *Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing your Organization and the World*. Harvard Business Press Books.

*There are qualitative aspects of policing that are not about marshalling existing expertise to target discrete problems, but rather adaptive challenges that require police to develop self-awareness and mental complexity.*

---

**8** Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. (2002). *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation*. Jossey-Bass.

adaptive (personal and cultural) challenges. As leadership theorist Ron Heifetz has argued, adaptive challenges require changes in values, beliefs and attitudes and not just behaviours, and they can only be addressed at a personal level, which is why they are difficult to identify and easy to deny, especially in strictly hierarchical and disciplined services like the police.

**Nonetheless, there are qualitative aspects of policing that are not about marshalling existing expertise to target discrete problems, but rather adaptive challenges that require police to develop self-awareness and mental complexity in their own way.** As an analogy, a diet pill is a technical solution to weight loss, while creating and maintaining a new exercise habit is an adaptive challenge. In policing, the Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) might be regarded as a technical solution, whereas the adaptive challenge would seek to engage parents, youth workers, and the broader community to support a young person not to behave anti-socially. Likewise, sending police officers to attend a certain number of standard training courses may not be the solution to the adaptive challenges they face in relating to each other and the public, unless those training courses allow police to see how this training can be accommodated in the context of the other constraints and demands of their work.

For this kind of adaptive challenge, it is possible police need more tools for self-examination rather than more professional training. What is needful may not be instruction in how to do ‘the job’ as such, but more awareness of how to critically engage with that kind of instruction, and shape their approach to ‘the job’ accordingly. The actions of police are constrained by innumerable conditions, including contextual specifics, job specifications and protocol. However, their approach to these conditions depends upon a prior set of conditions in their own nature. In the language of adult development theorist Robert Kegan, the RSA is striving to gradually help people develop from being the conditions of their action - passive subjects, shaped by biological and social constraints we cannot control, to having those conditions, whereby we begin to proactively shape our personal and professional lives with an awareness of them.

Thinking about police work from the perspective of adaptive challenges, it seems that in a working culture defined by strict adherence to protocol, rank structures and risk aversion, communicating clearly and honestly may not come easily, whether internally or out in the community.

In so far as this is the case, we believe our engaged approach to behaviour change may help police to meet the adaptive challenges they face, by offering some experience of informed self-reflection, and a language to talk about how and when it connects to recurring challenges at work.<sup>8</sup>

*What it means to be a police officer involves understanding a set of cultural expectations including operating within an entrenched hierarchy and negotiating implicit conceptions of what is appropriate at different levels of that hierarchy.*

—  
9 Op. cit.

## 2. PRELIMINARY RESEARCH: CULTURE AND COGNITION

We conducted four in depth semi-structured interviews with senior officers in which we asked them to respond to the five principles about decision making in our Steer report.<sup>9</sup> The aim was to decide which knowledge relating to brains and behaviour to explore with the police officers taking part in the second stage of our research. In the process we gleaned some useful insights into police culture and cognition more generally that seemed relevant to the wider aims of the Social Brain project. We felt it was important to attend carefully to what we learned about police culture and cognition and examine how these findings related to our key interest in habits, attention and decisions. In the section that follows, we present the results of this preliminary research. Although we have organised these findings in relation to our established interest in the three themes identified above, the process of analysis was grounded in the data. We used content and thematic analysis to establish themes of central importance to the participants, using their own language to specify the themes. A secondary analytic task was to determine how these themes related to our domains of interest.

### HABITS

It rapidly became clear from our discussions that habits have a range of important influences on how police officers do their jobs. What it means to be a police officer involves understanding a set of cultural expectations including operating within an entrenched hierarchy and negotiating implicit conceptions of what is appropriate at different levels of that hierarchy.

Officers explained that there are formal and informal hierarchies in a team: “You very quickly know who to ask, who you don’t want to be posted with. This all happens within the first two to three weeks of being posted.”. One participant described the police service in general as “**Such a total institution - from the word go, you are given advice from more experienced people about appropriate behaviour.** And inappropriate behaviour is really scorned. And then that is adopted as normal behaviour and ‘gut’... and perhaps there is too much of that and too little of thought processes interfering...”. In this context, “Career progression means: keep your nose clean, get a good number of arrests, take the exams”.

It was suggested that the need to attach oneself to somebody internally for promotional purposes also serves to perpetuate habitual behaviour and hierarchical norms too. For instance: “If you are trying to make your way - you’ve got to learn when to speak and when to keep your mouth shut”. It was suggested that this factor is felt more intensely now, because the educational level of officers is relatively high compared to previous generations, and “**There are lots of people who want to say what they can’t say...**”.

Despite this constant awareness of how others might react to what one says and does, officers are made acutely aware that the responsibility for decision making lies at the level of the person making the decision in real time. This is reinforced with language like: ...“you are a warranted officer”, “**you are the person who is given the warrant**”, “**you are the person on the street who will make the decision as a warranted officer**”. It was felt that an awareness of this relationship between responsibility and warrant reinforces habitual behaviour, because it requires officers to follow known procedures, and also to write up events as if they had done so, even if events were different. If an officer undertakes something in an unconventional way, it is considered very risky in terms of future disciplinary procedures, but if they take a more conventional approach, seniors will be much more forgiving.

However, while habitualised behaviours can be efficient, they are not always necessarily effective. Some concern was expressed about the very idea of getting police to think

*It was felt that an awareness of this relationship between responsibility and warrant reinforces habitual behaviour, because it requires officers to follow known procedures, and also to write up events as if they had done so, even if events were different.*

about their behaviour: “If you are going to ask police officers to think about their activity, that’s going to cause them more work - will they want that? They may feel they are less safe, because you are taking away habitualised forms of behaviour”. Police officers rely on these habitual patterns because they are reinforced by familiar habits, a point indicated by the claim that: “Police are reluctant to move out of their ‘manor’”. The associated language was “my area”, “that’s where I belong”, “the patch”, “the comrades”. It was remarked that “appropriate behaviour” was closely linked to area knowledge, and one even said that “You’ll rarely find that officers based in North London work in South London”.

