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Police leadership as practice

Abstract

In this paper, we investigate police leadership through of an alternative approach to management studies: the exploration of police leadership as a practice. Our aim is to ascertain whether a practice-based approach can increase our knowledge of police leadership. This approach represents an alternative to normative management models which have dominated the management literature. The normative approach often focuses on how police leaders must lead as well as on the traits and skills of police leaders. In contrast, our focus is on what leaders do and why and, therefore, what constitutes their professional leadership practices. We conducted qualitative explorative studies with Norwegian police leaders in 2016 and 2018. Our data were collected through the following means: a one-day shadowing of 27 police leaders, six weeks of fieldwork, 63 formal interviews of police leaders and a substantial number of informal conversations with police leaders and subordinates. In our analysis of leadership as practice, we recognise the importance of structural, cultural and contextual conditions as well as the emergent and dynamic nature of leadership practices. We identified four important practice dynamics: producing, relating, interpreting/sensemaking and negotiating. These practice dynamics were concerned with the relationships between leader(s) and employees, often characterised by the following. ‘Taking care of each other’ and ‘us against them’ within a leadership practice. Interpretations and sensemaking of the ‘reality’ within practices and production of policing as collective achievements. The language, symbols; artefacts, the police mission in relation to how it belongs/identifies with the practice and the negotiations of police leaders ‘fighting’ for resources (silos). And the continuously creation of manoeuvring spaces in what constitute police leaders’ professional practice.

Keywords: police leadership, leadership as practice, police culture, police reform.

Introduction

In this article, we investigate police leadership by employing an alternative approach to management studies: we study leadership as practice epistemologically. Our objective is to gain more knowledge of what police leaders actually do and why police leaders practice as they do.

We explore these characteristics of police leaders' professional leadership practice as two sides of the same coin (Schatzki *et al.* 2001; Whittington 2006; Orlikowski 2010; Gheardi 2012; Nicolini 2012; Day 2014; Raelin 2016). We study the ongoing everyday dynamics of police leaders' and employees' relationships and practices as well as how these processes constitute leadership practices, a research approach that theorists argue would add value to more traditional leadership studies (De Rue *et al.* 2011; Fleming 2015; McCusker *et al.* 2019).

The ways in which police leaders lead and how they create their leadership practice beyond what others perceive as effective leadership have received little attention thus far (Pearson-Goff and Herrington 2014; Fleming 2015; Flynn and Herrington 2015; Filstad *et al.* 2018; and Karp *et al.* 2018). The issue of how leaders practice everyday leadership is seldom addressed in general leadership literature, which is dominated by normative leadership models of what leaders ought to do. Such normative models are, at the least, problematic and even naïve, as they do not take into account social and cultural interactions and how leadership needs to be understood in relation to certain contexts and all their associated complexities (Alvesson 2017; Day 2014). Numerous examples exist in the literature of studies separating individual police leaders from actual police leadership practices and not addressing the cultural and structural contexts and what constitutes the leader-follower relationship within these practices (Pearson-Goff and Herrington 2013; Fleming 2015; Pfeffer 2015; Carroll 2016; Raelin 2016).

Instead, traditional leadership literature has focussed on the individual attributes, traits and competencies of leaders, independent of the leadership context (Carroll *et al.* 2008; Crevani and Endrissat 2016; Dovey *et al.* 2016). Moreover, leadership research based on behavioural-based self-reporting questions continues to dominate literature on leadership (Riggio 2019; McCusker *et al.* 2019).

The literature on police leadership also focuses on how to improve the individual police leader rather than on the leader-follower relationships, without accounting for the context of

policing, its structure or its culture (Bratton and Malinowski 2008; Eterno and Silverman 2010; Cockcroft 2014; Pearson-Goff and Herrington 2014; Flynn and Herrington 2015; Haake *et al.* 2015). Our research aims at exploring how police leaders practice leadership and why through investigating what constitutes their leadership practice. We use a leadership-as-practice perspective to contribute as an alternative way to study police leadership.

In what follows, we first provide a brief literature review of leadership studies, police leadership literature and the leadership-as-practice perspectives. Second, we briefly look at contextual factors, such as police structure and police culture, and their relationship to leadership practice. Third, we outline the methodological choices and the context of our study—the Norwegian Police Service (NPS). Thereafter, we provide our results, discussion and conclusion.

Leadership as practice

The leadership-as-practice approach to leadership studies represents an alternative to the mainstream leadership literature that informs leaders on what they ought to do in order to lead effectively (Arnulf and Larsen 2015). In a practice-based approach, the focus is on the daily practice of leadership and how actors ‘get on’ with the work of leadership as well as the emergent and dynamic processes of these practices (Whittington 1996; Chia and Holt 2006; Crevani and Endrissat 2016; Dovey *et al.* 2016).

The police leadership literature has, moreover, focussed on the individual police leader rather than their leadership (Bratton and Malinowski 2008; Eterno and Silverman 2010; Pearson-Goff and Herrington 2014; Flynn and Herrington 2015) and continue to increase the conceptualisation of managerial orientation (Davis and Bailey 2018). Transformational leadership has been the basis of several influential police leadership studies (Fleming 2015),

but the preferred choice of transformational over transactional leadership does not account for the policing contexts (Cockcroft 2014).

Shared leadership is based on collectivism, collaboration and participation in a holistic sense (Gronn 2002), and, therefore, it shifts focus from the individual leader to a community context. However, the quasi-militaristic rank structure in policing leadership and the power dynamics of 'rank knows best' are neglected in distributed leadership contexts (Steinheider and Wuestewald 2008; Silvestri 2011; Davis 2018).

