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"It's like I'm having an affair": Cross-force police collaborations as complex problems[1]

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Abstract: Financial austerity has brought considerable pressure upon policing services in England and Wales in the past decade. For the British government, one mitigatory vehicle to alleviate this pressure is the expansion of police collaborative units operating across two or more police forces. To date however, such cross-force collaborations have been beset by a series of problems and progress has been inexorably slow. Drawing upon the reflections of police officers and staff involved at varying stages of cross-force collaborations, this paper explores why collaborations have so far largely failed. The paper argues that while the challenges of cross-force collaborations echo those of previous police efforts to work with external partners, these difficulties are intensified during cross-force collaborations in which partners present divergent policing agendas. As such, cross-force collaborations may be usefully understood as 'complex problems', marking them out as particularly challenging and demanding new and distinct approaches to problem-solving.

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Introduction[2]

The police have long been encouraged to work with external partners to overcome the inter-connected challenges they face (Bratton and Zumin 2012). Since the introduction of austerity measures in the UK in the late 2000s however, a growing drive has emerged from central government to induce police forces in England and Wales to work not only with external partners, but increasingly with one another as part of cross-force police collaborations (HMIC 2009). These collaborations involve the creation of cross-force units composed of officers from two or more forces, often deploying specialist capabilities such as surveillance, armed policing or roads policing. Collaborations however are not limited to only specialist services, with some units involving back-office support functions such as legal and procurement services (O'Halloran 2020). For the British government, such collaborations appear to represent an important strategy for policing to respond to increased demand for services despite ongoing cuts to resources (Home Office 2012). Indeed, the introduction of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 saw a number of amendments made to the Police Act 1996 legally obligating chief officers to undertake collaborative working 'where it is in the interests of the efficiency or effectiveness of their own and other police forces' (Home Office 2012: 13). The amendments went as far as bringing a duty on chief officers to pursue collaboration 'even if they do not expect their own force to benefit directly itself' to ensure that 'collaboration takes place wherever it is in the wider public's best interest' (Home Office 2012: 13).

Successful cross-force collaborative working however, remains persistently elusive. As this paper argues, many of the problems evident in cross-force police collaborations echo the obstacles of previous police efforts to work in partnership with non-police bodies. These

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obstacles have in the past been identified as including poor information sharing practices, incompatible hierarchical managerial structures, ideological conflicts, and asymmetrical power relations amongst partners (Crawford and Cunningham 2015: 79). But this paper goes further in proposing that understanding the challenges of cross-force collaborations necessitates an appreciation that while the nature of these problems may appear well-known, they are in fact particularly acute in a context where all prospective partners are police actors. Since cross-force collaborations involve only the police, a number of divergent occupational cultures usually accustomed to dominating partnership dynamics can and do come to clash (Reiner 2010). Drawing on interviews with 17 police offers and staff across seven police forces, this paper explores why cross-force collaborations have so far largely failed. In doing so, the paper proposes that these collaborations might be usefully understood as 'complex problems' (Glouberman and Zimmerman 2002) and that understanding them as such may lead to more productive strategies to facilitate cross-force collaborations in their formative and operational stages. The discussions in this paper are highly relevant to the contemporary policing landscape given that many countries may be entering deep economic recessions following the coronavirus pandemic. This may lead to a renewed emphasis being placed on the potential for cross-force collaborations to result in financial savings.

Cross-force police collaborations as the way ahead

In England and Wales, moves towards amalgamation of police forces have floated on the political agenda as far back as the 1980s (Loveday 2006). After failed attempts to merge forces during the Blairite years (Brain 2010), the economic recession of 2008 onwards offered an opportunity for the sharing of police resources across multiple forces to be brought back onto the agenda (Dale 2012). In 2009, HMIC reported that policing expenditure in England and