A deeper point here is the perception that senior officers have of junior officers, and the extent to which they treat them as automatons, rather than autonomous agents: “The clever ones, and further up the tree...become aware that what they are supervising and managing is a group of automatic pilot behaviour...It’s very pervasive, it has to be”. On the one hand this comment sounds credible and plausible, but at the same time it’s slightly chilling, both to think of junior police operating as uncritical robots and senior officers taking decisions on that understanding.

This range of examples demonstrates that habitual behaviour is, unsurprisingly, firmly entrenched in police culture. The habits and cultural norms of the police make it almost impossible for junior officers to swim against the tide, or take more unconventional approaches to particular challenges within their work. There are many potential disadvantages to this situation, which makes increasing self-awareness and reflexivity a desirable if somewhat subversive aim.

## **ATTENTION**

The need to take time and pay attention in order to make good decisions is undoubtedly a challenge for police who are often under pressure to do the right thing and do it immediately. This strand emerged less prominently than habits and decisions, but the examples of the importance of attention to good policing were nevertheless striking. Based on his service in the force, and his more recent experience taking critical decisions in real time, a senior officer remarked: “Nothing makes me doubt myself more than when everybody agrees with me”. To remind himself not to rush to judgment, this senior officer carries a poem by Robert Graves with him at all times, which he pulled out of his briefcase during his interview.

### ***In Broken Images***

*He is quick, thinking in clear images;  
I am slow, thinking in broken images.*

*He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images;  
I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images,*

*Trusting his images, he assumes their relevance;  
Mistrusting my images, I question their relevance.*

*Assuming their relevance, he assumes the fact,  
Questioning their relevance, I question the fact.*

*When the fact fails him, he questions his senses;  
When the fact fails me, I approve my senses.*

*He continues quick and dull in his clear images;  
I continue slow and sharp in my broken images.*

*He in a new confusion of his understanding;  
I in a new understanding of my confusion.*

**Robert Graves**

*How decisions are made and the pressures on police to make them both quickly and effectively were obviously matters of considerable concern.*

---

**10** Claxton, G. (1998). *Hare Brain Tortoise Mind: Why Intelligence Increases when you Think Less*. Fourth Estate.

Paying attention to gut instinct was something our participants held as an important component of skilled policing. Years of experience in any given domain gives rise to sophisticated forms of pattern recognition, in which expertise in paying attention to certain things is developed. This fact was captured by our participants with the expression “policeman’s twitch”, or “copper’s nose”, both of which were used in response to the Steer principle ‘trust your gut’ and led one participant to remark that “Sometimes when we don’t think we are more effective than when we do”.

## **DECISIONS**

Decision-making emerged as a very important strand of police work, and this topic resonated profoundly with our participants. How decisions are made and the pressures on police to make them both quickly and effectively were obviously matters of considerable concern.

One participant expressed the view that there are basically three types of choice, those between good and bad, good versus good and bad versus bad. The trickiest type of decision is the last, where aiming for the least bad outcome becomes the prime challenge. Given that risk mitigation is not risk elimination, it was felt that “the duty to protect life and the duty to protect way of life are often at loggerheads”. For instance, the London tube remains an open system, and unless you want airport style security at every feeder point to the tube, it remains a hazard.

Clearly such decisions require a great deal of thought, but the picture painted by our participants begs the question of when and whether it is appropriate for police to ‘think for themselves’: One participant suggested that “A lot of police decision making is done without thought...and often without an awareness of the role of any decision making interfering...”. Participants placed more emphasis on institutional reinforcement, with one referring to: “The power of the group, the power of the institution, the power of the tradition”. Another concurred that there was a need to make police more aware of the basis of the autonomy they do have: “**You have to get people to understand processes of thinking - that people realise that they do have opportunities to make decisions...**”.

However, being lower down the hierarchy clearly affects police’s views of their role in making decisions. Officers described a tendency for junior members to err on the side of not speaking when around more senior officers, identifying a negative consequence that some senior officers become aware that this might prevent them from reaching an effective decision. One senior officer remarked that when working in a live situation with a team, he frequently says words to the effect: “**This is the decision as I understand it**”. Then he stops the room and asks, “Does anybody think different?”. It was remarked that this is extremely important because police often do work on different assumptions. This participant said he wanted this kind of process to become established practice - not merely giving the statement declaratively, but sharing the thought process that led to it: “So this is the situation as I understand it, and therefore, I’m interested in A, B or C...I need you to stick your hand up and shout if the situation changes”.

The need to be sure that everybody involved shares the same assumptions, and to make decisions based on up-to-date information should not however be understood as reasons to avoid making a decision. “It should never be: ‘I haven’t got the whole picture therefore I can’t make a decision.’ But make sure you have worked through all that you can and that a hidden bias is not shaping you”. It was suggested that a good senior officer wanders round and speaks to everybody in the room, because “**sometimes the key bit of information is with the shyest person**”. Another participant remarked that it was “a masculine culture”, where it is felt that what you say should have a clear point, but **sometimes it is the half-baked insights that lead to progress.** <sup>10</sup> Partly for this reason, he remarked that he tells those working with him on a real-time decision: “I don’t want you to go home feeling uneasy about something you should have said”.

*Officers described a tendency for junior members to err on the side of not speaking when around more senior officers, even though this might prevent senior officers from reaching effective decisions.*

### 3. DELIBERATIVE WORKSHOPS: STEER AND THE POLICE

Our analysis of what the senior police said confirmed our suspicion that our ideas were indeed highly relevant to the work of the force. With their help, we adjusted the original five Steer principles, incorporating what we had learned about police culture from the first stage of our research. The five principles listed below represent a distillation of some key insights into human nature that we believed would be particularly relevant to police, and we reframed the principles as questions to stimulate the discussion:

**1. Use your habitat to shape your habits.**

How does the working environment shape your automatic behaviour?

**2. Trust your gut, but remember to pay attention.**

Your intuition, based on professional experience, is powerful, but how can you remain vigilant in situations where something genuinely new is happening?

**3. Take your time, literally.**

There are three main decision speeds - automatic, reflective and 'mulling' - which do you use most and why?

