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NORWEGIAN POLICE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS ARMAMENT

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Abstract

Whether the police should routinely carry firearms is an ongoing debate in Norway. Although the police can carry weapons under special circumstances, the normal situation for the police in Norway is to store firearms in sealed cases in the police cars until armament orders are given by the police chief. In the present study, we examine attitudes towards routine police armament among Norwegian police students. First, we investigate the distribution of these attitudes among the students, and then we study possible factors influencing their views on the matter. Specifically, we ask how gender, educational background, career plans and perceptions of police work influence their attitudes about armament. Our study is based on survey data from the research project Recruitment, Education and Careers in the Police (RECPOL). Our sample included one cohort of students from the Norwegian Police University College graduating in 2013 (N = 513). Students were divided on the armament question, with roughly one third in favour of armament, one third against and one third undecided. The results of multinomial logistic regression analyses show that men are more likely than women to be in favour of armament, rather than being against. However, the gender difference is largely explained by differences in career plans and perceptions of the police role. Students who foresee a police career in patrol work and have an autonomous, non-legalistic perception of the police role are more likely to prefer armament. Previous education does not seem to influence students' opinion on this issue.

Keywords: police students, police recruits, attitudes, use of force, armament

Introduction

From an international perspective, having routinely unarmed police is an exception. Only five countries have chosen not to routinely equip patrol officers with firearms: Norway, Ireland, New Zealand, Iceland and the U.K. (except Northern Ireland) (Finstad, 2011a). The debate over whether the Norwegian police should remain routinely unarmed has been extensive (e.g. Finstad, 2011a; Hendy, 2014). The current Norwegian government is in favour of armament and the police force has been temporarily armed since November 2014, the reason being a perceived heightened level in the risk of terrorism. However, whether and when the Norwegian police force will be permanently armed remains an unsettled question.

In this paper, we explore Norwegian police students' attitudes towards armament and whether this attitude is influenced by gender, background, career plans or students' view of the societal role of the police. The latter includes both how dangerous police work is perceived to be by the students, and their attitudes towards non-legalistic police work. The analyses are based on survey data from all Norwegian police students graduating in 2013 (N = 513).

In a comprehensive review, Klahm et al. (2014) conclude that police use of force is an ill-defined concept in previous research and clearly demonstrate how and why this concept is difficult to measure. Attitudes towards the use of force may be related to a broad range of police behaviour. We have focused here on the most serious level of force, namely, the use of firearms. Furthermore, within a routinely unarmed police service, it is highly relevant to investigate attitudes towards a possible future change in armament policy. An extensive body of research covers officers' attitudes towards police use of force (e.g. Ingram, Weidner, Paoline, & Terrill, 2014; Klahm & Tillyer, 2010; Paoline & Terrill, 2011). These studies use diverse measures of attitudes towards the use of force, such as how officers would react to hypothetical situations.

Since attitudes towards armament represent a concrete and easy-to-measure concept, we believe that this is a new and interesting approach to the debate on how to measure attitudes towards instruments of power and the use of force. The Norwegian situation in which armament is intensively debated provides us with an opportunity to explore how gender, background, career plans and views on the role of the police influence police opinions on this important instrument of police power.

The year 2013 was a crucial point for measuring attitudes towards armament. This was the last year before the Norwegian police were temporarily armed and the debate peaked in both the media and among police officers and students. Measuring attitudes at this point in

Norway provided a historic opportunity for exploring the dividing lines among police students when it comes to this aspect of police use of force.

Permanent armament highlights one central aspect of the police role: the police as a practitioner of legitimate state force (Reiner, 2010, p. 7). Permanently and visibly armed police give a clear signal that they have the potential and the legal right to use lethal force. Hence, police armament influences their public image.

To our knowledge, no previous study has explored attitudes towards armament among police students although there are some studies of attitudes among police officers. In 2011, Finstad used the same question as we used in the present study on a sample of 4147 police officers. She found that 60% of officers were against armament, 20% were in favour and 20% were undecided (Finstad, 2011b). However, there are some indications that the proportion in favour of armament is higher among the more operative personnel and that some of those who were previously undecided may have become more positive towards armament after the incident on 22 July 2011, when a right-wing terrorist killed 77 civilians in Norway (Politiforum, 2012).

Previous research and theoretical background

As police officers in spe, police students are attempting to grasp what they perceive as the culturally shared attitudes and beliefs of the police service they are about to enter (Chan, Devery, & Doran, 2003; Van Maanen, 1976). Thus, to predict their attitudes towards the use of force, one should pay attention to the attitudes in the police service. On the other hand, police students are also influenced by their study environment, which provides diverse views on policing roles. In other words, police students' attitudes are influenced by at least two cultures: occupational culture(s) and university culture(s), in addition to the personal views and beliefs they bring into their police training (Petersson, forthcoming). Building on Van Maanen's (1975) hypothesis that police recruits pass through developmental stages during their early careers, Haarr (2005) claims that recruits will experience conflict and dissonance when facing the police culture and occupational environment.