Caless and Tong's (2015) empirical work on police leadership does provide a picture of the current understanding of strategic leadership practice in Europe. Still, we find that the leadership-as-practice approach goes further, as it explores leadership as an emergent phenomenon in the complex and dynamic processes of the creation of relationships between leaders and employees in particular contexts and practices (Day *et al.* 2014; Uhl-Bien and Ospina 2012; Gardner *et al.* 2010; Avolio *et al.* 2009; DeRue and Ashford 2010). Leadership needs to be acknowledged as a collective achievement (Crevani and Endrissat 2016; Dovey *et al.* 2016). Here, practice is characterised by common language, communication and physical expression; it is where leaders and followers together make sense of situations and construct ways of relating and acting (Cunliffe 2001; Shotter and Cunliffe 2003). Thus, leadership as practice highlights the fact that leadership is related to the social and cultural constructions that are relational and collective, situated and culturally defined as well as material and emotional (Chia and Holt 2006; Raelin, 2016). Therefore, the approach addresses the simultaneity of practice, where practice guides both leadership activities and those involved and where leadership is the practice itself (Schatzki 2001; Nicolini 2012).

Moreover, a leadership-as-practice perspective relies heavily on the practitioners' sense of reality and the sensemaking of these realities (Law and Urry 2004; Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006; Pye, 2005; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Weick (1995) famously recognised that the

sensemakers' sense of their own selves as well as their external worlds is interdependent and dynamic, which is addressed by Pye (2005) as 'sensemaking in action'. The emerging dynamics of practices are highlighted by using such verbs as 'belonging', 'understanding' and 'knowing'; the unit of analysis is the practitioners, and the practices function as connections in action (Gherardi 2012; Gherardi and Strati 2012). Nicolini (2003:7) defines practice 'as what persons say, imagine, conceive and produce, and think while attempting to carry out these activities'. A practice refers to the total sum of shared behaviours, traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and behaviours (Whittington 2006; Orlikowski 2010). Consequently, 'zooming in' is about studying the cultural dynamics, the processes of thinking and experiencing as well as the behaviours related to a collective understanding of reality; in contrast, 'zooming out' is about the function, extent and goals, and—from a macro perspective—about structures, politics, the profession, bureaucracy and the state, all of which must be integrated in order to understand the practice (Nicolini 2012).

In our previous studies on Norwegian police leaders do, we found that police leaders are concerned about the everyday practice of policing, such as creating a trusting working environment and culture; mastering their role as police leaders; role modelling; struggling for resources; encouraging loyalty; facilitating the best possible working conditions for their staff; and being hands-on and available. Moreover, they are concerned with ensuring quality and making local adjustments to everyday leadership by manoeuvring space (Filstad *et al.* 2018; Karp *et al.* 2018; Filstad *et al.* 2020). Here, in accordance with a police leadership of practice approach, this study also explores issues of police structure and police culture as well as how they influence police leadership practices. Hence, we investigate the interrelations between what police leaders do and why in developing a professional leadership practice. Next, we provide a brief review of police structure and culture in Norway.

Police structure and police culture

Some argue that the public sector often makes leadership particularly challenging (Isett *et al.* 2013; Van der Voet *et al.* 2016). The NPS is a quasi-military organisation, in which ordering, communication, loyalty, as well as lines of command and control are incorporated in its language and behaviour. The Police are uniformed, use a lot of cultural symbols and artefacts and refer to themselves as being part of the police corps/squad. Police leaders need, on the one hand, to deal with an organisational structure that is hierarchical, bureaucratic, instrumental, stable, predictable and controlled, and which, therefore, has a bureaucratic and controlling logic. On the other hand, policing is operative, mostly unpredictable, hands-on, dynamic, relational and independent; it, therefore, requires leadership more than control and relies upon an operational and cultural logic (Johannessen 2015). Police leadership is about balancing these two somewhat conflicting logics in creating its leadership practice (Filstad *et al.*, 2020; Filstad 2020) within public organisations that often are ‘characterized by multiple objectives and diffuse power structures, often extending beyond organizational boundaries’ (Denis *et al.* 2005:449). Thus, the contemporary policing landscape necessitates new approaches to leadership as opposed to command-based leadership (Davis and Bailey 2018).

Recent police reforms in Norway and Europe have called for greater centralisation, effectiveness and structural rationalisation (Fyfe *et al.* 2013; Christensen 2018; Ellefsen 2018). Accordingly, the Norwegian police reforms have used organisational structures to achieve reform goals; moreover, the new design employs a bureaucratic and structural logic to restructure the cultural and operational logic of the established practice. The police leaders’ autonomy to make changes to practices—taking into account the tensions between bureaucratic and operational practices—is challenged due to stronger organisational control without addressing the police culture(s) (Filstad *et al.* 2019; Gundhus 2017).

Police culture is a complex phenomenon and involves all that is known yet not visible or explicit in the police organisation (Charman 2017). Police culture is different from police structure, is more comprehensive and history-based; it develops and manifests itself as stable over time (Hatch 2001; Schein 2010; Alvesson 2013 and Charman 2017). Police culture is about values, basic assumptions and a shared meaning of reality—often symbolised through artefacts; it provides goals, values, norms and common understandings. Hatch (2001) argues that the cultural dynamics of symbols, interpretations and meaning-making become integrated in a practice. The culture defines the practice, and it stabilises the practice. Members of, for instance, a particular leadership practice will value stability because it makes sense and provides predictability as a common understanding of reality (Schein 2010). The police have a strong sense of ‘us’ and look out for each other during difficult times. Accordingly, a police culture is characterised by strong commitment, collectivism and identification with the mission of the police (Christensen and Crank 2001; Paoline 2004; Cockcroft 2013; Filstad *et al.* 2018).