Wales had reached £17.5 billion annually, a figure that comparatively vastly outstripped other Western countries. The solution appeared to be to encourage forces to make savings via the greater use of cross-force collaborative units, particularly those deploying specialist capabilities. In reviewing the relatively few existing cross-force collaborations in England and Wales at the time, HMIC expressed concern that 'growth has been relatively slow and… a more rigorous and far-sighted approach to cultivation is needed' (2009: 4). Four years and a change of government later, HMIC concluded that little had changed in the intervening period. In 2013, they declared that the continued failure to demonstrate collaborative working within the police was 'deeply disappointing' (2013: 81) with the pace of development 'too slow' (2013: 15) and only a small minority of forces delivering satisfactory savings through collaboration. In 2016, the Police Foundation identified several obstacles to collaboration, including issues of parochialism manifested particularly in tensions between larger and smaller forces borne from concerns over inequitable distribution of resources. The Police Foundation concluded that existing cross-force collaborations were 'a complex patchwork of collaborative arrangements that have generally emerged without reference to the national strategic interest' (2016: 35). In the same year, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) found that existing collaborative arrangements were often 'highly fragmented' (2016: 4) and that 'collaborative activity has… in some cases has simply created a new set of boundaries' (2016: 4). Most recently, HMICFRS (2020) once again noted its dismay at the ongoing lack of progress made by cross-force collaborations. The report explained that these failures were 'costing forces time, money and effort' (HMICFRS 2020: 1) and highlighted that forces lacked the knowledge, experience and skills to deliver successful collaborative working.

Recent developments in England and Wales have served to demonstrate some of the challenges identified above. In 2018, Avon and Somerset Police unilaterally withdrew from a

collaboration with neighbouring forces Wiltshire Police and Gloucestershire Constabulary (Police Federation 2018). Elsewhere, Nottinghamshire Police also withdrew from a four-force collaboration, claiming that the collaboration had withdrawn services from local areas and had damaged the force's ability to respond to major incidents (BBC 2018). The contemporary landscape of cross-force collaborations appears to show then, that ten years after HMIC's initial criticism and despite governmental inducements to encourage chief officers to collaborate, this mode of working continues to present considerable problems for police forces in England and Wales.

Complex problems

While policing literature has invoked the notion of 'wicked' problems (Rittel and Webber 1973) to examine the interconnectivity of the challenges faced by the police and its partners (Crawford and L'Hoiry 2017), the related concept of 'complex' problems is comparatively rarely used (Glouberman and Zimmerman 2002). In proposing that complex problems must be understood as distinct from simple or complicated problems, Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002) offer three examples to distinguish the nature and complexity of these categories. First, simple problems may be thought of as preparing a meal by following a recipe. There are clear instructions which can be expected with almost complete certainty to produce a desired result and solve the problem at hand. In order to succeed, the recipe is critical and there is no need for extensive expertise, though carrying out this task repeatedly may mean skills are incrementally improved over time. Second, a complicated problem may be sending a rocket to the moon. While recipes and formulae are still necessary, solving this problem requires greater depth and range of expertise and specialist knowledge. Experimentation and ongoing testing will ensure lessons are learned and significant, rather than incremental, improvements may be

made from one testing phase to the next. But crucially, the central tool of the problem – the rocket – will remain relatively consistent since 'in some critical ways, rockets are the same as each other' (Glouberman and Zimmerman 2002: vi). This lends some degree of certainty and consistency to the problem-solving process and over time and with enough scope for experimentation and refinement of the method, this complicated problem may be definitively solved with the likelihood of success for future missions becoming increasingly certain.

In contrast, complex problems involve inherent uncertainty at all stages and, critically, success in solving one complex problem offers no guarantee of solving future problems. The example used by Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002) is raising a child. Since every child is different, what has worked in the past may not work in the future. Key strategies, previous experiences and expert knowledge may help to solve the problem, but what works for one child may be plainly unsuitable (and perhaps even damaging) for another. The 'unique local conditions' (Martin and Strumberg 2005: 107) of a complex problem – or, to return to the metaphor, the fact that each child should be treated as an individual – forms a central component of its unpredictability. Adding to this complexity is that such problems are not static and therefore they may not necessarily be solved with a singular, 'one-time' solution. Instead, complex problems are more likely to be continuous – children are not raised once in a singular moment but rather ongoingly, which may necessitate constant re-evaluation and the development of new skills and knowledge to solve or stay ahead of new challenges (Martin and Strumberg 2005). Funke (1991: 186) also proposes that complex problems are characterised by 'polytely' or the presence of multiple goals. Though this may not appear particularly unusual in itself, Funke argues that in complex problems these goals will often be contradictory and as a result an ability to identify and implement reasonable trade-offs within a terrain of uncertainty is essential. Exacerbating the complexity of these problems even further is the 'connectivity of