In 1978, Van Maanen described the self-image of U.S. police officers as primarily law enforcers, engaged in an ongoing struggle with those who upset the just order of the regime (Van Maanen, 1978, p. 222). In cases in which police authority is challenged, it is crucial to demonstrate police authority. Similar views are expressed by police officers in Petersson's

(forthcoming) more recent study of the Swedish police. However, unlike Van Maanen, Petersson describes a divided police force, in which some officers are more willing to use almost any means judged as necessary to uphold police authority. Visible and permanent armament is an obvious way to signal police authority. Hence, those who are most likely to defend police authority by any means will probably also be those most in favour of armament. Based on this, we expect more positive attitudes towards armament among students with autonomous, non-legalistic attitudes. Since previous research has indicated that autonomous attitudes are more wide-spread among officers working the streets (Fekjær, Petersson, & Thomassen, 2014), we expect that those oriented towards a career in operational police work would have more positive attitudes towards armament.

The occupational attitudes and beliefs about the use of force can be viewed in terms of how heavily the crime fighter role is emphasized as a core of the police role. Terrill, Paoline and Manning (2003) argue that crime fighting activities fill the centre stage of policing as a means of coping with the ambiguity of the police role in society. Thus, ‘officers, as culture carriers, are expected to “show balls” on the street during encounters with citizens’ (Terrill et al., 2003, p. 1006).

However, as the emphasis on crime fighting may vary between individuals and police subcultures, a corresponding variation in ‘heavy-handed policing’ (Haarr, 2005) and the use of force could be expected. For example, in Muir’s (1977) typology of police officers, the ‘enforcers’ have a strong will for coercion and a relatively weaker empathy for the citizens with whom they interact and may correspond to the ‘crime fighters’ mentioned above. In contrast, Muir’s ‘professionals’ use force when needed but with an integrated perspective of the citizens and ‘reciprocators’ are described as helpers with a comparatively reluctant view concerning the use of force. A highly similar typology was found in a Norwegian factor-analytic study of police officers’ preferences for conflict resolution tactics (Abrahamsen & Strype, 2010). Among police students, an indicator of preferred policing types could be studied in terms of future job preferences, e.g. operational careers versus crime prevention and investigation careers. We would expect students who plan an operational career to have a more positive attitude towards routine armament.

To become a police officer in Norway, a bachelor’s degree from the Norwegian Police University College is required. It has been shown that a higher educational level is related to less use of physical force (Paoline & Terrill, 2007) but does not necessarily influence attitudes towards less lethal force policy (Ingram et al., 2014). Since all police students in Norway

receive a relatively long police education, only previous higher education could account for education-related variance in students' attitudes towards the use of force.

Finally, what is known about the effect of gender on attitudes towards the use of force? In a review of studies on gender and the use of force, Klahm and Tillyer (2010) found that most studies found neither differences in how often male and female officers used force, nor differences in the types of force that were employed by male and female police officers. However, they found some evidence of gender differences in the amount of force used, i.e. male officers used more force than female officers. As the use of firearms is at the top of the police coercion ladder, it could be hypothesized that male officers and possibly also male students would be more favourable towards firearms in the police service. Although Klahm and Tillyer found relatively small gender differences in behaviour, it should be noted that attitudes and behaviours are not necessarily the same. Even if male and female officers employ comparable use of force in comparable situations, it does not mean that their attitudes regarding the use of force in general are the same. More specifically, the use of firearms in a given situation is not the same as the general attitude towards regular armament.

Data and methods

The data in this paper are part of the research project Recruitment, Education and Careers in the Police: A European Longitudinal Study (RECPOL). This study covers Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Belgium, Scotland and Spain (Catalonia). The project includes routine administration of surveys to police students, starting when they enter police training and ending six years into their professional careers. The research design is based on the StudData survey, which was developed by the Centre for the Study of Professions (SPS), Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (SPS, 2015). The RECPOL questions cover background characteristics, general values, opinions on police training and expectations and attitudes towards police work. Taken together, the data from this project provide a unique opportunity to study and compare police recruits.

The data in this paper are drawn from the first and second study phases, which included all police students in Norway when they began training in 2010 and finished their education in 2013 (N = 513). The students completed the questionnaire during a college class meeting. Hence, the response rate was quite high: 71% completed the surveys at both time points.

