

# Evidence Cafés and Practitioner Cafés supported by online resources: A route to innovative training in practice based approaches

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## **Abstract:**

Current radical changes in the Police service internationally and in England and Wales are being driven by movements to adopt an evidence-based practice (EBP) approach to policing. However this poses a challenge as early adopters have experienced resistance to EBP, a relatively unknown, and more importantly misunderstood approach for policing. This resistance is not limited to police with international research highlighting implementation issues for evidence based medicine, evidence based management, and evidence based teaching. One reason is the lack of training in EBP, which is coupled with recent concerns over the general quality of training and level of professionalism within UK police organisation. There have been international initiatives aimed at increasing learning around evidence based practice. Some UK police forces have adopted approaches from other domains to counteract these problems (e.g. champions, enquiry visits). Mapping clear pathways that link training, experience and evidence-based practice is crucial to developing the capacity for an evidence-based workforce. This paper presents evidence from recent research that used Evidence Cafés and Practitioner Cafés connected to online resources as a route to increase understanding and awareness of evidence based practice amongst frontline police officers. Evidence Cafés are coordinated by a knowledge exchange expert with an academic and a police practitioner who facilitate the translation of research into practice. This paper presents evidence of the benefit and limitations of these events. Analytics and learning analytics of events' online resources also provide insights into these approaches and identify triggers for increased engagement across a wide geographical context.

**Keywords:** evidence cafes; evidence-based practice; knowledge exchange; practitioner cafes; engagement.

## **Evidence-based practice**

Evidence-based practice seeks to increase the quality and rigour of practice by implementing evidence into practice based decision-making processes (Kitson et al., 1998; McKibbin, 1998; Horner et al., 2005). However problems frequently occur when translating research evidence for practice purposes and applying that research into practice contexts (Kitson et al., 1998). Increasingly there is a push for evidence-based practice to take a more balanced participatory approach between academics and practitioners (Rice, 2007; Lum, 2014).

Evidence based practice within the domain of policing is younger than in domains such as medicine and management. Over the past two decades the role of criminology in police practice has increased and with this, a significant push to adopt evidence based practices. Much of the emphasis in this field is underpinned by the criminology discipline. Criminology has its roots in scientific practices and reviews the nature, impacts and management of criminal behaviours at an individual, organizational and social level. Although an interdisciplinary field of study, it has been most prominently driven by psychological

scientific methods. As such, evidence based policing has adopted a psychological testing approach to randomized controlled trials (RCTs). Sherman and Berk (1984) and later Sherman and Weisburd (1995) produced the first RCTs in policing. This was then presented by Sherman as the ‘evidence-based policing’ approach in Washington for the ‘police foundation lecture’ (1998). Whilst this approach has gained momentum within police forces internationally, there is a current debate growing around problems in the translation of research into practice (Neyroud and Weisburd, 2014). This has been especially highlighted as a conceptual gap between academics and front-line police officers (Lum, 2014).

### Centre for Policing Research and Learning: Case Study

The Centre for Policing Research and Learning was set up to use knowledge from research and education to improve policing, helping police forces adapt to a changing policing landscape that incorporates a greater emphasis on evidence based practice. The Centre works with a consortium of member police forces drawn from across the UK and Northern Ireland (currently 16 forces, November 2016). The work of the centre is focused around three themes:

- Research
- Learning
- Knowledge Exchange

To ensure their relevance to police practice, research topics were chosen in discussion with the member police forces and include topics as varied as cybercrime, forensics markets, citizens use of technology, police use of social media, witness identification, simulation tools to improve interviewing of children, ethics and leadership and public value.

However academic research, by itself, does not always readily transfer across to the police practice setting. Thus, an innovative range of knowledge exchange activities help to translate research knowledge into practice on the front-line and across the police organisation. Knowledge exchange activities include Evidence Cafés, enquiry visits, conferences, and the secondment of police officers and staff into ongoing research projects.

This paper describes the knowledge exchange activities of Evidence Cafés, set up by the Centre for Policing Research and Learning in the UK, and hosted at consortium member police forces, and Practitioner Cafés which developed out of Evidence Cafés. Evidence Cafés provide a means to close the conceptual gap between academic research and frontline police by supporting the application of findings from research into practice contexts. They facilitate a two way flow of information, linking to concepts of evidence-based practice and supported by the centre’s learning resources which can be accessed through the website <http://centre-for-policing.open.ac.uk>. Practitioner Cafés take this translation process further, embedding it within police practice.