variables' (Funke 1991: 187) involved. As one variable shifts in a complex problem, this may impact other variables, necessitating re-evaluation and a preparedness to amend one's approach to solving the problem. The cumulative result of all these factors is that ambiguity rather than certainty dominates the problem-solving process and this in itself places a particular emphasis on ensuring that individuals are carefully selected when tasked with solving these problems since this may require not just particular expertise and experience but also resilience, adaptability and the ability to operate within an unpredictable terrain (Wagner 1991). But as Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002: vi) assert, these challenges of course 'do not lead us to the conclusion that it is impossible to raise a child' and once the unique local conditions of a complex problem are recognised, ways of adapting to the challenge may begin to emerge. For cross-force police collaborations, discussions of complex problems are salient and offer a route towards better understanding how challenges in this context arise and, perhaps, how they may be overcome.

The research study

This research sought to capture the reflections of individuals involved in past and current cross-force police collaborations. In total, the research conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with a sample encompassing ten police officers and seven police civilian staff. Individuals were drawn from seven forces in England: Cleveland Police, Durham Constabulary, Humberside Police, North Yorkshire Police, Northumbria Police, South Yorkshire Police and West Yorkshire Police. The ranks of officers ranged from Sergeant through to Assistant Chief Constable and the breadth of civilian roles encompassed Heads of Services, Programme Managers, Business Managers and Service Delivery Advisors. The sample of participants was designed to encompass a diverse range of capabilities and areas of business across the policing

spectrum ranging from specialist, front-line activities to back office functions and enabling services. Participants were also recruited to gather the views of those involved at various stages of cross-force collaborations, from design and consultation through to operational management, enabling the study to gather reflections across the end-to-end life-course of a collaboration. In this sense, the study used a purposeful sampling strategy designed to achieve maximum variation in order to capture central themes which cut across diverse operational contexts in which collaborative units are deployed. A note should be made of a key limitation of the study: despite their importance in facilitating or disrupting collaborative efforts, senior police representatives such as Chief Constables or Police and Crime Commissioners were not interviewed in this study. Their actions and intentions vis-à-vis cross-force collaboration are discussed by participants below, but these views, though informed by participants' experiences, are speculative and are undoubtedly at times negatively disposed as a result of frustrating past experiences. As a result, in order to advance understandings of why cross-force collaborations succeed or fail, future research may usefully focus on the motivations of senior police representatives in advancing or rejecting collaborative proposals and particularly how the goals of cross-force collaborations align to competing priorities faced by police leaders.

In the data presented below, participant identifiers are not directly linked to specific police forces or ranks/roles as per the ethical protocol of the research which guaranteed anonymity to participants. Though the sample size is relatively small, this study does not seek to make broad generalisations but rather to present the information-rich, in-depth reflections of a variety of individuals involved in diverse collaborative units to draw out common trends in their experiences (Patton 1990). Interviewees were invited to discuss their experiences of collaborative units, specifically reflecting on the value of such units, the challenges encountered and how such challenges were (or were not) overcome. Transcripts were

thematically analysed and coded to identify meaningful and repetitive patterns in interviewees' responses, revealing common experiences across different collaborative units (Clarke and Braun 2013). In analysing data and constructing the themes emerging, the conceptual framework of 'complex problems', previously applied to a variety of contexts but rarely to policing, arose as an appropriate frame through which to present these themes.

Complex problems in police collaborations

In the following discussion, the challenges of cross-force collaborations are explored through the lens of complex problems as described above. The obstacles identified by participants are thematically organised below along the following axes which comprise varying facets of complex problems: unique local conditions; polytely and uncertainty; and the connectivity of variables.

Unique Local Conditions

Central to appreciating the complexity of cross-force collaborations is the unique nature of the problems presented in each collaboration. Here, the unique local conditions (Martin and Strumberg 2005: 107) which define complex problems are manifest in variances in the identity or culture of different police forces expected to come together in a collaborative setting. Police occupational cultures have long been identified as a continuing blocker to police reform and an enduring challenge to aspects of everyday policing (Chan 1997; Loftus 2010). Participants in this study referred to divergent force 'identities' which they argued were ill-suited to collaborative working and indeed the concept of collaboration itself.