In the literature on police culture, the relationship between police culture and police behaviour is often ignored and deemed to have limited relevance for exploring changing police practices (Cockcroft, 2013, 2019). Instead, the discussion on police culture is often used to describe negative police behaviours, with the intention of seeking ways to change police culture (Rowe and Macauley 2018). In this context, the fact that culture is constructed and manifests itself in order to make sense of reality is usually ignored (Waddington *et al.* 2013; Cockcroft 2013, 2019), as is the fact that culture is difficult and almost impossible to change (Alvesson 2013; Schein 2010). Reiner (2017) argues that police culture is not a primary foundation for police practice but is interdependent with practice—that is, structural pressures shape both culture and practice. Hence, cultural dynamics are influenced by structures, and structures are influenced by the cultural dynamics integrated in police leadership practices (Filstad 2020).

More recent literature on police culture focuses on the prevalence of several types of police cultures within different policing practices (Chan 1997; Cockcroft 2013; Reiner 2017; Rowe and Macauley 2018; Waddington *et al.* 2013). Yet new studies of police culture need to acknowledge the transformations undertaken in the police to confront new kinds of crimes and not be stuck in an older era of policing (Loftus 2009; Reiner 2017). Empirical studies have also demonstrated the pervasiveness and continued influence of police culture on policing and leadership practices (Chan 1997; Loftus, 2009). Police officers are driven by a sense of mission and their relationship to leaders is characterised by street-level resistance (Gundhus, 2017). Police culture is also characterised by a learning-by-doing approach. Arguments following the learning-by-doing approach in policing posit that police officers exhibit a suspicious and cynical disposition due to their isolation from the rest of society. Loftus (2010) refers to these arguments as a sociological orthodoxy that undermines police culture as positively affecting police identities and their sense of mission. Hence, previous police culture research fails on safeguarding the complexity between police actions and police culture. Instead, police culture is blamed in cases of bad police work or bad policing behaviours.

In addressing the cultural and structural contexts for leadership practices, the need for ‘zooming in and ‘zooming out’, as argued by Nicolini (2012), is fruitful in our studies and analysis. We acknowledge the complexity involved when analysing the cultural dynamics in leadership practice. In fact, within a leadership-as-practice approach, cultural dynamics and cultural dimensions/conditions are integrated to understand reality collectively as well to acknowledge the integrated interconnections between culture and practice. Hence, we argue that studies including not just what police leaders do but why need to address the cultural and structural contexts that constitute the leadership practice.

The study

We used participant observations and interviews in our study. We observed and interviewed a total of 63 police managers and spoke informally with a number of subordinates and leaders. We observed their daily interactions with subordinates, which included—but was not limited to—small talk, relationship work, meetings, work behind closed doors, computer work, phone calls, politicking, solving dilemmas and hands-on police work. Thereafter, we interviewed the police managers and spoke to subordinates about our observations and about their managers. Thus, we used a variety of methods in the study.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1: Empirical methods employed in the study

Bryman (2011) observes that given that much of leadership studies are about what leaders and employees do, it is surprising that the participant observation method is rarely used. Although participant observation is time- and resource-consuming, as well as demanding for researchers *in situ*, we regard observation as a method that provides the best information on what leaders do, their practice as well as the interplay between contextual factors and leadership; moreover, it offers insights into the dynamics of leadership processes. Observation is beneficial because we seek to understand a phenomenon, not a population. We aimed to bridge the gap between theorising and lived experience by highlighting the details of organisational life on the ground (Orlikowski 2010). However, the method is challenging. It is one thing to observe leaders and their interactions, but observing leadership is a different endeavour. How do we know when leadership is exercised or when to observe and validate it? In certain instances, this may be obvious, whereas in others, not so much; however, there is room for interpretation.

Our observation of the police leaders was followed by semi-structured interviews with each observed leader, which gave us the required flexibility not only to ask all of the leaders the same structured questions but also to interpret and discuss observations. We did not expect to acquire a complete understanding of the leaders' actions and interactions but to clarify various processes that constitute a pattern of practice. We followed an inductive approach, which provided us the flexibility and open mindedness to study what unfolded in what police leaders said and what we observed as to what activities they undertake and when, their relationships with employees, leaders, external etc. and what they use most time on/where involved in. Obviously, our observation notes represented some analytical challenges. We attempted to seek out and conceptualise the patterns and structures in the leaders' practice. We generated codes that we subsequently developed according to the propositions described herein, thereby leading to the collection of more data as a result of more focussed questions asked and themes observed. The challenge was that we did not know exactly what we were studying before we completed a significant amount of analysis. Thus, we had to test different propositions before being able to identify the pattern to which other themes related, which enabled us to identify important findings that we will presented and discuss in the next section.

Results and discussion

In line with a practice-based approach, we first present our data in the form of narratives from leadership practices. The narratives of John's and Chris's (pseudonyms) leadership practices represent first-line leaders—that is, those police leaders who lead operational units. In our further analysis (the discussion), we incorporate these narratives in the total findings but without us specifically referring to the participants' names and positions. Thus, the data on police leaders of all levels and their leadership practices is included, representing most police work of investigations, preventing crime, patrols and counterterrorism.