We measured students' attitudes towards armament by asking '*Should the police always carry weapons while on duty*' (yes/no/not decided). The same question has been used

previously with a sample of police officers by Finstad (2011b). The background variables were *gender* (0 = female, 1 = male), *age* (range, 22–34ⁱ) and *previous education* (0 = compulsory education only/upper secondary, 1 = previous higher education).

The variable *operational orientation* was based on students' answers to the question '*If you try to imagine what your life will be like in 10 years' time, how probable is it that the following statements will apply to your situation?*'. We constructed a mean index (Cronbach's alpha = .70) based on the two sub-questions '*I am doing operational police work*' and '*I am working in a specialized operational unit, e.g. a special intervention team*', with responses ranging from 0 = *doesn't apply at all* to 4 = *applies very well*. The variable *perceived danger* is measured by the question '*To what extent do you agree with the following statement on the police profession: police work is dangerous*' (0 = fully disagree, 4 = fully agree).ⁱⁱ

The variable *autonomous attitudes* is based on Fekjær et al. (2014)'s measure of the students' attitudes towards non-legalistic police work. An autonomous outlook on the police role implies that the student sees the achievement of quick and concrete results as more important than following the law in every detail. The index consists of 14 items measured on a scale 1–5 (Cronbach's alpha = .70). The index has been rescaled to range from 0 (legalistic to the maximum extent) to 100 (autonomous to the maximum extent). Examples of items include '*In cases where the law is inadequate, it is acceptable that the police punish those who are obviously guilty*'; '*In policing, it is more important to achieve results than to follow the rules in every detail*'; '*Those who behave in a disrespectful manner towards the police should be treated correspondingly*' and '*If police officers break the rules, then this should be dealt with by colleagues rather than by having charges brought against them*'. The descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

[Table 1 near here]

Table 1 shows that police students were divided into three groups in their attitudes towards armament, each with roughly one third in favour, against or undecided. It is interesting to note such a complete split on this important question. While previous research has shown that police students are quite homogeneous in many ways, the question on armament seems to create a clear division.

The descriptive statistics show that about one third of students were women and almost 40% had some kind of higher education before they started their police education. Their mean age at graduation was 25 years. These students tended to be highly oriented towards an operational career, although there was some dispersion on this question ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.1$ on a scale 0–4). On average, the students leaned towards more legalistic than

autonomous attitudes ($M = 42.4$ on a scale 0–100) but the standard deviation (12.0) shows that these students were divided on this issue. On average, they judged the danger inherent in police work to be medium ($M = 2.1$ on a scale 0–4).

Results

Were these students' attitudes towards armament influenced by their gender, age or previous educational experience? Table 2 shows the results of a multinomial logistic regression.

[Table 2 near here]

Table 2 shows that male students were more likely to answer yes to the question of armament, rather than answering no. The difference is substantial (odds ratio = 2.38). Students with no previous higher education were more likely to prefer armament, relative to being against. Age had no significant effect on students' attitudes towards armament.

Table 2 also shows that the group who responded no to armament and the group who were undecided had quite similar backgrounds; there were no significant differences between these two groups. Judging from background characteristics, the divide therefore seems to be between students in favour of armament versus those against or undecided.

[Table 3 near here]

Table 3 indicates whether students' view of the police's role in society and their career plans affected their attitudes towards armament and whether this can explain gender differences. The results show that students' attitudes towards armament do not seem to be affected by their perception of the dangerousness of police work. The students who view police work as dangerous are not more likely to be in favour of armament, rather than against. What seems to matter are the students' operational orientation and their degree of autonomous attitudes. Those who were interested in pursuing a career on the streets were more likely to favour armament over non-armament. Students with autonomous attitudes were also more likely to be in favour of armament rather than against. We can deduce that if a student were to increase her/his operational orientation or degree of autonomous attitudes, we would expect her/him to increase their preference for armament over non-armament.

Interestingly, the independent variables included in Table 2 also seem to explain the gender difference in Table 1. When we compare women and men who were equally interested in an operational career and had the same level of autonomous attitudes, there are no longer gender differences in being in favour or opposed to armament. Hence, men being more positive to armament appears to result from them being more oriented towards an operational career and holding more autonomous attitudes.

Table 3 also shows that the undecided group is quite similar to the group against armament. There are two exceptions to this, namely, women are more likely to be undecided than against, and those with autonomous attitudes are more likely to be undecided than against. Nevertheless, the main impression from Table 2 holds: the undecided group is more similar to those against armament than to the group in favour.