> The culture for each force is different and that's the other problem. Even if you're under the direction and control of another force, if you're still working within your own force you remain within their culture because [of] your colleagues around you. (P7)

Historical mistrust between forces also forms part of the cultural challenge of collaboration building and the unique local conditions collaborative units must navigate. These barriers at times present themselves as 'big force vs small force' tensions in collaborations between forces of different size, capability and demand in which collaborators express concerns about equity and fairness. Here, parochialism is endemic and often represents a first point of conflict for any new proposed collaboration.

> With [a large force], when collaboration's been discussed previously, there's always been a concern that everything would be sucked into [that force]. (P5)

> The starting point is that [as a representative of a larger force] you're not trusted and they don't believe you and they think you're out to try and grab their eyes out… It has to be only the slightest catalyst, other people will say, "There you go! There's evidence. That is more evidence that [a larger force] are trying to have all of our money." And it's really, really hard to battle against that. (P12)

Dale (2012: 44) has termed such concerns the 'centre of gravity pull' problem in which supposedly shared resources are drawn towards larger forces since they may have claims to greater demand for services. Adding to the complexity here is that this issue also presents difficulties in the reverse, as larger forces at times complain of being 'expected to prop up programmes undertaken by smaller forces' (Dale 2012: 44), an issue previously identified by HMIC as 'net-donor syndrome' (2009: 2). So pervasive are these tensions that for some participants, perceived competition amongst forces and the prospect of losing ownership of one's resources gradually becomes equated to a loss of identity.

> I think also that there is – certainly something I experienced - was big force/little force, where there is a sense that the big urban forces are like black holes… you get onto their horizon and you're in, you are sucked into that and then you lose your local identity. (P3)

This demonstrates the equivalence in officers' minds between operational concerns surrounding resources and more abstract, cultural issues of force identities. In this sense, while

issues of staffing and equipment might in a non-policing context appear to be a logistical challenge, in a policing setting they *also* become cultural barriers, rendering them complex rather than complicated problems. This complex problem is exacerbated by the unique local conditions in any given collaboration – different forces will have different histories with one another and will have formed different reputations in the eyes of prospective collaborators. What is perceived as a barrier to collaboration for one force may not be an issue for another. Like other complex problems, this set of unique barriers must be continuously navigated and may continue to present themselves even after a solution is found (Martin and Strumberg 2005).

Polytely and Uncertainty

Cross-force collaborations are also rendered complex problems by the polytelic nature of their goals. According to participants, collaborations are often expected to achieve not just operational and cost-saving goals but also serve political purposes. While political influence within policing is not new *per se* (Reiner 2010; Emsley 2014), the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners has added a new and more explicit layer of political consideration to the policing landscape (Lister 2013). Discussing these developments within the context of cross-force collaborations, the Home Affairs Committee predicted in 2012 that this new political element in policing would 'almost certainly mean that any Police and Crime Commissioners who do enter into collaborative agreements will be particularly keen on conveying the benefits of the agreement to the public, which could be an advantage' (HAC 2012). Despite this optimistic prediction, participants in this study described instances where rather than facilitating collaboration, senior officers and staff allowed political imperatives to negatively

influence such efforts. Participants highlighted risk-aversion and entrenched protectionism as politically motivated barriers to cross-force collaboration.

> You're asking them to give up a big chunk of their resources and let them go somewhere else and be managed by somebody else, and, generally speaking, chief officer teams have a bit of a cob on when that happens. (P10)

> A lot of chiefs are notionally going into collaboration because they know there is no choice. They're being told to nationally, there are the funding issues, but actually secretly they're quite happy just to do the minimum because they want their own force, their own train set. (P2)

While this echoes previous work which has highlighted the potential for police leaders to block reform efforts (Skogan 2008), literature concerned with organisational change outside of policing has emphasized the role of senior leadership as central to successfully delivering such outcomes (Kouzes and Posner 1987). Instead, the reverse appears to be true for some cross-force collaborations as participants drew upon numerous of examples of PCCs and Chief Officers refusing to collaborate based principally on the potential for a negative public reaction, particularly when highly visible and popular representations of police activities appeared to be under threat:

> [A force] had the option of collaborating on their mounted department some time ago… Our previous PCC said, "No way am I losing my horses. The public expect us to have horses. I'm not going to be the PCC that lets my horses go". There's not a great deal of economic [sense] or efficiencies behind that decision, but public expectation was that we would keep our horses. Similarly, I sat in a conversation with [another] PCC, who said, "I'll collaborate over everything except for my dogs. The public will not want to see me give my dogs up, so don't even go there". (P4)