First, we provide a brief account of Chris' day:

Chris

Chris is surrounded by a lot of laughter and joking at the daily briefing. He is tall, muscular, and very visible and is outspoken both out on operations and as a member of the first-line managers' leadership team at the police station. He is the centre of attention and gives the impression of being both 'one of the boys' but also a role model for his unit on how to perform good policing. At the briefing, he sits informally at the front table, where the leader of another unit is leading the briefing. He shows images of 'villains' that they need to look out for when out patrolling. Chris interrupts and explains about changes in the shift teams, making it clear that they'd only be talking about loaning people out to other units. He says that there are a lot of problems with reduced staff numbers right now, but that he doesn't want this to cause uncertainty among them. Accordingly, he says he will fight on their behalf and not accept that they need to move to another unit. 'You guys have suffered enough disruption and changes now,' he says. Suddenly everyone is rushing out on patrol at full speed (night shift). Everyone stands up and gets hold of their equipment; there's a bit of rushing around, and Chris is telling the officers who they will be partnered with out on patrol. He also laughs and tells one officer to take me (the researcher) with them. This officer is known as 'the academic'. (He is doing a master's degree.) Chris says: 'that will work well; you two definitely have got plenty to talk about'. Chris has a good laugh and is friendly and comradely, exuding energy and enthusiasm.

Chris's leadership practice

Chris has seventeen years of patrol experience in the police, and his leadership is exercised out on operations. For Chris, the challenges stemming from the latest police reforms include more paperwork and reports, in which Chris finds a hindrance to his leadership. He explains that you cannot be a leader at this level and not be out together with your unit. Members of his team tell us that Chris has a vision for the unit. He makes it obvious that they must be the best and that they must be out and serve the public. They have complete confidence that Chris 'has their backs'. When new recruits join the unit, he uses experienced officers as 'culture carriers'. The

working environment implies that surrounding factors, for instance, the reform is not so important. There is some talk about outdated and missing equipment, but the police officers explain that the unit's working environment trumps these concerns. Many members are young and eager. The younger officers say that it is not always true of the older officers. Chris represents the culture from a former unit, before the police reform, which is operations-based and action-oriented. The staff talk about a former working culture whereby they looked out for each other, socialised together and got to know each other well by working so closely together. They were used to the senior officers in the old unit being available and they had a high level of freedom in their jobs. 'It's up to you what you do at work, what you take on/don't take on. And so you must take the initiative—for example, proactive service—contact people who are working on preventive measures to collaborate', explains one of the officers we are out with on patrol.

Next, we present a brief account of John's day:

John

John greets us in the control room and says that the dust has finally settled—it's been one thing after another since 06:00 hrs. He tells us that he's already had someone sobbing in his office. He waves to the officers who have gone off duty and are now in the day room and welcomes the duty team to the briefing—he says they follow up with things well. He sits behind his computer. There's laughter about a crazy woman they arrested, he smiles along with it, reads on the screen, looks up and asks if anyone knows some good people they ought to employ. The leaders will take notice of this—he emphasises that the social element is important. John informs everyone about the guidelines for free weekends; he says they must be strict about this and that they must be trustworthy. He informs everyone that the debate about shift arrangements is now concluded—the decisions have been made. This is how it's going to be! There are no protests. John also says he doesn't support reorganising the shift system again so soon after the last time, but several unit leaders are struggling with under staffing. John asks if there are any questions. There is no response.

John explains that one of his officers has worked over the entire weekend without mentioning to him that he got a call from the human resources department before the weekend to say that he might be getting fired. The officer in question had just returned to work after one year of suspension. John has contacted colleague support and talked to the officer's lawyer. He asks me: What does this say about leadership? He is extremely frustrated and says that he cannot perform his role as leader if he is not kept informed. He says he feels as though his wings have been clipped.

Later the next day, John asks his own unit to stay behind after the joint briefing at the station. He tells the officers about the officer who has now been fired—first a reprimand and then the standard personnel procedure on these types of cases. John says he's spent a lot of time talking to the officer in question, and he has talked to another colleague. He explains that he has really tried to follow the matter up. One of the young women says that it's important for them to show loyalty to the fired officer as a colleague and that they should be savvy about how they use social media from now on in order to look after him in a personal capacity. John gets a bit emotional. One of the union representatives in their unit is leaving, and the young woman says to the others that they must be sensible and that they must soak up all the knowledge they can before people leave. John says that they can tell him in confidence if they're planning on finding a new job. He will keep it to himself and understands if they want to apply positions other places. It seems that everyone is really sorry for the fired officer, even though a lot of people don't really know what has happened. John tells me that he's left it up to him to tell people about it himself. But John does say to the others that what he did wasn't good, but that he deserves better follow-up internally at the Police Station.

John's leadership practice

John is not necessarily 'one of the gang'; he is rather someone who sets the direction and has the respect and confidence of his team. As a person, he is not dominant; he is a supervisor and facilitator, which appears important in his leadership practice. He has over 20 years of experience in the role and still spends a lot of time out patrolling with his unit and explains that

he has to work behind the scenes to enable his unit to do its best. He says there are a lot of personnel issues, conflicts that have to be resolved, complaints from the public and so on. He attempts to shield his unit from this as much as possible. He is aware of the importance of creating a positive working environment; there are always a few alpha males whom he has to bring down a peg or two. He emphasises that everyone must contribute based on their own expertise and that he should see each of them during their everyday duties. His team discuss a complicated system and how decisions are made by some people 'upstairs', which causes challenges for them. They also mention that John spends a lot of time sorting out who goes on car patrol together. They think that all the unit leaders do the same. There is a good atmosphere, a little light teasing and a lot of laughter and chat about sports and dieting in the control room. Out on patrol, they praise John, and everyone wants to be in his unit. He has everything very much under control and listens to everyone. He always has time for everyone. Already in April, he has a plan right up to August that takes care of everyone's holiday plans. His police officers do not agree with the new shift arrangements, which have apparently been decided by the leadership. They say that John could not manage to get them changed, even though they know that he agrees with them that the old shift arrangements were better. However, they are confident that John put their case forward but was voted down in the unit leaders' meeting.

