Conducting Critical Research on Powerful Organisations

Challenges for Research Independence

Stefan Holgersson

PhD, Norwegian Police University College, Oslo, Norway
Department of Management and Engineering, Linköping University, Sweden
stefan.holgersson@liu.se

Malin Wieslander

PhD, Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Sweden
malin.wieslander@liu.se

Abstract

Independence and integrity in research are prerequisites for objective and ethically responsible research. At the same time, image promotion plays a significant role in many contemporary organisations, and this might influence how research is carried out and presented. The article suggests that organisational branding is significant to understand the conditions in which researchers conduct and present critical research on powerful organisations. In this article we explore what prevents researchers from challenging the police's brand and how researchers can act when their results do so. The results are based on several sources of data, such as field notes, public records, media statements, research reports and interviews with researchers who have presented critical research.

Keywords:
critical research, branding, police, research ethics

Introduction

Research is important for the development of society. All researchers must consider aspects of ethical procedures and the value of independence and integrity, with the ideal that research should be carried out objectively and free from stakeholder influence (Swedish Research Council, 2017). Although it is vital that researchers do not act in their own personal interests or in the interests of other stakeholders, researchers may be placed in situations or assignments where this is difficult to achieve. This is particularly important when research presents critical results on powerful organisations. All researchers in these situations probably reflect on how to present critical results about an organisation; how these results are received by various stakeholders; and the effect that the presentation may have on the researcher's career. The two authors of this article have independently identified dilemmas associated with presenting critical research about the Swedish police, and this has led us to explore the issue further.

In recent decades, several changes have been made in the Nordic countries that we suspect influence the possibilities to conduct critical research on police organisations in these

countries. These include political and economic pressures on organisations arising from the adoption of new public management, an increase in an evidence-based orientation to research that gives priority to 'what works', and the importance for organisations to promote an image of a well-functioning organisation that can be trusted (e.g. Davies, 2016; Holmberg, 2014; 2015; Punch, 2015). Davies (2016), for example, argues that the increasing collaborative relationship between police research and police organisations is needed, but also states that it is important to scrutinise the underlying motivations for research. Depending on these motivations, researchers are faced with challenges of independence and integrity, which in the long run might corrode trust in police research as a whole (see also Reiner, 2012).

This development not only concerns research on Nordic police organisations, but should be seen as part of changes in many societies at large that influence research in various disciplines and organisations. In recent decades, organisational research has shown how legitimacy work is fundamental in both private and public institutions (e.g. Alvesson, 2013b; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The discourse of 'value-based organisations' has increased the significance of value branding and value work in these institutions (Krause-Jensen, 2011). It is worthwhile for organisations to strive to create public trust, but an aim to build positive impressions might come with other consequences. Brunsson (1993) argues, among other things, that higher priority is given to numbers in public organisations than to the reality behind them. The term 'window dressing' has been used by scholars to describe and explain the institutional image or organisational brand that is communicated to the public. Critics argue that the focus on window dressing downplays the actual performance of an organisation, in favour of rhetoric and strategic value branding of the organisation (e.g. Alvesson, 2013a; 2013b). Research also suggests that an organisation can be aided by researchers to build a desired image of the organisation (e.g. Holgersson, 2014; Holmberg, 2015; Wertz, Kyriss, Paranjape & Glantz, 2011). Wertz et al. (2011) found that industry researchers have a long history of manipulation of the presentation of scientific results. An important implication of their analysis of research results concerning the toxic effects of cigarette additives was that the scientific community and regulatory authorities did not take conclusions made by researchers within the tobacco industry or industry-funded research at face value.

This article wishes to deepen the understanding of how powerful organisations, such as the police, respond to critical research on policy and practice, and how this might have an influence on the independence and integrity of researchers. We align with scholars who argue that researchers need "to bring political economy and ethical critique back into academic policing debate" (Reiner, 2012, p. 107), and that they must be reflexive "about current trends in police research, asking critical questions about the underlying motives of the research and stepping back to think about the wider implications of the research" (Davies, 2016, p. 163).

The article suggests that conducting and presenting critical research on an organisation is part of challenging the brand of the organisation. Therefore, branding is significant to understand the conditions under which researchers conduct and present critical research on powerful organisations. The aim is not to study branding *per se*, but to explore what prevents researchers from challenging the police's brand, and to describe how researchers can act when their results do so. Data from many sources, including interviews with researchers, are here used to answer how researchers describe their experiences and reasons for not challenging the police's brand, to describe the outcomes that can be expected when challenging the brand, and to suggest how researchers can act to avoid challenging the police's

brand. The study is based on interviews with all Swedish researchers who have publicly challenged the Swedish Police's brand on several occasions, presenting critical results that described structural problems for which the police is the problem-owner.

Branding and the Swedish Police

Legitimacy work plays a significant role in organisational management and functions in several ways (e.g. Alvesson, 2013b; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Holgersson, 2013; 2014; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Rennstam, 2013). We use the term 'branding' to refer to various image-promoting processes with the aim of making an organisation look good (Alvesson, 2013; Holgersson, 2014). Organisational identity is a key concept when explaining organisational behaviour, where 'image' is central to how the organisation is perceived by the public or its members (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000). This image is fluid and can change, depending on how people portray the organisation, and how the organisation (or its members) portrays itself. Organisational image and identity are interrelated and thus subjected to both internal and external communication (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000).