Policing leadership, most clearly PCCs and senior officers, appears therefore to have significant influence in restricting collaborative efforts predominantly based on politically motivated protectionist concerns (Skogan 2008). But whilst this protectionism evidently caused frustration for participants in this study, the reluctance of some police leaders to enter into cross-force collaborations accentuates the difficulties they face in balancing competing priorities, bringing to the fore once again the polytelic nature of this complex problem. This

seems to be particularly problematic for PCCs. The introduction of PCCs in 2012 was grounded in an apparent desire to increase local governance, allowing the Home Secretary to retreat towards a 'hands off' role in local policing matters (Bainbridge 2020). The election (rather than appointment) of PCCs was theoretically intended to ensure 'greater local democratic accountability' (Lister 2013: 240) of police forces to the local electorate and to 'empower local communities' (Lister and Rowe 2015: 360). With this in mind, one may consider unfair the criticism outlined above that PCCs were reluctant to sanction collaborative arrangements when these did not appear to deliver immediate benefits to their local publics. PCCs appear locked in a difficult balancing act between adhering to the legal stipulation that they commit to collaborations 'even if they do not expect their own force to benefit directly itself' (Home Office 2012: 13), whilst concurrently being accountable to the local electorate who may have elected a PCC based on certain manifesto promises. On this latter point, Lister and Rowe (2015) have previously found that in the 2012 PCC election cycle, only 3 (all Conservative) of the 41 successful candidates made mention of cross-force collaborations in their election statements. This demonstrates that in the eyes of PCCs at least, local populations attached low importance to cross-force collaborations and this issue carries little political currency for the electorate.

The necessity for collaborations to achieve multiple goals – operational, economic and political – therefore presents a complex problem (Funke 1991). Compounding this challenge is the rapid turnover of senior police leaders. Chief Constables are frequently offered contracts of less than five years while PCC elections are held every four years, at the end of which a PCC with different political party affiliation may be elected. New appointments may have different views on the value of collaborations, adding a further layer of uncertainty in long-term planning, exacerbating the complexity of this problem.

Connectivity of Variables

As Funke (1991) explains, complex problems are characterised by the connectivity of variables which mean that as one problem is solved, another will emerge, requiring continuous problem solving. This is evident in collaborative units as participants reported a series of interconnected problems which were rarely solved with a singular solution. Perhaps most prominent amongst these is the perennial issue of information and communication technology (ICT). One participant in the study stated simply 'you just say ICT and you just leave it there really… The ICT is too hard so let's not bother' (P1). Participants unanimously highlighted differences in ICT platforms leading to a lack of inter-operability of systems and individual officers' unfamiliarity with (or unwillingness to learn) new systems as persistent problems experienced during day-to-day work within cross-force collaborations. One participant described the difficulties of achieving a seemingly simple task - getting officers in a two-force collaboration to use a single radio channel:

> It takes six months to get one radio channel switched. When it's switched you then go, 'well we don't talk like this' and 'we don't talk like that' and 'they're talking for too long'. It took another six months before it became common work practice for it to be the norm and all I wanted to do was change a channel. (P13)

This example demonstrates the connectivity of seemingly simple or complicated problems which eventually become a complex problem. The example described above initially presents as a technical problem. But once solved, this morphs into a cultural issue when officers from different forces complain about the use of some terminology, thus demonstrating their reluctance to amend previous working practices and, more broadly, to resist change.

Officers from different forces being on different contractual terms and conditions despite working in the same collaborative units was another obstacle cited by participants. Once more,

this may appear as a logistical issue, but it is one which becomes connected to a unit's cohesion and perception of equality and fairness within collaborative teams. One participant claimed that having examined these differences in depth, he found '60 key pieces where [terms and conditions are] completely different' (P13) between officers of just two different forces involved in one collaboration. Such variances in terms and conditions were seen as having a profound impact upon trust between colleagues which ultimately undermined the very notion of collaboration.