**4. Be influenced by others, but know your own voice.**

You need others to help you think, but how can you guard against groupthink?

**5. Don't let consistency get in the way of learning.**

The desire to reduce cognitive dissonance often prevents us from understanding what really happened - how can we avoid this?

In the second phase of our research we took these principles to a diverse group of police officers, and used them as a springboard for discussion. Fifteen police officers including inspectors, sergeants, police constables, special constables and a trainee detective constable attended a deliberative workshop. In this workshop, we gave ten minute presentations on each of the principles, with each presentation followed by small group and plenary discussion. The primary question driving this workshop was 'how might the five Steer principles be beneficial to the work of the police?'. We also used this question as the organising framework for analysis, and particularly salient points from across the data were grouped under each of the principle headings (master themes). The analysis was not restricted to these five points, and a 'second pass' over the data was conducted in order to identify unanticipated themes or overarching issues that ran across all of the areas. Data under each of the master themes were then sorted into sub themes. Any sub-themes with very few citations were at this point either eliminated or incorporated into other closely related sub themes. Our findings are presented according to the five principles.

#### **3.1 PRINCIPLE 1 - USE YOUR HABITAT TO SHAPE YOUR HABITS**

Habits are driven by our automatic (principally limbic) system, and often feel automatic due to the way our brains predict events, and reward us when those predications are accurate, principally through the release of the 'feel good factor' in the form of dopamine. But habits are acquired and conditioned behaviours rather than strictly automatic. They are second nature rather than first, and therefore amenable to the influence of deliberation and reflection. Samuel Johnson remarked that "The chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken" but with a deeper understanding of how habits form and how they are reinforced, we are better able to shape our own habits. One of the best ways to do this is to think about the role our habitats - our living and working environments - play in shaping our habits.

*The notion that there is a relationship between habits and habitats captured the imagination of many of our participants.*

Officers had a range of reflections on how their working habitats impacted on their habits. There was a broad feeling that police working environments are chaotic, whether in the office or out in the community. The chaotic physical and psychological environments that officers typically found themselves in were described as follows by one participant:

*“This job takes us outside our comfort zone on a regular basis. Often unfamiliar/ bizarre/dangerous etc. habitat, which may be very different to what we are brought up on.”*

The effect of the physical and social working environment on mood and behaviour, and the importance of being able to ‘escape’ was also raised. Although not stated outright the first quote below strongly suggests the problem of too many people being present in an office is not due solely to the level of noise, but that it has a social dimension as well, and one that tends to foster conformity as group sizes increase:

**“The office environment limits our behaviour.** When people enter our office, by the time the 4th or 5th person enters it can drag our conversations down. Positive people are brought down.” Whilst not chaotic in the same way as some of the other ‘habitats’ described above, this is nevertheless another example of how physical environments can take on social meanings and impact on thoughts and feelings.

Other participants felt that the influence of habitat was not a greatly important factor. This officer notes that perception plays a greater role in how the work is perceived than the physical environment itself: “It’s nothing to do with the habitat, just perception”. One might ask, however, about the extent to which perception is shaped by one’s habitat.

Participants could also see ways in which habitats matter in relation to changing the behaviour of offenders. They drew on ideas such as situational crime prevention and removing opportunities in order to reduce (re)offending. The two quotes below are from the same participant who had worked with drug users. He noted that their ability to move drug users was limited by factors such as funding:

*“The biggest successes that we have had with drug users are when we’ve moved them away from their problematic peers. It helps if we move them to the coast and away from inner London.”*

*“Where there are side streets and cars, people have the temptation to steal things like Satnavs. If you remove them from their habitat you remove them from temptation.”*

These examples demonstrate that the notion that there is a relationship between habits and habitats captured the imagination of many of our participants. They were able to identify ways in which their own habitats were impacting on their actions, but also to recognise how changing habitats could help reduce crime by encouraging people to change their habits. It became clear that making space for reflexive consideration around these issues was helpful.

### **3.2 PRINCIPLE 2 - TRUST YOUR GUT, BUT PAY ATTENTION**

In complex situations where we have some experience but lack sufficient information to make a clear decision, gut feelings are often our best guide. However, they are fallible, and it is crucial to have some sense of when to follow our gut feelings, and when to pay close attention to ways in which a seemingly familiar set of circumstances may be subtly different.

This principle resonated in many ways with our participants, and it was clear that the issue of gut feeling in policing was one that they had all considered. They described

*It was suggested that years of experience make you less likely to check your assumptions. “We learn the right way of doing it, then we unlearn the right way of doing it.”*

making decisions based on gut feelings but also showed an awareness of the limitations of this type of decision making (and the potential serious consequences of making an incorrect decision):

*“Sometime I’ve misjudged situations – I’ve thought the suspect was OK and then took them back to the police station and they had a knife. You’re glad you didn’t do a search. But they were very civil and they were doing what they were being asked to do, very politely.”*

A more extreme example was presented during the second workshop. One participant described a situation where he felt that officers had dealt with what eventually transpired to be a domestic violence case (along with an allegation of rape) inappropriately. He described the officers in question not taking enough action during the day of the incident and not appreciating that an offence may have been committed:

*“I was asked to do a management review on a domestic incident. The call was to an estate with three flats on a balcony. The lady in the middle flat called to say there is a man out of prison to see a girl, who lived in the flat on the left, and whose mum was living in the flat on the right. Two police officers go to the flat and see a couple engaging in a sexual act as willing partners. They can’t get any answer on the door and can’t go to the informant as she doesn’t want to be seen talking to the police. Eventually the girl comes out red faced. The guy ran out over the fence to his mum’s. Afterwards the police officer said they had a gut feeling that nothing was wrong. She said no one was there when they asked and mentioned someone else’s name when they said they saw a man in the flat. The next day, she’s been head butted by him. Another team investigate and she tells them she was raped in the incident the day before.*

*Did the PCs investigate thoroughly enough? My own gut feeling was that one of the police officers who was new was a bit blasé. The older policeman probably influenced the younger one. Nowadays rules for domestics are strict. We make sure we see every person etc. We used to say ‘LOB’ which meant ‘load of bollocks’ but we don’t let it go now. The young person should have challenged the older PC. Based on hindsight, they should have done more. Your gut may tell you what is right, but you need to follow everything. They trusted their gut, but they didn’t pay attention.”*

Awareness of the need to pay attention to the fact that a response is largely based on gut feeling was expressed in this way by one participant: “I do trust my gut on perceived feeling, but instead of following through I do a bit more checking – I always think there’s always one time when a risk I take may go badly wrong”.

