



Force for change

AS a Chartered Psychologist serving as a senior officer with the Metropolitan Police Service, I was often asked if I was a psychologist or a police officer. But I was frequently at a loss to distinguish between the two roles: both embraced so many similar features, such as studying and interpreting human behaviour, gathering data of human reactions, and in extreme cases seeking approaches to control attitudes and behaviour.

I was sworn in as a police constable in 1966, and rose through the ranks to Inspector in Hornsey. In 1979 I was awarded a scholarship to attend City University to read psychology. My decision to study psychology (and later to take a master's in occupational psychology at the University of East London) was fuelled by my experiences, knowledge and cultural



PAUL MATHIAS describes how psychology has helped his work with the police.

environment as a police officer in London. I was fascinated by the criminal determination of some, the vulnerability to victimisation by others, and the dynamics of interactions in crowd behaviour, domestic incidents and traffic accidents. As a police officer every activity involves dealing with people in situations where they are emotionally charged, where people have lost control or are experiencing events where their normal behaviour patterns do not work, or where the influence of one group discriminates against another.

Such events had dominated my life as a police officer and led to my trying to reason why and how people behaved in such ways and how I was to resolve the situations: like experiments where we gather data, analyse information, propose approaches and resolve the problem. Psychology explained my work as a law officer and enhanced my performance. Equally, my street experiences helped demonstrate psychology's applicability beyond the centres of academic learning. I strongly maintain that every officer uses psychology in the everyday discharge of their duties, and conversely that policing offers a good vehicle for psychologists to practise their knowledge and skills.

I have been able to start and sustain innovative schemes because of the combined experiences of psychology and policing. I developed skills-based training in the Metropolitan Police: some 25 per cent of initial training of any new officer

involves addressing attitudes, communication, interpersonal skills, empathy, and a host of psychological attributes. Officers need to know and accept their own feelings and reactions if they are to understand those of others. Another major initiative started 10 years ago in an inner-city borough in London, employing non-police support workers to attend the scenes of domestic incidents and support victims and their families.

I also introduced a scheme that provides mentors for young children identified as being vulnerable to developing behaviour that will lead to conflict with the police, social services, education and health authorities. Research on a group of persistent young offenders suggested that behaviour that might be regarded as deviant was being exhibited before the age of criminal responsibility (currently 10 in the UK). This innovative approach is the subject of longitudinal evaluation. Hopefully, it will help to reduce the risk of children gravitating to regular offending, and lead to 'savings' to society in terms of the 'fear of crime' and a lighter load on public institutions that otherwise would be required to intervene.

Without my psychology training it is unlikely that I would have understood the scope of these alternative approaches in policing, or have possessed the confidence to take them forward. I also found that my knowledge of 'group dynamics' was invaluable in my role as a Match

This is the first of a new format in The Psychologist. We would like to hear from people who have used their psychological knowledge outside the discipline. If you've got a psychology degree and something interesting to say about how you have put it to use beyond the teaching or practice of psychology, we'd like to hear from you. How has your background been of use in your subsequent career? What is it like 'outside' looking back in? Of course such people might not be reading The Psychologist, so if you were at university with someone who you know went on to different but interesting things, you could see if they would like to contribute. E-mail jonsut@bps.org.uk.

Commander for six years at a major Premiership football club, and throughout Europe as a professional expert on crowd control, management of hostile situations and preventive approaches.

My psychology background has also been a factor in my selection for high-profile posts in internal reform programmes, and I have spoken at numerous conferences to demonstrate the way the police have accommodated the philosophies and practices of psychology. My final posting was as an overseas adviser working to reform and modernise police forces in developing countries, raising awareness of issues such as human rights, corruption, accountability, standards and ethics.

People sometimes ask how I have stayed in contact with other psychologists, perhaps presuming that there is a risk of isolation outside an academic institution. For me the reverse has applied. Not only were there a lot of other police officers who had completed psychology degrees, but I worked with psychologists in social services and in the Prison and Probation Service. Also there was constant interaction

through research projects involving Portsmouth University, Brunel University and the Home Office Research Unit, which strengthened and expanded contacts and generated more and more interest.

Membership of the Division of Forensic Psychology and the European Association of Psychology and Law keeps me well informed of areas of interest to me; and I find *The Psychologist* a most useful publication.

Psychology has been a powerful force for me, opening up exciting opportunities and complementing my role as a police officer. It is a widely held belief that 'once a policeman, always a policeman'. It is also equally true 'once a psychologist, always a psychologist'. I have been fortunate to have been both and want others to enjoy the excitement and experiences. May the force of psychology go with you!

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