> The [lack of] alignment is a frustration and an annoyance… There's significant differences which affect culture and morale. Annual leave policies are different, allowances are different… but when you're telling people 'work together, you're on an equal footing' it really causes frustration. (P5)

> It actually breeds mistrust, people feel hard done by, if you're two police staff members sat next to each other and one of them is on £5,000 more than the other one, and gets 15 days more annual leave than the other one, it becomes a point of conflict. (P10)

Making this problem even more complex are legal stipulations concerning salary harmonisation. In the UK, the Equality Act (HM Government 2010) requires that employees receive equal pay for 'equal work'. When collaborative colleagues are performing similar roles on different terms and conditions, forces may find themselves at risk of equal pay claims. In response, forces may carry out so-called 'job evaluation schemes' in which they review existing roles in the organisation and consider ways to harmonise terms and conditions. But such evaluations are often treated by staff with concern and anxiety and can therefore in themselves be disruptive (as well as costly and lengthy) processes. Solving one problem begets another and the cycle continues.

The multiple and connected challenges outlined by participants above require continuous problem solving for collaborative unit leads. This marks cross-force collaborations as complex problems, demanding a recognition that though these challenges may be familiar in light of previous multi-agency partnership efforts (Crawford and Cunningham 2015), these present

themselves as more entrenched and complex in the specific context of cross-force collaborations.

Potential solutions to complex problems

Drawing on the lens of complex problems once more, the following discussion offers four suggestions emerging from participants' reflections to aid in solving the complex problem of collaborations: effective and multi-skilled leadership; optimistic approaches; timing; and facilitating bottom-up solutions. These guiding principles are however offered with the caveat that as complex problems, collaborations will encounter an array of different challenges defined by unique local conditions, meaning that solving one such problem offers no guarantee that the same solution will overcome future problems.

Effective and Multi-Skilled Leadership

Perhaps unsurprisingly, effective leadership is a critical facet of navigating complex problems (Metcalf and Benn 2013). Indeed, leadership has long been recognised as a key driver of organisational change both within policing and beyond, particularly in the context of mergers or partnership working (HMIC 2013; Huxham and Vanger 2000). However, as McDonald (2014: 227) cautions, leadership in complex problems must be critically considered since the 'dark side' of leadership – hypocrisy, autocracy, an inability to appreciate others' viewpoints, risk-taking behaviours – may all be counterproductive in solving complex problems. For a quasi-military organisation like the police which places so much emphasis on leadership structure (Adlam 2002), selecting the right individuals to lead collaborations is critical according to participants in this study. While participants acknowledged the instrumental role

played by Chief Constables and PCCs in facilitating some collaborative ventures via 'visionary' and 'brave' (P17) leadership, more emphasis was placed on the leaders of collaborative units themselves. This echoes Neyroud's (2011: 349) argument for the criticality of 'leadership in the frontline'.

> The chiefs and the PCCs have to be behind [a collaboration], the execs have to be behind it but it's more than them; it's actually even more important that the head of the unit is behind it… If you've got heads of unit that are really not for a collaboration or really are not just being engaged with it, that's part of the problem. (P7)

In this study, collaborative unit leaders tended to be Chief Superintendents, Superintendents and Chief Inspectors (and Heads of Service in civilian staff units). But participants were at pains to emphasize that achieving a certain rank within the police hierarchy is not a precursor of being the right individual to drive forward a collaborative venture. Simply put, some individuals within the police organisation will not be suited to leading collaborations, bearing in mind the complex problems that will inevitably be encountered.

> The police service has been a hierarchical rank organisation, and, as such, they have appointed people into leadership roles, to head up collaborations… and they might have been really good at being a police officer, but they didn't have the knowledge, either the subject matter, the specialist knowledge, or where to go and get that and bring that in. They also didn't have the project management skills and the business management skills and the strategic leadership from that point of view. (P9)

> If in doubt we'll stick a superintendent or chief inspector in… [but] they're not really project people, they're not really designed to do change, they're operational officers, and I think that seems to be our default position. (P1)

Metcalf and Benn (2013: 369) have argued that effective management of complex problems requires 'leaders who can read and predict through complexity…, engage groups in dynamic adaptive organisational change and have the emotional intelligence to adaptively engage with their own emotions associated with complex problem solving'. Reinforcing this, participants painted a portrait of effective collaborative unit leaders as displaying elements of both transactional and transformative leadership. They described unit leads as continuously negotiating with staff to convince them that collaborative working will be beneficial but,

equally, having difficult but productive conversations with reticent colleagues when the need inevitably arises. Participants also argued that leading a collaborative unit necessitates visibility, clarity of vision, creatively engaging and stimulating staff and ongoing enthusiasm in the face of disruption, all of which must be anchored by excellent interpersonal skills in order to inspire staff to implement change. Critically, in a collaborative context, leaders are required to separate themselves from individual force affiliations and see the 'bigger picture' (Bass 1985).