Police leadership practices

Chris's and John's leadership practices can be described in terms of how they conduct police work, they handle relationships and make sense of and negotiate matters. They are both proactive and hands-on, and both fight for their unit externally and take care of their staff. They are both confident with regards to what results in good policing and are motivated by the police mission; however, the question of how to perform leadership is more challenging. Both are

viewed as good leaders by their subordinates. They do not question their leaders but instead blame the lack of support they receive from more senior leaders. Many subordinates refer to Chris and John as ‘being one of us’, which we find accounts for many first-line managers in our study. Many first-line managers leadership practices in the police serve as examples of the dynamic and relational processes between leader and employees, which create a collective community of belonging with common achievements that is in line with what’s important for leadership practices (Day *et al.* 2014; Uhl-Bien and Ospina 2012; Gardner *et al.* 2010; Avolio *et al.* 2009; DeRue and Ashford 2010; Crevani and Endrissat 2016; Dovey *et al.* 2016). We recognise the operational and cultural logic described earlier in these leadership practices as well as the newer literature on police culture arguing the positive affect culture has on police identity and sense of mission (Lofthus 2010; Reiner 2017; Rowe and Macauley 2018). Police officers and police leaders in our study continuously repeat that they need to focus on the mission, that they are there for the public and that their drive and motivation is about making a positive difference for people.

However, when first-line managers refer to management, they exclude themselves from being part of it and, as a result, so do their subordinates. Moreover, they refer to management in negative terms but not in a very specific way. In a quasi-military organisation, it is not always clear who has made the decision or ‘given the order’ (Filstad 2020). The result is a sort of blaming management culture, especially at the operational level, but it is also quite visible at all levels as well. Another possible explanation for this negative view of management is that first-line managers themselves are often operational, and before the reform, many of them did not have personnel responsibilities for their unit. Police culture literature that highlight street police resistance as well as the gap between street managers and police management may have a point (Reuss-Ianni and Ianni 1983; Chan 1997), but as we will discuss later, these relationships are far more complex than that police culture literature gives them credit for.

In meetings with police officer representatives from all units at this police station, it was not clear whom specifically they blamed. Sometimes, it was the police directorate, the police station chief, the police commissioner, the HR department or first-line managers from other (often competing) units. Importantly, the fact that they compete and that their leaders are protecting them by not moving them to other units create more competition and a sense of their unit being unique. Also, leaders are protecting themselves by not referring to themselves as leaders when decisions are negative, which can reinforce their leadership practice as having an ‘us against them’ mentality.

The legitimacy of police leaders also relies on them being role models of good policing. Police officers are loyal to ranks and do not question orders from higher ranked leaders—they do as they are told. However, internally, they are open and quite critical. Even we, as researchers, found all police leaders at all levels to be surprisingly open and critical. One police leader explains his own leadership in the following way:

Presence is everything. [You must] be able to tell stories and create new stories together with your unit. You must know policing; policing is a craft. You must be very much aware of what sort of signals you convey and what you perceive as being important enough to set on the agenda. Behaviour is stronger than words, so what you do really matters. Be available. Be present and visible at important arenas. You must use dialog in order to influence because police officers are knowledge workers. Police leaders have to know how to work with people.

We also find that different leadership practices at all levels share a number of similarities, which we identify as important practice dynamics for the establishment of police leadership practices. That said, we also find differences among police leaders and how they practice leadership. For instance, Chris is not a great planner, and for the most part, he focusses on being out on patrol. John, in contrast, plans ahead, is in control, writes the reports needed and then goes out on patrol. Chris is louder and more outspoken, whereas John is not so much. Still, both of them

are considered to be very good leaders by their unit, and both units say they are happy to be in each's unit.

Another example of differences is the leadership practice of the police station chief (level 2) consisting of level 3 leaders and one appointed deputy. One interesting observation happened during a meeting, in which the police chief left halfway through and the deputy to take over. I was surprised by how quiet the members were when the chief himself was leading the meeting, even though the topics were challenging and previous similar meetings we have observed with other leaders have included much discussion. When the station chief left and his deputy took over, the dynamic of the group changed completely. Suddenly, everyone participated in the discussion, and some of them were quite outspoken and critical. The chief, in a later interview, explained that in order for the leadership practice to develop and be effective, he needed his leaders to stop being negative and feeling frustrated about the reform. The decision had been made, so as leaders they now need to look forward and to stop feeling grief about the passing of what he called 'good old days'. The deputy explained that the police chief had had a hard time taking over this leadership practice and that he himself had used a different approach. He also thinks he had more legitimacy representing 'the old' way. Finally, the leaders (in our interviews) talked about grief and about not being able to communicate their frustration and that their competence and experience were never addressed or acknowledged on how they had conducted good policing earlier in their district. Some of them were aware of such a 'silence', which they argued was the result of how the leadership practice had developed.

We find differences between police leaders and how they create their leadership practices. These differences are a combination of who the leader and his and her employees are, their common interpretation of good policing and the structural and cultural conditions which are integrated in the leadership practices. That said, our study does not enable us to say what good police leadership is and what is not, acknowledging its complexity. Instead, our study

contributes to with what we find to be important practice dynamics that can increase our knowledge about how police leaders construct their leadership practices. Still, each leadership practice needs to be explored in order to understand what constitutes leadership practices in the police. These practice dynamics will be discussed next; we include the data we find most relevant from our analysis.