Conclusion

Previous research has sometimes described police recruits as a quite homogeneous group, exclusively oriented towards law enforcement and crime fighting activities (Terrill et al., 2003; Van Maanen, 1978). Our results tell the story of a more divided group of police students who are split three ways on the important question of permanent armament. This can be interpreted in line with Muir's (1977) typology of police recruits. 'Enforcers' with a strong will for coercion are probably more likely to be in favour of armament, while 'reciprocators' with a more reluctant view of the use of force are probably more sceptical towards armament. Our finding of a divided group of police students is in line with other recent Scandinavian studies on police students' and officers' attitudes (Fekjær et al., 2014; Petersson, forthcoming). We found differences between the students when it came to attitudes towards the role of the police and career plans, and these attitudes influenced their opinions of police armament. This finding of a diverse group of police students provides a reason to question the direct transfer of the uniform picture of police officers described in older U.S. police studies to a modern Scandinavian setting.

Although students with previous education were somewhat more reluctant towards armament, the difference did not reach statistical significance after controlling for career plans and attitudes towards the police role. This is in line with previous research that showed the limited importance of previous education (Ingram et al., 2014). One possible interpretation is that regardless of previous education, police students are a specially selected group, driven by a common and intense motivation to become police officers (Chan et al., 2003; Lauritz, 2009).

Our results show clear gender differences, with women more likely to be against armament rather than in favour. However, this result can be explained by career plans and attitudes towards the police role. When we compared women and men with similar plans for an operational career and degree of autonomous attitudes, there were no significant gender differences in attitudes towards armament. This finding is supported by previous research, which found different career plans among male and female students (Fekjær & Halrynjo,

2012) but limited differences in the use of force (Klahm & Tillyer, 2010). Male and female students' different career plans and attitudes towards the police role explains the gender differences in attitudes towards armament, not gender differences *per se*.

Measuring attitudes towards armament is a clear-cut way of operationalizing one aspect of a concept that is difficult to measure, that is, police attitudes towards the use of force. Although our study only covered a limited portion of this larger question, it clearly demonstrates the dividing lines between the police students on this question. Armament is a concrete and visible demonstration of the police's potential for using violence. Our study elucidates the dividing lines between the students, which may be more difficult to reveal with alternative or less direct measures.

Whether the Norwegian police should be permanently armed remains an unsettled question and one that is beyond the scope of this article. However, our results provide a rationale for questioning whether the decision to permanently arm the Norwegian police could also affect the kind of police officers recruited. These students were divided with male, operationally oriented and autonomous recruits more likely to be in favour of armament, and female students who less frequently plan an operational career and who have a more sceptical attitude towards non-legalistic police work more likely to be against. Permanent armament will probably increase the motivation to become a police officer among some groups and lessen the motivation among others. Ultimately, the choice between armament and non-armament may hence also be a choice about what kind of police officers we want in the future.

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Tables

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	%	
Attitudes towards armament		
Yes	32	
No	33	
Not decided	35	
Gender, female	36	
Previous education, higher education	38	
	Mean	SD
Age	25	2.8
Operational orientation (0–4)	2.7	1.1
Autonomous attitudes (0–100)	42.4	12.0
Perceived danger (0–4)	2.1	1.0
N	513	

Table 2. Attitudes towards armament dependent on background characteristics.

Multinomial regression.

	Yes		Not decided		Likelihood ratio test
	OR	p(Wald)	OR	p(Wald)	p(LR)
Sex	2.38	**	0.69	n.s.	**
Age	1.04	n.s.	0.95	n.s.	n.s.
Previous education	0.55	*	0.67	n.s.	n.s.
–2 Log Likelihood (Change)	35.344 df = 6, p < 0.001				
N	404				

**p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; n.s. = not significant

Table 3. Attitudes towards armament dependent on background characteristics, views on the police and career plans. Multinomial regression.

	Yes		Not decided		Likelihood ratio test
	OR	p(Wald)	OR	p(Wald)	p(LR)
Sex	1.45	n.s.	0.57	*	**
Age	1.08	n.s.	0.96	n.s.	*
Previous education	0.58	n.s.	0.67	n.s.	n.s.
Operational orientation	1.45	**	1.08	n.s.	*
Autonomous attitudes	1.03	*	1.02	*	*
Perceived danger	1.10	n.s.	0.95	n.s.	n.s.
-2 Log Likelihood (Change)	54.918 df = 12, p < 0.001				
N	397				

**p < 0.01, *p < 0.05; n.s. = not significant

ⁱ The 22 students between 30 and 35 years were grouped in two age groups (30–32 and 33–35) to ensure anonymity. To simplify analyses, they were assigned the middle value of their group (31 and 34 years).

ⁱⁱ We also tested non-linear terms for the variables age, operational orientation, autonomous attitudes and perceived danger as well as interaction terms between the background variables and the attitudinal independent variables. None of these were statistically significant.