### Evidence Cafés — translating between research and practice

Evidence Cafés are loosely based on the format of the worldwide Café Scientifique movement. The first Café Scientifique in the UK was held in Leeds in 1998 in a coffee bar. Cafés Scientifiques are held in a variety of informal venues — cafés, bars, libraries, anywhere where a group of people can meet up informally with access to refreshments. They are organised by volunteers and their common thread is knowledge exchange about science, for example, AIDS, the Big Bang, biodiversity, cancer, code-breaking, consciousness, Darwinism, ecology, evolution etc. Anybody who is interested can attend. The speaker speaks for 20 to 25 minutes about their scientific topic with no slides nor PowerPoint presentations. The core principle of Café Scientifiques is that they are forums for dialogue, not opportunities for imparting information; locations for a conversation about an evidence topic, not a lecture. Participants can ask questions, and as coffee cups are replenished, discussions emerge. ‘The discussion is at all levels and comments come from all angles; they might arise from what the speaker said, from what’s been on the news that night, from the field in general or from people’s experiences.’ (Grand, 2014: 276).

We sought to capture this discursive, informal element in our Evidence Café format, however there are significant differences between a Café Scientifique and an Evidence Café. Cafés Scientifiques focus on a science topic, are held in communal venues and are open to anyone who wishes to attend. Evidence Cafés focus on a topic related to policing and policing research and

the discussions that ensue focus around police-practice and the translation between research and practice. Evidence Cafés are sponsored by the Centre for Policing Research and Learning and take place at a host police force. They are not open to anyone who wants to attend, rather targeted at an audience of police officers, though other staff and community representatives may attend depending on the topic.

The aim of an Evidence Café is to:

- develop a deeper understanding of evidence used in practice
- support the translation between specific research evidence from the Consortium and Centre for Policing Research and Learning into police practice
- give academics the opportunity to both share their research and learn practical applications and issues from a critical audience of police practitioners.
- give police practitioners an accessible way to explore how research might influence their daily work
- provide a forum for knowledge exchange between police practitioners and academic researchers giving valuable practice-based perspective on the research

## Evidence Café methods

Evidence Cafés are informal and relaxed in their set-up and structure, with participants seated in small groups, café or bar style. The Evidence Cafés are held at each individual force in a location which each force feels suits their needs — this could be in the force restaurant (e.g. within a police station canteen or informal break-out rooms using easy chairs and coffee tables) or in a meeting room in a café style layout, with participants able to move around and discuss.

The academic team consists of one or more facilitator and one or more academic research specialist. Alongside this team, it is important to have a representative from the police force who is able to support the translation process between research and practice. Such officers are referred to as evidence-based champions (EBCs).

### Evidence Café facilitator(s)

The academic facilitator should have an understanding of research and research methods, but the facilitator

should not be the same person as academic research expert who presents the research findings. Rather, the academic facilitator is the knowledge exchange expert, acting as the key point of contact with the host police force and maintaining a balanced perspective in the research. They liaise with the force to match research topic with police force interests and work up a café plan to suit the topic. This plan may include preliminary activities that take place before the café, a timetable for the café allowing time for discussions, coffee and feeding back to the group, and post-café activities that build on the research discussed. For example, an Evidence Café that focused on Evidence-based practice (EBP) in policing was preceded by a @WeCops Twitter debate on the topic of EBP. This debate generated a set of themes that informed discussions at the Evidence Café. An Evidence Café on the research topic of leadership with political astuteness incorporated a short 10 question quiz that participants completed during the café to gain a high-level view of their leadership skills and insights into political astuteness qualities.

On the day of the Evidence Café, the Academic Facilitator introduces the café, explaining the format to the participants, and helps manage the discussions and activities.

### Academic research topic expert(s)

Evidence Cafés research topic discussions are academic led, but they are not a one-way academic presentation. Presentation screens can be used because often the research being discussed involves use of digital technology. For example one Evidence Café presenting research into a game-based approach to developing skills in collecting first accounts from child witnesses needed a large screen on which to show clips from the game. Participants then gathered into small groups to discuss how this approach might fit in with their force's practice and identify benefits and challenges, discussing their groups ideas in a whole-group plenary at the end of the café.

### Police evidence-based champions

It is important to have a member of the police force involved in running the café. These individuals are referred to as evidence-based champions (EBCs) and identify and invite practitioners and help with the process of translating between research and practice, ensuring that the event does not turn into an academic presentation with academics on one side of the divide and police officers on the other. We have identified

four different types of EBC that align with the College of Policing's Continuing Professional Development (CPD) framework (College of Policing, 2016). These are: individual, national/organizational, role and local. EBCs are effectively change agents and tend to be evangelist, inspirational, have some educational experience. They help run the Evidence Cafés, and take the lead on organising follow-on Practitioner Cafés.

## Evidence Café structure

As a general guideline, an Evidence Café lasts for about 2 hours and caters for 20 to 40 participants. The background of the participants will depend on the topic; for example cybercrime research is fairly niche, so the audience will most likely be a specialist team. Research on topics such as use of social media in police work has a broader appeal and the audience could include community representatives alongside frontline officers.