Practice dynamics in leadership practices

The practice dynamics we identify as most relevant are the practice dynamics of producing police work, the characteristics of social and cultural relations within these practices, the interpretations and sensemaking of what the practices means as well as the negotiations conducting within these practices in order to advance common policing goals. These practice dynamics are interrelated within leadership practices, and they need to be understood as ongoing dynamics that are integrated into everyday practices. These practice dynamics are ongoing and emerging processes, and they need to be explained using the verbs ‘producing’, ‘relating’, ‘interpreting/sensemaking’ and ‘negotiating’. These practice dynamics serve to explain what constitutes leadership practices in the police.

Producing

Producing refers to the ongoing everyday activities of policing and the common and collective achievements in leadership practices. It is about the ‘doing’ of police leadership practices. The dynamics and action-orientation of policing are recognisable in our study. Police leaders are seldom found in their office; they are out on patrols, in meetings or checking out locations or operations; they are talking and walking with colleagues, popping into different offices, talking

on the phone, reading mail or using their computer. Police leaders at all levels practice an open-door policy; they are involved in activities in open office landscapes, meet over lunch, in the gym, in the locker rooms, or during task force activities. They are used to multitasking—for example, talking on the phone while leading the roll call or in meetings—but, moreover, we find that they rely more on verbal communication skills than written ones. The increased demand for written reports, digital solutions, as continuously giving information about ongoing operative activities, and increased scorecard reporting found in the recent police reform follows the structural logic (Johannessen 2015; Filstad 2020). The typical response is to blame the system so as to create an even stronger ‘us vs. them’ mentality within leadership practices (Schein, 2010; Hatch 2001). Also, since communication skills, according to our informants, are the most important skills in policing, and communication training is a substantial part of the police education. Such a finding is confirmed in other studies, in which communication was also seen as an important skill for being a good police officer (Charman 2017; Willis and Mastrofski 2017). Consequently, for them, good policing is about communicating, preferably oral and face-to-face communication, and avoiding time-consuming paperwork. Following Lofthus’s (2010) argument, we find that this belief is not about police culture negatively affecting police behaviour; rather, it is about police culture questioning the value of time-consuming paperwork at the expense of performing good policing.

Policing is a collective activity; police officers work mostly in pairs and express the importance of being able to discuss and take up matters with their leaders and colleagues. Therefore, being available is an important part of a police leader’s job. Paying attention to delivering what is required by the centralised entities while also being loyal to one’s own unit and staff is a dilemma that needs to be tackled every day. For example, John did not confront his leader when he was not informed about the progress in the case involving the fired officer because they both knew that they had to follow the HR-departments rules on these cases. Also,

John and Chris fight for their units but without criticising by their leader. Blaming leader culture does often not involve blaming the closest leader, with some exceptions, one described earlier in this discussion. Moreover, most employees are quite happy about their leader. Police leadership practices appear to be characterised by leading ‘downwards’ rather than leading ‘upwards’ leadership. Further, ‘sideways’ leadership is also limited, as leaders often fight amongst themselves to obtain resources; therefore, ‘silo thinking’ is adopted in order to create the necessary manoeuvring space. Our findings are similar with Haake *et al.*’s (2015) study of Swedish police leaders: leadership practice coincides more with subordinate expectations, and, therefore, official policy has a limited impact on practitioners’ views.

The bureaucratic structure of the police is also organised in accordance to other silos (e.g. patrols, investigations and crime prevention) in organisational charts. In fact, silo thinking can be characterised as cultural, particularly in how police leaders are expected to ‘fight’ over limited resources, as structural conditions tend to address policing as stable and predictable as opposed to unpredictable, complex and dynamic (Pearson-Goff and Herrington 2014; Davis 2014; Flynn and Herrington 2015). Talking about cultural dynamics, which is in line with a leadership-as-practice approach, is fruitful, since the cultural dynamics of leadership practices might have the capacity to change, as police culture is neither unified nor universal in the whole police service (Chan 2007).

The police reforms have substantially disrupted the practice dynamic of producing police work. Instead, the rise in the number of what many police leaders argue are new bureaucratic structural barriers, as well as fewer resources, has resulted in an increased focus on the next practice dynamic of relating and social interaction to protect their staff.

Relating

Relating and social interactions in policing seem to be based on informal relations between leaders and employees while working, for example, on the mobile task forces, at roll calls or in meetings. The importance of the collegial and social environment is often emphasised by the leaders themselves. Accordingly, police officers continuously repeat, also when times are hard (such as in the reform), that the collegial working environment trumps all. Interpersonal skills of eloquence, positive attitude and working with the community is accordingly highlighted as the most impressive characteristics of high performing colleagues in the police (Willis and Mastrofski 2017). Policing is physical; formal training is on regular basis together with the unit, and leaders and officers attend sports arrangements arranged by the police, sport teams and gyms for general training and they all occasionally meet in the locker rooms. This affects how they communicate with each other, especially since a lot of the conversations concerning leadership also involve talking about participating in running or cycling races as well as comparing notes on new records they have obtained, scores and sports equipment. Therefore, communities of policing are built on more than just their formal roles in the police service. They often have close friendship relationships with colleagues, often due to their 24/7 shifts.

A sense of camaraderie is the hallmark of much of the social relationships we observed. Chapman's (2017) research provides strong evidence for comradeship and commitment. For police leaders, it was important to create a common sense of belonging among the officers, which acted as a kind of social glue. The police leaders' ability to be positive role model and encourage good policing behaviour was important to create positive leadership practices. One may argue that police leaders become the 'practical authors' of their own leadership practice (Cunliffe 2001; Shotter and Cunliffe 2003), in which the construction of practices relies on informality, humour, openness as well as promoting social relations that are relevant to good practices.