> I think for [collaboration] to work… you've got to have some leadership that says I'm divorcing myself from the force that I've been with for 23 years and I'm marrying this one. Well actually I'm not, it's like I'm having an affair with both because I can't be truly loyal to one all of the time, I've got to be servicing both. (P13)

By breaking beyond the cultural or other concerns of their 'home' force and instead 'servicing' multiple forces simultaneously, successful heads of collaborative units enact a style of multi-skilled leadership required to solve complex problems and drive collaborations forward in an often disruptive and unpredictable environment. In doing so, collaborative leads deploy behaviours akin to Bass's (1985) elements of transformational leadership in that they act as role models, imbuing idealised influence onto staff whilst also inspiring confidence through a clarity of vision and enthusiasm for this vision. However, simply put, this set of 'extraordinary' (Metcalf and Benn 2013: 369) leadership skills may not be found in all officers holding a certain rank in the police. Selecting the right officers to lead the right collaborations is therefore critical and when recruiting heads of cross-force collaborative units, one size (or rank) does not fit all.

Optimistic Approaches

Approaching complex problem-solving with optimism is emphasized by Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002) as a key facet of overcoming such problems. Echoing this proposal,

participants in this study argued that optimism could be harnessed to generate greater positivity concerning the successes of collaborations, potentially leading to greater trust and confidence amongst staff involved in new and existing collaborations. However, participants also argued that internal communicative practices within the police are not geared towards self-promotion and celebration of successes.

> We are not very good at communicating our successes in collaboration, so people have nothing to hang onto. There is nothing to showcase; there is nothing in the shop window to say "this is how we do it, look at the examples of excellence in policing that we've produced"… There are no doubt some excellent examples… and we need to shine the spotlight on those. (P15)

The narrative of collaborations, and more specifically the championing of existing successful collaborations with optimistic messaging, must therefore change. Celebrating existing collaborative units can act as a form of confidence building for officers and staff across the entire policing hierarchy, offering aspirational models to aim towards. Part of creating this new narrative of success may be to target 'quick wins' (P10) to demonstrate to all parties that collaborative endeavours are achievable.

> Let's get on with some relatively small stuff, let's see the success and then I think the success then will start to build the relationships, build the trust because people will see things growing. (P12)

> If you start off with something small that's fairly deliverable you're building up – trust is the wrong word because it's not to say there wasn't trust there in the first place – but it's like believability: we've done it; the world hasn't imploded because we've shared x with y. (P6)

However, defining success has proven problematic and competing priorities, as discussed above, add to the complexity of these problems (Funke 1991). Alongside political considerations, participants explained that for some (senior) staff, only large collaborations (usually involving at least four or more forces) were considered successful and, as a result, smaller but more embedded and long-standing collaborations were ignored. Participants suggested that celebrating the latter may enable the police organisation more broadly to develop an institutional memory of collaborations being shown to work. By extension, it is

precisely the development of such an institutional memory which may help to overcome the culturally-embedded resistance to change amongst some officers. Participants suggested that over time, new narratives could be attached to collaborations which paint them as pathways towards successful police work, as elite and desirable units forging new and innovative ways of policing. Positive institutional memories and narratives will not self-manifest however, and this may require a shift in the nature of communication within policing, away from focusing on examples of failed collaborations and instead emphasizing the lessons to be learned from successful units.

Timing

In their discussion of complex problems, Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002) frequently refer to the importance of the timing of interventions to investigate and solve complex problems. Though the context in which they explore this is medical, a similar lesson may be applied to cross-force collaborations. Identifying a manageable and appropriate pace to enact organisational reform, particularly when this involves complex cultural change, has been identified as essential elsewhere. As Kavanagh and Ashkanasy (2006: 81) propose in the context of public-sector mergers, 'it is often the pace of change that inhibits the successful re-engineering of the culture'. But this may be particularly problematic in a policing context where the cultural tendency is to focus on immediate solutions within short timescale (Foster and Bailey 2010). Further, given the (perceived) political risk in participating in collaborative units, some (usually senior) officers and staff often hold expectations of quick returns in order to justify their decision to join collaborative units. As such, participants reflected that political exigencies frequently appear to trump appropriate pacing to develop a new collaborative team. This was seen as particularly counter-productive since the intended goals of collaboration are

often only visible over the mid-to-long term, and in the case of efficiency savings, these may often only appear several years after a collaboration has been active.