Exact timings and activities during the café will also vary. To date (January 2017), we have run seven Evidence Cafés, with 3 in the planning stages to give us the full 10 at the end of the project. Each café has a different format; the following two example cafés illustrate two formats that have been successful:

### Evidence Café Example 1: Using social technology and crowdsourcing to support community engagement with policing

— Participants: Police officers, community support officers, community representatives

— Facilitators: Academic facilitator

» 2 Research Academics on Social technology and crowdsourcing

» Research Academic on Evidence-based Practice (EBP)

» Evidence-based champion

— Café Structure

• General introduction from academic facilitator

• Four top tips on Evidence-based practice from research academic on EBP

- Explain concept of crowdsourcing (social technology and crowdsourcing research academics)
  - Participants invited to think of ways that crowdsourcing could be used (or is being used) with communities to help the police detect and prevent crime. (facilitated by all)
- Present social platform using large screen (social technology and crowdsourcing research academics)
- Break for coffee and biscuits
- Participants invited explore social platform in groups using iPads or mobile phones to suggest ways it might be of use to police based on crowdsourcing ideas from first part of café. (facilitated by all including EBC1)
- Capture ideas for implementation on platform within 3 weeks.

### 5.1.1. Evidence Café Example 2: Gathering first accounts from children — a game-based approach to learning basic skills in child interviewing

— Participants: Police officers

— Facilitators: Academic facilitator

» Research Academic on Game-based approach to training

» Research Academic on Evidence-based Practice

» Police evidence-based champion

— Café Structure

• General Introduction from academic facilitator

• Present research on serious games for learning, demo prototype game designed to teach basic skills in child interviewing from research academic on game-based training

• Break for coffee and biscuits

• Officers discuss their experiences of collecting first accounts from vulnerable witnesses, e.g. children, what training they have had, what training is avail-

able, what learning resources/training officers feel is needed with a focus on areas where the game might contribute within this framework. (facilitated by all)

- Questions to frame discussion:
  1. How would the game fit in with your force's police practice?
  2. How useful would the game-based approach be in your police force?
  3. If your police force were to use the game, what do the officers present see as the major challenges?
- Plenary — participants come together as a whole group and share the notes from their discussions. Academic draws together the themes emerging from the discussions and frames these in principles of Evidence-Based Practice with reference to the free and accredited learning resources available from the Centre for Policing facilitated by research academic in EBP.

Other research topics covered in Evidence Cafés include Leadership and Political Astuteness, Evidence-Based Practice, Ethics in Policing and Demand Management.

## Initial Findings

Preliminary findings indicate that Evidence Cafés are a valuable means to engage police practitioners with cutting-edge research and for them to realise the potential of the learning resources available through the Centre for Policing Research and Learning for their continuing professional development (CPD). The analytics data from the Centre for Policing Website has shown steady increases in visits to the website from a 49 visits in February 2016 peaking at 1 975 in July 2016 and averaging at about 741 per month. Of these, visitors to the learning resources area increased from 25 % in February 2016, to over 50 % by October 2016.

Spikes in access can be observed linked to Evidence Cafés and Practitioner Cafés. For example, there was a strong peak in Centre for Policing Research and Learning website access on May 23rd of which 75 originated from Lancashire Police. This took place after they had

promoted the OU learning resources for internal continuing professional development (CPD) and published a direct link on their intranet. Of these website visits from officers in Lancashire, 100 % accessed the Learning Resources page, and from there, 9 went onto the Postgraduate Certificate, 7 to Crime and Investigation, 7 Leadership and Strategic Command, 6 to information management ICT, 5 to professional development and learning, 5 to community engagement and crime prevention, 5 to intelligence and counter terrorism, 4 to studying for a qualification, and 4 to the research pages. This growing activity and interest suggests an increased engagement as a result of participation in knowledge exchange activities.

The added value from participation in Evidence Cafés works in both directions. Not only do participating police officers gain an understanding of the research through the opportunity to interrogate it in an informal and relaxed environment, reflecting on how it fits in with their practice, but academics get a frank and critical appraisal of their work. This appraisal is not always what they anticipated. For example, in Example Evidence Café 1, the academic focus was on exploring ways in which the crowdsourcing social platform could help police engage with the community. During the discussions with the police officers present, it emerged that the police force already made extensive use of Facebook and Twitter and they questioned the usefulness of yet another social platform. They also raised key issues of vulnerability (members of the public making themselves targets by participating in the platform) and ethics (if that force were seen to be sponsoring activities on the platform that resulted in individuals making themselves vulnerable). The discussions that ensued did clarify how the platform could and could not be used by the police. The functionality of the platform emerged as potentially useful to the police, but not in the way that the academics were expecting.