We also discussed whether it is appropriate and even possible to train officers in the implementation and negotiation of gut feeling responses to policing situations. Contrasting views were expressed. Some felt training was important, while others felt this was an area in which ‘on the job’ experience was the only way of developing skill. One participant highlighted the difficulties of retaining good practice that was advocated during training, raising the example of dealing with people who are apparently drunk and remembering to check if they are “ill or injured”. He cited an example of somebody who was assumed to be drunk, but was in fact in a diabetic coma. In training, you are taught to check such things, but it was suggested that years of experience make you less likely to check your assumptions. **“We learn the right way of doing it, then we unlearn the right way of doing it.”**

This participant went on to describe feeling restricted and patronised by regulations: “Having to undertake so much training and following so much regulation shows little trust in us”. This demonstrates a certain tension between recognising the importance of lessons learned in training and feeling that implicit competence should be assumed.

*The principle “Take your time, literally” is a way of highlighting that we should take decisions with the appropriate amount of time, and reflect on the kind of decision we are being asked to take, rather than just taking it easy, or doing everything as fast as possible.*

11 Op. cit.

Various strategies were described in order to appropriately balance the influences of gut and conscious thought and there was some variety evident in the specific strategies used. One participant described a process of recalibrating their general level of suspicion in order to make more effective decisions:

*“On my first week on the street, I thought that everyone (members of public) was having me over. After that I treated everyone as criminals until they were able to prove otherwise. If you do that, you’re much more likely to use your gut and intuition around people.”*

Clearly such gut feelings are potentially harmful to the public, but one participant also described their feeling that checks and balances already exist in order to guard against over-reliance on ‘gut’: **“Standard Operating Procedures protect us from trusting gut instinct** e.g. the requirement to take detailed description from a witness...”. The use of the word ‘protect’ is noteworthy here, and clearly there is some tension between respecting an officer’s instinct, based on years of experience, and yet putting systems in place to protect the officer from an exclusive reliance on their own expertise. In a sense, the system dictates that protocol should override gut feelings, and officers are potentially constrained by this, possibly, on occasion, even being pushed into putting sanctioned procedure ahead of their better judgment.

This evidence demonstrates that there is a range of differing opinion amongst police around the issue of gut instinct and attention. While some showed an acute awareness of the potential negative consequences of an over or under reliance on gut feelings, others seemed to feel patronised by the suggestion that they need any help in negotiating these challenges. Despite this variety of perspectives, all of the participants appeared to enjoy and derive benefit from deliberating over the issues raised by this principle.

### **3.3 PRINCIPLE 3 - TAKE YOUR TIME, LITERALLY**

Within cognitive science, there is a general acceptance that there are three broad speeds of decision making.<sup>11</sup> There are those instinctive reactions that we call upon in physically demanding situations like sport, or when under stress. There is a rational deliberative mode that takes place when we have time to ‘work things out’, and there is also a slower process of unconscious rumination that we tend to use for really big decisions that require time for us to get a feeling for them, like whether to buy a house, change job or get married. The principle “Take your time, literally” is a way of highlighting that we should take decisions with the appropriate amount of time, rather than just doing everything as fast as possible.

Participants in our discussion had much to say about the issue of taking time. Opportunity for careful deliberation was generally seen as a luxury that officers rarely enjoyed, regardless of the area in which they worked. One participant noted that “As a response officer you have a generally very limited time period... ..you might reflect on it by yourself at home or in the pub or whatever...”. Another concurred: “...but generally we don’t get much time to mull over things”.

However contrasts were drawn between different decisions faced by different officers: “This all depends on the job and role. Even for detectives, a day is not enough to make a decision such as taking a child away from his/her parents, but at the same time hours could be luxuries for PCs and PCSOs”. The need to decide and act quickly and without the opportunity for consultation with superiors was also identified: “Despite all the rules/policy, supervision etc. the police is a bottom up organisation. We can have huge discretions. **It’s our decision and the lowest ranks make most of street decisions**”.

This pressure to make rapid decisions (for instance in order to comply with the Police and Criminal Evidence Act or to meet targets) was described as having potential

*There was a perception that some senior officers were very wary about the potentially serious consequences of an incorrect decision, and therefore held back for too long:*

*“There’s lots of managers that don’t want to take a decision that could blow up and, heaven forbid, lose their pension or get a complete drubbing in the press... sometimes people just don’t want to decide because it could affect their career...”*

---

<sup>12</sup> See Police Complaints Commission for details on standards of professional behaviour. Available online at: <http://www.ipcc.gov.uk/en/Pages/standofprofbehaviour.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Tavis, C. & Aronson E. (2007). *Mistakes were Made (But not by me): Why we Justify Foolish Beliefs, Hurtful Decisions and Bad Acts*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

negative consequences, such as leading to a lack of clear direction and being “incredibly morale sapping” for the officers involved:

*“I’m inclined to think our culture tends to move us more towards rushing and resolving decisions, and I’ve seen at a strategic level, just ‘We need to get there’, ‘Okay, how do we do it?’, ‘I don’t care! Run! Fast! Anywhere!’.”*

The inherently fast pace of some aspects of policing was seen as an obstacle to taking one’s time: “By definition, policing does not give time for intelligent mulling”.