Role modelling is relational, as police leaders model not only who they are but an ideal police leader, often being a heroic and masculine male (Silvestri 2019). We find that police leaders aim more for good role modelling behaviours in accordance to the police mission and on how to serve the public (Filstad *et al.*, 2018). We recognise gender differences but not substantial enough to make a point here other than that female police leaders often use other terms than role modelling on own leadership behaviour. We have also made a point of describing Chris as tall and muscular. We therefore support the concern of researchers failing to acknowledge the diversity that exist between women and amongst women and men where identities emerge and are more complex (Silvestri 2019). We also find that leadership as practice represents an important perspective on exploring intersectionality by zooming in on the relational dynamics with the possibility of accounting for diversity.

Police leaders create a practice in which they continually balance their own leadership practice with the demands of the leaders above them and those of the entire organisation. A contrast emerges between humorous, informal and relational forms of communication, on the one hand, and following orders, on the other hand. When we contrasted this to normative leadership models, relational can be understood as transformational leadership, while transactional leadership is typified by such formulations as ‘well it’s been decided, so we’ll do it!’ The need for combining transformational and transactional leadership is argued for by Cockcroft (2014), as NPM and their leadership models rely on one recipe for leadership. On the contrary, practices are both learnt and clarified through experience, which continuously involves the dilemma of balancing a bureaucratic logic—that is, following orders in a quasi-military organisation—with the relatively open, transparent and caretaking logic, which includes everyday practices concerned with performing good and collective policing. The command-based leadership is task-oriented (as opposed to relationally oriented) and reflects the authority of rank (Davis and Bailey 2018), which mirrors the centralised top-down hierarchy

of the police. The quasi-military authority culture of rank constructs and reconstructs conventions of ‘know your place’ in the hierarchy (Steinheider and Wuestewald 2008; Silvestri 2011; Davis 2018). For the most part, police leaders work their way up through the ranks internally, through various levels, in order to reach a senior management position (Roberts *et al.* 2016); they are often recruited on the basis of being ‘the foremost among equals’ (Karp *et al.* 2018). The police culture literature unilaterally focuses upon the same complaint: the absence of more individual adaptations to normative practices as well as the new recruits who represent change are seldom supported (Charman 2017). In order to understand how the culture is learned by new recruits, the social nature of identity formation must be appreciated, since we construct our identities in relations to the groups with which we interact (Charman 2017). In leadership practices, experiencing camaraderie first-hand and being aware of the importance of social relationships and caring for each other form a common identity and a strong sense of belonging, which is fundamental for creating a common sense of reality (Filstad *et al.* 2019).

Interpreting/sensemaking

Interpreting and sensemaking are integrated in social, cultural and contextual relations and ongoing practice dynamics. Different interpretations lead to sensemaking when individuals construct their own sense of self as interdependent and dynamic within leadership practices (Weick 1995). In ambiguous contexts, such as policing, there are several possibilities of loose coupling between contradictory demands, where leadership practices can construct discretion based on how they relate to one another as well as how they ignore certain demands and constraints (Schaefer, 2019). Sensemaking is, therefore, about creating a collective sense of the reality of the practice, where professional language, artefacts, stories, symbols, jokes,

experiences, education and interpretations of the police mission create belonging and identification with the leadership practice.

We find that being a police officer is strongly related to values and motivation. Such a sentiment is related to both homogeneity and a common sense of the importance of the police mission. Accordingly, it's the legal and symbolic power of the police that they strongly identify with. Role modelling is about identity. It's about who the police officers want to be as internally related to in their interpretation of good policing and what makes sense to them as to how they should appear and create trust in the public.

Role modelling builds a collective image and opens a sensemaking path to achieving the mission of the police as part of its practice. The leaders themselves argue that police leadership is about ensuring the best possible conditions for their team (which is what we discussed above). The leaders also claim that the motivation and goal of being a police officer is about being able to make a difference in society; the leaders also appreciate the unpredictable, hands-on and action-oriented aspects of actively carrying out the mission of the police. That is what makes sense to them and motivates them in their daily work. Still, we find that loyalty to the line of command also provides the reality of policing.

Their interpretations as police leaders are influenced by learning how to lead in relation to two opposed bureaucratic and operational logics; therefore, leading involves being able to deal with this dilemma. Thus, in order to construct leadership practices, police leaders need to be able to construct a common-sense understanding of their leadership realities. Consequently, combining the two opposed logics is an everyday challenge for police leaders; they may solve the problem by openly discussing their disagreements, blaming the system, discussing how they could be smart and strategic in order to ensure and find local adjustments and so on. Hence, their loyalty can be described as comprehensive, historical and manifested in the police culture over time (Alvesson 2013; Hatch 2001; Schein 2010).

Negotiating

Negotiating refers to power and politics, which, according to a practice-based perspective, are integrated and embedded in leadership practice (Clegg *et al.* 2006; Gherardi 2011). Sensemaking is a dynamic process that involves sensegiving, which refers to political processes and enacted powers of influencing or negotiating the sensemaking of others (Hardy *et al.*, 2003; Maitlis and Lawrence 2007). Police leaders acting more or less proactive when fighting for resources is visible at all leadership levels. They ‘play the game’ and are strategic on what to report on to avoid more detailed control. Leaders are also strategic about how they translate strategies or priorities to ensure adjustment to own leadership practice, and, thus, we find that they actively engage in these processes. Negotiating as a practice dynamic is about positioning, status, knowledge, interests, career and training but also about the negotiation of meaning and identification. In public organisations, the power structures are often diffuse (Denis *et al.* 2005). Still, the NPS is, moreover, loyal (externally), and compared to, for instance, the health sector in Norway, you will the health sector protesting and using the media to express their frustration. The NPS does not. That’s probably why police leaders do not talk about using power, politics or even negotiations, but they do behave politically. Two police leaders explain this behaviour as related to the police reform:

It is a fight of stealing interesting new tasks and resources; that is very predictable. It happens all the time. And to prepare my staff, you don’t say anything explicit, but we work to get something that is stated between the lines; that’s how it is. And we have to be prepared and get our views heard; now everyone works politically on all levels.