The Evidence Café structures have been developed through their implementation. For example the top tips on EBP was presented at the start of Example café 1, before the practitioners had become comfortable with the informal café format. This reduced the effectiveness and impact as the practitioners did not readily engage. Example café 2 adapted the approach by presenting evidence based policing tips at the end of the café. This was much more effective — participants had already spend a productive time exploring the potential of the game-based training and by the

end of the café, they engaged actively in discussions on EBP and the support and CPD opportunities available through the Centre for Policing.

## Practitioner Cafés

Research into Evidence Cafés is underway. The format of the Evidence Cafés is unlike anything the member police forces have experienced before. Nevertheless, feedback from participants was very positive and as a result, an unexpected outcome has been that forces have asked to use the Evidence Café format for use within their force, in particular, as a method to develop and promote the concept of Evidence-based practice with frontline officers. However, Evidence Cafés are predicated on knowledge exchange around academic research, and this requires academic input.

We therefore developed the concept of **Practitioner Cafés**, in collaboration with the Lancashire Constabulary. Practitioner Cafés are an excellent way to engage with staff around evidence based practice. Within Lancashire Constabulary the Practitioner Cafés have utilised a very similar model to that of Evidence Cafés. Topics are identified by evidence-based champions through liaison with heads of department or other key people and are aligned with the force's priorities. To date they have included issues such as child sexual exploitation and digital crime which have been rotated with Practitioner Cafés concentrating on progressing the embedding of evidence based practice. Learning from the Practitioner cafés is then circulated to all staff within the organisation to ensure any knowledge shared is gained. Real world policing problems are also identified from the café. These problems are then used to underpin research which is coordinated by the organisations evidence-based policing team which begins as a simple literature review and if a solution to the problem is not in existence with the 'What Works' community of evidence-based policing, consideration is then given to the commissioning of research to identify an applied solution.

This can then come back to the University through the centre as a proposal to initiate collaborative research to understand a specific practice based problem.

— Participants: Police Officers and Police Staff

— Facilitators: Academic Facilitator (when available)

- » Evidence Based Champion
- » Police Practitioner in the field of discussion

— Café Structure:

- Three key topic related questions are identified beforehand to help facilitate conversation.
- The cafes with Lancashire have been preceded by an online discussion within the organisations internal chat forum called '*The Buzz*'.
- The location used is identified using two key criteria; it must be an informal setting and it must be frequented regularly by the target audience to ensure capture of what is described as '*passing traffic*'.
- A welcome speech opens the Practitioner Café and sets the scene and the identified questions are posed to stimulate conversation.
- Free tea, coffee and biscuits are available throughout the 2 hour period of the café'
- In closure of the Practitioner Café the EBC will summarise the discussions and themes identified.
- After the café the EBC is responsible for completing a briefing note on the Practitioner Café which is circulated to all staff within the organisation.

Early indications are that Practitioner Cafés are seen as extremely worthwhile. Interestingly, the format of the Practitioner Cafés is moving close to the format of the original Cafés Scientifique, with more of an emphasis of informality and less structure. One EBC reported:

- » '*We felt that the EBP cafes should run actually like cafes (we did this on the day), so rather than having someone talk to the group (like the academic did at the initial one [Evidence Café]), we had it so people could walk in and out and just join the conversation.*'
- » '*Also, having it in the canteen worked really well ... where it should definitely happen as it keeps it informal and ensures we have lots of people passing through!*'

The success of the pilot Practitioner Cafés demonstrates a real impact on police practice which can spread to other forces. The Evidence Cafés held thus far have involved a minimum of three academics. This is not sustainable in the long term, and the fact that the Practitioner Cafés are recapturing the essence of the original Cafés Scientifiques suggests that they may well enjoy a similar success within the police.

## Discussion

Evidence and Practitioner Cafés are not only a method to embed the ethos of evidence based practice. They are also a strong mechanism to challenge the existing Police culture that is incredibly sceptical of any approach which is perceived as undermining or replacing professional judgement. Evidence Cafés help break down this barrier by illustrating how research can underpin, enhance and improve decision-making as opposed to replace it. Evidence Cafés also provide a relaxed opportunity for staff of all ranks to enjoy discussion and engage in a positive way. This is impor-

tant because engagement between senior leaders and frontline staff within policing is proven to increase the discretionary effort of the workforce by increasing morale and enhancing alignment with an organisations primary policing goal, protecting people (Heskey et al., 2015).

The collaboration between practice and research has also been found to benefit follow-on research. For example participants at the cafés identified that a key barrier affecting frontline police acceptance of the games-based learning research lay in the title of the project. The term *Gaming* was misunderstood as frivolous and not supporting every-day practice. Also there was confusion over meaning between games-based training, serious gaming and gamification. Substituting the term *Simulation training* was felt to relay a far more practical application for policing, and was seen to be more acceptable. In several ways academics and researchers found that the language used within the research often acted as a barrier to understanding and implementation of the research.

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