There were occasionally some counter-examples. In the second workshop, one participant described having been able to take more time to deliberate over decisions after applying the principles and even described encouraging others at a meeting to do the same:

*“Team meeting with my supervisors, some decision had to be made about course allocations for both PC’s and Sgts. By getting all to take their time, mull over pros and cons, we arrived at a unanimous decision.”*

This constant shortage of time was evidenced throughout the diaries. Although it seems that most participants had developed coping strategies to get them through, they were still uncomfortable with this constant pressure, and sometimes voiced concerns about it having an impact on the quality of their work:

“Massively busy week - looking at the timetable to work out opportunities to prepare - and realise there is none - ‘taking time’ just ain’t an option! I will just have to ‘blag’ which is what I absolutely hate - it’s sitting very uncomfortably around my values on professionalism.”<sup>12</sup> It’s interesting to reflect on what professionalism might mean in relation to the police force – the service places integrity at the heart of its code of professional standards, so in this case it’s easy to see why the officer might feel that having to ‘blag’ is in conflict with his professionalism.<sup>13</sup>

In the second workshop there was some discussion of how cuts in budgets and staff might further exacerbate the existing pressure to make decisions in a disorganised and short-term fashion:

*“This mentality results in frustration in the ranks; seen as short termism ‘there will be costs in ten years’ time. Very frustrating for all involved. This short termism is endemic.”*

It also emerged that officers had some experience of problems arising if people took too much time over decisions. For example, there was a perception that some senior officers were very wary about making important decisions because of the potentially serious consequences of an incorrect decision, and therefore held back for too long:

*“There’s lots of managers that don’t want to take a decision that could blow up and, heaven forbid, lose their pension or get a complete drubbing in the press... sometimes people just don’t want to decide because it could affect their career, or they make the decision because it’s a tick in the box.”*

The picture painted by our participants shows that there is tension between the need to take an appropriate amount of time (neither too little nor too much) over decisions and barriers which prevent them from being able to do this. It was clear that this issue was of considerable importance, and that officers valued having had the opportunity to consider and discuss it. The experience of the officer who put this principle into practice demonstrates that it is possible to use awareness of the principle productively.

*“When you’re absolutely 100% sure, it’s much easier for me to speak up. But if you’re only 70% sure, that little inkling of doubt creeps in and you don’t want to say anything.”*

### **3.4 PRINCIPLE 4 - BE INFLUENCED BY OTHERS, BUT KNOW YOUR OWN MIND**

This principle arises from evidence that our thoughts are strongly influenced by the thoughts of others around us. Where groups form to discuss issues, there is a danger of groupthink, in which everybody starts to think the same way because nobody is willing to dissent or rock the boat. In any organisation, being able to resist groupthink and offer divergent views can be crucial.

There was a strong consensus that questioning decisions was always important, with some participants noting that this could be particularly vital in situations such as investigating serious offences:

*“During murder investigations, we actively expect people to speak up. In finer moments of murder investigations you need to have some criticism.”*

Some participants described feeling strong or confident enough to question decisions that they didn’t agree with:

*“If I don’t agree with something I always say something and try and interrogate.”*

However, it rapidly emerged that there are barriers which affect the ability to question the decisions of other people. Some examples were to do with individual factors, such as the level of certainty one might have in their contrary conviction:

*“When you’re absolutely 100% sure, it’s much easier for me to speak up. But if you’re only 70% sure, that little inkling of doubt creeps in and you don’t want to say anything.”*

Other barriers included the significance of rank and experience, including pressure from above:

- **“People dismiss you purely because you’re a Special (constable).”**
- **“Rank definitely entitles people to more of a say.”**
- **“You’ve got to be able to back yourself if you dissent from somebody [who has ten years’ experience].”**
- **“But we have pressure for results from the sergeants.** We may change our decisions for a variety of reasons – to get some results, to prove ourselves, to follow procedures, to satisfy the boss and to get someone in custody. This may mean taking an instant decision to get an instant judgement.”
- **“We may even be nudged by our sergeants to take a certain decision.”**

Variations in personality of superior officers could also lead to barriers to speaking up:

*“Some inspectors are approachable, some aren’t. There are just different personalities.”*

Individual differences in personality were raised as something that might make it easier to challenge the views of others:

*“I’m quite stubborn anyway, so principle 4 applies to me quite often.”*

One particular difference influencing whether decisions were challenged was between uniformed and non-uniformed officers:

*“...in uniform it’s very much: ‘Sarge’, ‘Guvnor’, ‘Sir’. When you’re out of uniform there’s a lot of first names.”*

*“Everybody’s notes after an incident are ‘word perfect’. That kind of consistency wouldn’t happen anywhere else. They all heard the same thing which can’t be true.”*

This example corroborates our notion that habits are formed by habitats, broadly conceived, and that formality is partly a function of implicit framings of the working environment.

Following from the above remarks, another participant noted that the more rigid, hierarchical dynamics amongst uniformed staff served a purpose, in that lower ranking uniformed officers necessarily had less scope for informality and questioning decisions because they were involved in front-line policing.

A particular example of resisting and questioning policy was discussed at the second workshop. One participant was vehemently opposed to having his photograph displayed online and stated a few reasons for this. He was interested in moving into covert policing, and noted that his picture being displayed publicly could impact on his safety in the area in which he lives. Beyond these practical concerns there was also a strong implication that he was opposed to this on principle: “Very private person - not on Twitter, Facebook...”. He described dealing with this problem by writing to his Chief Inspector, and by resolving to transfer if he was forced to comply.

There was frustration expressed regarding situations where officers failed to question the decisions of their superiors. In some cases participants were describing the behaviour of others, but throughout the workshops and diaries they also reflected on situations when they themselves failed to challenge a questionable decision:

*“It’s infuriating when people nod their heads in meetings and talks. The fact that they don’t speak up is bad.”*

*“...I followed foolishly all the others with instinct and my perceived belief of their experience just like sheep.”*

Our findings suggest that the issue of knowing one’s own voice and having the confidence to challenge others is a real issue which officers frequently have to negotiate. While participants expressed a strong view that speaking up is something they should do, they also provided many examples of barriers which prevent them from being able to do so. **The culture of policing, with its respect for rank and length of experience, combined with the pressure to achieve results quickly seem to work against the need to resist groupthink and influence from above.** It may be that lower ranked police would benefit not only from understanding this principle, but also being offered practical strategies which may help them to put it into practice.