> How often do [PCCs] get re-elected? Four years. 'So I want you to do this national collaboration of firearms and show a massive benefit for x shire in four years.' That ain't never going to happen. (P17)

> We're looking for increased efficiencies [but] it might take us five years to realise a money-saving side of it, but the truth is at the end of it there has got to be some savings involved. (P7)

These 'time-delayed effects' are a frequent feature of complex problems (Funke 1991: 187), reaffirming the importance of accepting an appropriate timeline for evaluating the performances of collaborative units. Alongside this, new collaborations often place heavy demands on the time and energy of key individuals to reassure and corral potentially reluctant and worried staff. This is often a delicate process necessitating a 'softly, softly approach' (P14) which cannot be rushed. Thus, expecting collaborations to produce desired outcomes in the short term is often unrealistic, counter-productive and ultimately adds pressure on individuals and teams to perform in already challenging conditions. Allowing collaborations time to develop within a framework of 'organic evolution' (Wiggett 2016) is therefore crucial to ensure that they are given the best chance of success.

Facilitating Bottom-up Solutions

Martin and Strumberg (2005) identify bottom-up approaches as key to solving complex problems. Such approaches may involve consulting with affected staff and organisational management literature recognises such processes as fundamental during any transformative change (Borins 2002). Participants in this study felt that this was particularly true in the context of new cross-force collaborations in which staff may be understandably worried about changes to their working practices.

> [Collaboration] poses instability for [staff]. It makes them worried. It's destabilising. So at a very early stage if you don't get in with an early comms plan, an early consultation with staff, staff instability and staff scepticism will ultimately inhibit any collaboration. (P4)

Perhaps more importantly however, bottom-up approaches can and should go beyond consultation, aiming for co-production in the design of new collaborations (or reviews of existing collaborations). Participants argued that the experiences and reflections of individuals working within collaborative teams or about to do so must be heard and meaningfully accounted for. Doing so may maximise the potential for staff 'buy-in' as well as draw upon subject-matter expertise of individuals.

> If they're involved with it and they actually are the ones that are forced to come up with the model, they'll make it work and they'll get the buy-in of the staff, which is the most important thing. (P7)

> [It's] giving them the opportunity to raise their own ideas. Because the workforce will have a lot more ideas normally than your strategic leads, because they're the ones doing it. And it's empowering them to be quite innovative about what they want to achieve as well and what their concerns are. (P8)

Aiming for co-production situates front-line officers as 'change agents', fostering what Toch (2008: 61) has called the 'participatory involvement' of lower-ranked officers as a vehicle for organisational reform. Toch echoes the benefits outlined by participants above, particularly the belief that front-line officers are 'repositories of considerable first-hand information' (2008: 67) which can provide invaluable feedback during reform efforts. According to participants in this study, co-production exercises may include workshops, task forces, joint training and 'team days' during which officers are empowered to meaningfully inform a collaboration before seeing this turned into action. As discussed earlier, this type of engagement with staff aligns with aspects of transformational leadership, particularly notions of intellectual stimulation and creativity as well as individualised consideration of group members (Bass 1985). Once more however, engaging staff in this way relies heavily upon individuals being

capable of performing styles of leadership requiring a skillset not necessarily evident in all officers.

Conclusion

In many ways, what this paper argues is that the challenges of cross-force collaborations are not new *per se*. They instead echo well-documented problems experienced by the police as part of previous attempts to work with external partners (Crawford 1994; Fleming 2006). Crucially however, in the context of cross-force collaborations, these challenges are re-visited and intensified as each participant brings their unique policing identity, one which is often drawn from oppositional, insular occupational cultures (Reiner 2010). If, as Crawford and Cunningham (2015: 79) assert, a key challenge of partnership working is the 'dominance of a policing agenda', obstacles to partnership arrangements are likely to be even higher when every partner brings their own policing agenda to the table. Treating the problems of cross-force collaborations as though they are the same as those of previous police efforts to work with non-police partners equates this challenge to a complicated problem. As this paper has argued, cross-force police collaborations are complex problems and should be treated as such, demanding an appreciation of their unpredictability and the need to recognise the unique local conditions of each collaboration.

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