We are very loyal to the intentional behind the reform. But for the demands we had that were not possible, we had to find our own way because it was not possible.

We find that negotiating has much to do with participating in and understanding politics and in order to create a manoeuvring space in leadership practices at all leadership levels. We do not find this to be cynical response, as stated in the police culture literature referred to earlier; in NPS, the gap between the street-level subculture and police management culture is not that visible. The ‘rank knows best’ is example of symbolic powers (Charman 2017). Here we find only a few examples of police leaders that represent the ‘old school’ of chiefs more than performing leadership. Dividing between the ‘street cops’ and ‘management cops’—based on the work of Reuss-Ianni and Ianni (1983)—ignores different police functions, the existence of multiple cultures, the active cultural role of each member and the importance of situating culture within a continuously changing context of police work (Chan 1997; Reiner 2017; Waddington *et al.* 2013). We therefore support the argument that the debate of cynicism and street level resistance over back-office/management has more to do with the legal and symbolic powers the police carry (Chapman 2017).

Police leaders struggle against the bureaucratic system and the ongoing police reform in their efforts to perform good police work; in this context, the danger is that the bureaucratic influence leads to unproductive, unmotivated and non-dynamic work practices (Krimmel and Lindemuth 2001). The studied police leaders learn bureaucratic logic; over time, the bureaucratic structures not only influence the police culture but also enhance their sense of identification and belonging to a practice, their social identity of being police officers and their pride in being part of their mission. We observe that this also brings about situations in which police leaders give orders but also blame the system, since the opposite logic also represents unpredictability; they have to respond to both political initiatives and action-oriented policing, not knowing what to expect.

The police need to decide when to act or not to act and what actions and decisions to undertake, as they know that they will be blamed for poor police work (Klocklars 1985; Rowe

and Macauley 2018). Hence, they share their frustration regarding ‘stealing’ from other districts but recognise this to be part of the political games. Negotiating, competing with other units and districts, sharing frustration internally but not externally and creating local adjustments and local priorities are political processes that focus on serving one’s own interests (Filstad 2014). A large number of the observed leaders definitely prioritise creating the necessary room to manoeuvre with regard to their own leadership practice, which is also a result of struggling to acquire resources and negotiating in the best interests of their own practice. Thus, they can be said to participate in politics as well as power struggles in order to create room for action, thereby being able to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills that will enable them to develop their own leadership practice to ensure the delivery of good policing.

Conclusion

In this study, we investigated police leadership through the epistemological lens of leadership as practice in order to understand what police leaders actually do as opposed to what they ought to do, and why police leaders practice as they do. This was done to uncover how the structural and cultural aspects, as well as the police leaders’ professional practice, mutually influence one another. Our study demonstrated the emergent and dynamic nature of police leaders’ construction of their own leadership practice—with an opportunity to move beyond examining cultural and structural conditions when identifying several practice dynamics. We recognised important structural, cultural and contextual factors as integrated conditions and dynamics in the collective leader-employee relationships that constitute police leadership practices. The most important practice dynamics that represented the everyday dynamics and emergent nature of police leadership practices were producing, relating, interpreting/sensemaking and negotiating. The practice dynamics were evident concerning the relationship among

participants in the police practices and involved the following aspects: ‘taking care of each other’; ‘us against them’; interpretations and sensemaking of the reality’ within the practice; production of policing as a collective achievement; the language, symbols, and artefacts of the police as well as the police mission related to belonging/identifying with the practice; and the negotiations of power and politics in fighting for resources to ensure the continuously construction of manoeuvring space.

Our study contributes with new theoretical knowledge on what police leaders do and why. The need for researchers to study police leaders’ everyday practice and the construction of police leadership practices represents an important alternative approach to understanding police leadership. We also suggest that the leadership element in everyday activities is, in itself, worth studying. We identify four practice dynamics that can serve as basis for future studies of police leadership practice in particular, but also more general leadership practices. The leadership-as-practice approach is an area that requires further theoretical development to accommodate the numerous normative leadership theories on what leaders ought to do. Our advice to leaders is that only a few universal answers exist in the field of leadership. Thus, we departed from positivistic approaches that aim to produce objective answers. Managers must find their own way together with their employees, and they must continue to learn and work hard in developing their professional practice in the exercise of leadership.

Our research has several limitations. Conducting inductive research is challenging, particularly in terms of the numerous variables that need to be studied during the observation process. Also, studying practice dynamics are particularly challenging due to interrelationship between the nature of culture and the dynamic and changing nature of practice and how they are interrelated. Although there is room for interpretation and uncertainty in terms of what practice dynamics that are more important and how leadership practice dynamics relate to the context of policing, we believe that inductive and observational studies are worth the risk, given

the upsides. The need of an alternative approach to police leadership is critical to ensuring good police leadership in the changing landscape of policing. We find that a leadership-of-practice perspective fulfils important requirements of how to conduct future research. Given that leadership practices need to be investigated as relational, social, cultural and contextual, more in-depth studies are needed.

Our study is limited to the context of the NPS and identifies four integrated practice dynamics. We did not address diversity, such as gender and race, or ethics. We also have limited data on differences between districts, age and professions in terms of leadership practices. Research on police leaders' and employees' everyday practice deserves more attention and is something we aim to pursue in future projects; the same is true for a practice-based understanding of leadership—that is, what comprises and assists in the development of police leaders' professional practices.

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