### **3.5 PRINCIPLE 5 - DON’T LET CONSISTENCY GET IN THE WAY OF LEARNING**

This principle is underpinned by the concept of cognitive dissonance - the discomfort caused by holding contradictory beliefs, or doing something that contradicts one’s perception of oneself. Attempting to justify one’s actions by making them consistent with an existing value or prior action often leads to ignoring certain features of what happened to maintain a positive image of oneself. We wanted to explore with participants how this might impact on police performance.

There was some discussion as to whether a conscious or unconscious desire for consistency affected behaviour with two opposite views being expressed:

*“No, consistency doesn’t get in the way. You learn by experience in the police force. You learn what works and what doesn’t. There isn’t the space for this consistency to take root. Every situation is different. It’s all about adapting to new situations, not being consistent.”*

However, this in turn may be precisely the kind of self-justification that this principle seeks to target. For instance, one participant remarked:

*A police culture that can understand and speak about the challenge of cognitive dissonance would be more nuanced, and this development is worth striving for.*

*“Everybody’s notes after an incident are ‘word perfect’. That kind of consistency wouldn’t happen anywhere else. They all heard the same thing which can’t be true.”*

The benefits of being consistent, in the sense of being methodical and thorough, were also highlighted:

*“Some consistencies are good e.g. DV [domestic violence] policy, RTC [road traffic collision] breath test policy.” or “You make better or worse decisions based on knowledge about what has worked in the past.”*

It may be that our attempt to express this principle and provoke participants’ views on its significance to them was not entirely successful. However, it may also be that this result confirms that there is a need for this kind of work with police, in which they are given the opportunity to develop their self-awareness in relation to notions such as cognitive dissonance. The comments which arose from the discussion of this topic certainly suggest that the notion of ‘consistency’ of actions which participants latched on to did not reflect the tensions created by attempting to align values and actions.

For instance one participant remarked:

*“People have to reach their targets. You can call it corruption, or you can call it making the job work. The quality service report people will step away from you as if you are a leper if something is wrong. People are all quite compliant, they want to do a good job, they are figures driven.”*

Clearly there are tensions between competing goals that need to be unpacked. A job that is ‘figures driven’ creates pressure to report on situations and manage relationships in a way that creates the desired figures, which does not rest easily with professional goals to serve and protect the public and the earlier statement about every situation being different. Indeed, it is clear from the rest of the data that there are many instances in which police encounter experiences that do result in cognitive dissonance (for example, having to justify complying with the pressure to meet numerical arrest targets while not really wanting to make a particular arrest), but they do not recognise these challenges as personal or psychological. A police culture that can understand and speak about the challenge of cognitive dissonance would be more nuanced, and this development is worth striving for.

Although our data here is relatively limited, we believe this principle is crucially important, but that its expression requires further adaptation.

*“I work in an environment that is intellectually under stimulating and quite formulaic. (There was a) good spread of people at the event - rare to get perspectives from relatively junior staff.”*

## 4. ASSESSING THE STEER APPROACH

### 4.1 WHAT PARTICIPANTS HOPED TO GAIN

We asked participants what types of self-knowledge would help them to do their jobs better. They described a wide variety of factors including getting objective feedback, identifying gaps in their knowledge and experience, exploring whether they saw things differently to other people, learning how to deal with “trigger points” such as maintaining smooth interactions with student protesters, exploring whether there were “areas of my mind untapped that together I could unleash to improve my and therefore my team’s performance”, accepting their own behaviour, exploring their own physical, emotional, or academic limits and understanding how these interact with factors such as tiredness, frustration or boredom, being self-reflective and understanding “what makes me tick”, understanding how they were influenced by others and how they could influence others, “the ability to think faster and react quicker in certain situations” and a desire to “see every difficult job/task as a challenge rather than a chore”.

This diverse list could potentially be separated into the overlapping categories of hopes for personal self-improvement and hopes for improved professional performance as part of programmes of professional development. It suggests that police see many potential benefits from and have an appetite for opportunities to enhance self-knowledge.

### 4.2 SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENTING THE PRINCIPLES

The research diaries and the notes from the second workshop provide an indication of how useful participants found the principles in practice. In his early diary entries, one participant appeared very positive about the utility of the principles. However, by the time of his fourth entry, when prompted as to what he had learned he stated:

*“[The principles] enabled me to ‘plan’ the meeting. However, I am not sure whether I would have done it any differently. I am beginning to think that I already apply the 5 principles subconsciously in much of what I do.”*

In the next entry he repeats the suggestion that the principles have not had a great effect on his behaviour, but considers that they might have helped him to become more reflective:

*“I’m not sure whether I would have acted any differently without RSA but this has allowed me to examine my thought processes.”*

He does however describe situations where he was able to “get others to apply [the principles] as well as yourself”.

This was corroborated by comments from the second workshop, although the context was shifted outside of policing:

*“It’s quite difficult to change – policing is in a set habitat. Away from policing, I took it (the principles) to my non-job mates. I made an effort to go to real people.”*

When describing what she had learned from applying the principle in the context of activities specific to police work, one participant also seemed to highlight subtle but important shifts in her own thinking rather than radical changes in behaviour:

*“To accept difference and that one style which suits one person does not suit all; not to take things personally, to have more confidence and trust in my own judgements; not to be reliant on others for validation.”*

Another participant described the principles possibly having a very direct effect on behaviour in the context of front line policing. Here he described making a decision

*The implication is that the principles were easy to understand and to apply in theory whilst in the safe environment of the workshop, but that the more challenging environments of police work made this much harder because of relatively hierarchical and formalized social relations.*

using ‘gut’ to stop suspects who turned out to be known robbers suspected of committing new offences, informed with newfound self-awareness:

*“I learned there is definitely an advantage to understanding how decisions are arrived at. I wondered afterwards if I would have stopped the two males without thinking about Steer and concluded it was probably 50/50 depending on numerous factors. Sometimes I would have stopped them without really understanding how I had reached the decision and at other times I would have found a reason not to, however by consciously thinking of the reasoning behind the decision I feel there is some potential for better and more consistent decision making.”*

#### **4.3 BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING THE PRINCIPLES**

A phone conversation conducted with one participant revealed some potential barriers to implementation. Over the course of this discussion he noted that whilst the workshop was interesting it was a very different environment from that of his everyday work, and one in which those from different ranks and departments had the rare and unfamiliar opportunity of interacting as equals:

*“I work in an environment that is intellectually under stimulating and quite formulaic. (There was a) good spread of people at the event - rare to get perspectives from relatively junior staff”, “Workshop - people wanted to be there - everybody was in a more intellectual environment... people have more to say, but time constraints... everybody not trying to dominate... people could/would have said more but wanted to be polite... Also a matter of habitat...”*

The implication is that the principles were easy to understand and to apply in theory whilst in the safe environment of the workshop, but that the more challenging environments of police work made this much harder because of relatively hierarchical and formalized social relations. As well as these structural limitations discussed above and extensively elsewhere, a few participants also raised the issue of the principles being new and unfamiliar:

*“I think I learned that knowing the principles is not enough as it’s a case of trying to change thirty two years of learned and inherited behaviour and thought processes. If the processes are to be useful it seems important to internalise them and make them an automatic framework of thinking, though I’m not sure how easy or quick this would be.”*

This point serves to highlight that not all participants fully understood that our desire was not to create a new improved automaticity but to increase self-awareness and space for informed reflection, and also suggests that more work is needed to clarify our objectives from the outset of the research.

#### **4.4 INTENTIONS TO USE THE PRINCIPLES IN THE FUTURE**

Our objective was not to draw strong conclusions about the direct application of these particular principles, but rather to establish whether this kind of approach with these kinds of principles have the potential to be valuable to police work. Nonetheless, the few participants who attended the second workshop were very positive about their intentions to go on using the principles they learned. We should note that they are not necessarily representative of the initial group (that is, the most motivated and interested may have been the least likely to drop out). Still, there was a clear view amongst participants that the principles have some ongoing worth for those in the police service:

*“It takes conscious thought to introduce these principles into decision making but is I believe worthwhile. Reactive consideration of the principles after the event helps the debriefing process and with time I think it would begin to influence patterns of behaviour.”*

Another participant described her intention to incorporate the principles into her management of other staff, having been convinced of their power to improve decision making:

*“I will use the principles in 1-1 discussion to help [my team] improve their own decision making, as a domino effect will cascade the learning.”*

*Like all public services, the police service has experienced years of ‘target culture’, obliging police to face inwards and upwards, reporting to management in quantitative terms, rather than outwards to communities seeking quality.*

14 Hastings, R. (15th September 2011). *Tough Talk and Family Values: Bernard Hogan-Howe lays down the law*. The Independent, [Online], Available: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/tough-talk-and-family-values-bernard-hoganhowe-lays-down-the-law-2355541.html>

15 Both at The 2020/RSA Public Services Summit, [Online], Available: <http://www.thersa.org/events/rsa-conferences/2020rsa-public-services-summit/agenda#session4>

## 5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### NEW LEADERSHIP

There are critical problems facing the police as publicity surrounds the appointment of the third new commissioner of the Metropolitan police in three years. Bernard Hogan-Howe’s to do list includes dealing with aftermath of the riots, keeping a handle on the continuing terrorist threat, planning for the Olympic Games, restoring public trust, all while making cuts of £543m by 2015. In light of these challenges, what do the findings of our modest research offer?

Hogan-Howe has set out his stall for no-nonsense, bold policing which is about crime-fighting above all else, and does away with unnecessary partnership working. The tone of his “total policing” agenda might appear to be somewhat at odds with our suggestion that police need to be encouraged to take the time to consider the impact of their habits, attention and decisions. Hogan-Howe says, “I am trying to get the police to concentrate on our strengths. We are good problem solvers: we go in, sort a problem out quickly and move on”.<sup>14</sup>

Our research process suggests that such ‘quick wins’ are only part of the story, and that some police officers feel that several factors inhibit the organisational learning necessary for dealing with more complex cases. Moreover, in order for this kind of slick problem solving to follow, our research suggests it would be helpful for police to have a good understanding of the ways in which their minds work, and how they impact on what they do. The quality of their interactions with each other, with the public, criminals, victims of crime, and other services all depend on being able to be aware of and properly manage, for instance their susceptibility to groupthink or cognitive dissonance. Moreover, our findings indicate that making space for the exploration of Steer principles is an opportunity that police officers greatly value, and there is potential for it to deliver both individual and organisational benefit.

### POLICE CULTURE: SOLDIERS OR SOCIAL WORKERS?

Like all public services, the police service has experienced years of ‘target culture’, obliging police to face inwards and upwards, reporting to management in quantitative terms, rather than outwards to communities seeking quality. The need to follow process, hierarchical management, and a risk-averse organisational culture has further militated against prioritising the quality of interactions both within the police force and between the public and the police.

At the same time, there is a growing recognition that many forms of policing, especially community policing, depend crucially upon precisely these aspects of internal and external communication, especially at a time when police budgets are being cut and the public are called upon to fill gaps in provision. Criminologist Roger Graef argues that “Communities deliver community safety, not police”, while Professor Betsy Stanko, Head of Research, Strategy and Analysis at the Metropolitan Police Service remarked that “Fear rules the streets in places where the communities are not involved”.<sup>15</sup>

Varied pressures on police often requires them to shift between roles, adapting their behaviour accordingly, and dealing with difficult choices quickly, always under the pressure to get it right. For example, in a public disorder situation, officers have to enact the militaristic function, using necessary and proportionate force and rapidly coming under critical fire if they go too far or not far enough. The same officers may later find themselves delivering devastating news to a bereaved family, or providing first line support to a victim of rape. In this context, it seems desirable to encourage

*We are not the first to point out that the implicit framing of what kind of public service the police force is - e.g. community enablers or militaristic defenders of public order - has a bearing on how the public and police think of and relate to each other, and both perspectives reflect important aspects of what it means to be a police officer. However, our work suggests that police themselves are rarely given the chance to reflect on the kinds of tensions and dilemmas that stem from this dual aspect to their role.*

the types of insight that arise from reflecting on operational and personal challenges that relate to the cognitive underpinnings of behaviour, because this may help police to establish a more sophisticated understanding of the contextual sensitivity of their relationship to the public.

We are not the first to point out that the implicit framing of what kind of public service the police force is - e.g. community enablers or militaristic defenders of public order - has a bearing on how the public and police think of and relate to each other, and both perspectives reflect important aspects of what it means to be a police officer. However, our work suggests that police themselves are rarely given the chance to reflect on the kinds of tensions and dilemmas that stem from this dual aspect to their role.

In this respect, our small study served to highlight this hugely significant issue in a new way. By reflecting on their decisions, habits and attention, the police themselves seemed to be bringing these two core models of policing to the surface. When discussing the influence of organisational culture, accountability and hierarchy, the police highlighted the militaristic metaphor: closed, bureaucratic, controlling and necessarily engendering fear in the public. On the other hand, when thinking about patterns of attention, communication, and gut feelings, the metaphor was more like a form of social work: open, personal, trust-based, and enjoying working with the public rather than against them.

The inter- and intrapersonal skills that are required to navigate between these diverse responsibilities are manifold and it is clear that further investment in supporting the development of such skills is important. This research indicates that the Steer approach to understanding our own behaviour may be a promising part of this endeavour.

## **RESEARCH**

Our study was exploratory, and part of a wider investigation into our engaged approach to behaviour change. The research revealed that the Steer approach has potential value to the police service, that the introduction of the principles could be feasible and acceptable in the context of police culture, and that the general approach is worth further investigation.

More research is now needed in order to further develop this approach. In order to find out more about the barriers and facilitators to using the principles, it would be valuable to interview more police officers individually. Conducting one to one interviews would allow participants the freedom to disclose issues that they may not feel able to in a group environment of mixed rank officers. It would also be beneficial to repeat the process in a way that was targeted to particular sections of the police, taking into account the specific challenges they face.

There may also be scope for a more ambitious programme of experimental research which would aim to demonstrate the impact of discussing these principles on participants' thinking and behaviour. This more extended piece of research would aim to engender a deeper sense of commitment to the process and follow participants up over a longer period. The development of tailored mechanisms to capture the relationship between Steer-like interventions and enduring changes in thinking, attitudes and behaviour is one major research challenge, and determining the impact of those changes on outcomes of police work would be another. An experimental trial of this nature is an important next stage in the development of an evidence base for the impact of being engaged in the Steer process.

## **TRAINING**

While further research is needed to further develop and refine our approach, we see potential to develop a training package that could be delivered by the Police Service internally. This training package could either be integrated into basic training or as

*When discussing the influence of organisational culture, accountability and hierarchy, the police highlighted the militaristic metaphor: closed, bureaucratic, controlling and necessarily engendering fear in the public. On the other hand, when thinking about patterns of attention, communication, and gut feelings, the metaphor was more like a form of social work: open, personal, trust-based, and enjoying working with the public rather than against them.*

an additional course for those who have been in service for some time. The positive case for this kind of training should emphasise the types of things that the current participants expressed a desire for. These were personal self-development, improving professional performance and taking more control over one's thinking and behaviour.

### **PRACTICE**

Given limitations on staff, time and budgets any changes to working practices would have to be relatively subtle if they are to be realistically implemented. There is evidence in our data that the principles are useful for some of the current participants in some situations, but that their successful implementation might have been hampered by structural factors. For instance there is limited time to reflect and apply the principles due to external pressures such as complying with the decisions of superior officers, or working within the parameters and timescales dictated by legislation, as well as local and force-wide targets.

It is suggested that the successful application of the learning could be promoted by recommending a series of small changes such as encouraging officers to take a short time (around 20 minutes) every week to explicitly reflect on their decisions, habits and attention, and perhaps begin promoting the value of this to senior officers so that this would not have to be done on their own time. Whilst this process could be undertaken individually or in consultation with peers and line managers it would be important not to make the format of this exercise overly structured. It is clear that there is huge diversity in the challenges and issues faced even by those in the relatively small current sample. As such, methods of coping and reflection (and of applying the principles) are likely to be just as idiosyncratic.

### **TRANSFORMING BEHAVIOUR CHANGE**

Our research with members of the Police Service supports our broader view that behaviour change strategies need to take account of organisational culture and context. Many behaviour change initiatives rely on nudging techniques, which work on individuals' automatic behaviour. In contrast, the Steer approach works with groups, and does so reflexively, which makes changing behaviour a shared process through which we collectively reflect on our shared influences and our individual influence, and recognise that we cannot really change ourselves without changing each other. However, this process benefits greatly from a shared recognition and discussion of the distinct features of any given organisational culture, which was an integral part of this piece of research.

We set out to explore whether and how the RSA's Steer principles might help police do their work better. Both stages of our research indicated that introducing the opportunity to consider the principles was beneficial. Although the sample was small, and the responses were selective, the feedback was sufficiently positive and instructive to consider the process a success. As a result of taking part in the research, some police reported heightened self-awareness, and some made positive changes as a result. These changes ranged from the personal, including smoking less and eating more healthily, to significant shifts in professional settings, including encouraging colleagues to reflect, pay attention and take more time over difficult decisions. The impact of implementing these changes at a personal level is hard to maintain, and hard to track. Still, this kind of engaged reflexive process does seem to have the potential to improve communication, increase efficiency, and change the course of specific cases police are working on for the better. This in turn may mean more crimes solved, injustices prevented and lives saved.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the Department of Communities and Local Government for their Empowerment Fund, and RSA Fellows and Trustees for their continued support. I am particularly grateful to the RSA Fellows with experience in the police service who helped with the preparatory research. The Metropolitan Police Research Unit were instrumental in advertising for participants and we would like to thank those who took part in the workshops and the research process as a whole. For helping with previous drafts we are grateful to Matthew Taylor, Steve Broome, Adam Lent and Jeremy Crump. Thanks also to Gaia Marcus, Janet Hawken and Benedict Dellot for assistance with data collection and Mansoor Mir for data analysis. A special thank you to Professor Betsy Stanko FRSA for helping to recruit participants and for writing the foreword.