Theories of branding can be used to explain a driving force for many organisations to 'look good'. Legitimacy activities may be particularly complex in public organisations that 'have a political dimension inside; but there is also a political dimension outside […] with strong connections to the work practices within. In both dimensions, legitimacy is an important factor' (Holgersson & Melin, 2015, p. 14. See also Mintzberg, 1985). Thus, officials are in a difficult position when it comes to public statements concerning the police. Critical statements of a public organisation can negatively influence public perception of the organisation. Public trust in police organisations can therefore be seen as imperative, since loss of legitimacy and perceived ineptitude can erode formal and informal mechanisms of social control that are necessary to maintain order. It is also important for the welfare of the public and employees' job satisfaction. Another aspect to add to the complexity of value branding in a specific area is that branding can also be used to promote personal careers (Holgersson, 2014; 2019).

The Swedish Police places more emphasis and invests more resources in branding than before (Forsell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014; Holgersson, 2014). For instance, the national police commissioner formulated a policy in 2015 that stated that the aim of the police's communication work is to strengthen the brand (Polisen, 2015). The increasing employment of communicators in the public sector and in governmental authorities, such as the police, is one effect of the increased emphasis now being placed on value branding (Forsell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014). To initiate research studies and present their results can be a part of the branding strategy of an organisation (Holgersson, 2014). Scholars have described a tendency in the Swedish Police that is also found in other public institutions: to give priority to political strategies in order to create a good reputation, rather than to address institutional obstacles and problems (Holgersson, 2014; 2015; Rennstam, 2013). This phenomenon has been observed in other police organisations, such as the National Danish Police (Holmberg, 2015) and the New York Police Department (Eterno & Silverman, 2012).

Several studies have given examples of how the communication from the Swedish Police puts the police in a more positive light, where information from the police has been misleading, and sometimes directly wrong (Holgersson, 2013; 2014; Rostami, Melde & Holgersson, 2014). One study has identified more than twenty communication techniques used by the police to deflect criticism and to put forward positive messages (Holgersson, 2014).

This way of communicating also concerns data published in annual reports, where negative results have been concealed (Holgersson, 2014; RRV, 2016). Misleading or wrong information is not always the result of intentional behaviour, but may be the result of misunderstandings or mistakes (Holgersson, 2015).

Critical research and the Swedish Police

Scholars argue that little research with a critical approach that concerns the police has been carried out and presented (e.g. Holmberg, 2014; 2015). This is neither a solely Swedish problem, nor a problem only in police research. Holmberg (2015, p. 45) identifies seven problems in relation to this in Nordic police research: "direction by authorities, censorship, selective funding, 'shopping around', neglect, self-censorship and misguided ethical demands". He shows that the authority is attempting to ensure positive results by exerting strict control, which raises the risk of self-censorship among researchers to secure further funding. The attempt to secure positive results also leads to research being replaced by evaluations, which has two basic implications (Holmberg, 2015, p. 50):

> First, the questions being studied will more often than not be pre-defined and instrumental in scope – leading to the abovementioned lack of critical studies. Second, instrumental evaluations may demand less of the evaluators than does more comprehensive research. Once the goals of the evaluation have been agreed upon, the need for deeper knowledge of the field of study is rendered unnecessary. This opens the door for consultancy firms with limited knowledge about policing and little interest in advancing our knowledge of the field beyond what is specifically paid for. In such a field of competition, it would be no wonder if police researchers restricted themselves, to the detriment of police science.

Several scholars are concerned that the increasingly collaborative nature of police research may have an impact on research independence, which might mean being unable to take on a critical perspective on particular police practices (e.g. Bayley, 2015; Davies, 2016; Holmberg, 2015; Reiner, 2012). Moreover, Holmberg (2015, pp. 49–50) argues that the increasing necessity for external research funding and "the mere threat of selective allocation of funding towards more 'positive' results may influence both how we study specific problems, and what problems we study". Davies (2016, pp. 161–162) suggests that this may "be driven by pragmatic willingness to keep close ties to police organisations in order to secure future research funding and access", and that this embeddedness may have implications for research ethics, such as the reporting of malpractice.

The development of stricter control and the desire to secure positive results are evident in several cases concerning the Swedish Police. One recent example of how this can lead to an increased number of evaluations occurred in 2017. The police received targeted funding from Brottsförebyggande rådet, Brå (the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention), to enable it to be responsible for conducting evaluations. 82 percent of Brå's targeted funding was granted to the police in 2017. Another example of how the above-mentioned development can lead to censorship occurred in 2010, when the Swedish Government instructed the police to improve its ability to conduct evaluations. An independent evaluation unit was established at the Swedish Police with the task of examining and guaranteeing the quality of the published research. Researchers were hired to work at this unit. One purpose of the unit was to improve how the police reports to both the Swedish government and to citizens. Other purposes were to help transform the police into a learning organisation, and to increase police effectiveness and efficiency. However, top-ranking commanders interfered with the work of the independent evaluation unit. In one case, publication of a critical

report was forbidden. Researchers were placed in a dilemma in which they must choose between adapting to the authority's control over research and quitting. The senior researcher who led the evaluation unit resigned in protest, and the research board fell apart when the board members no longer wanted to be part of it (Knutsson, 2015).

Recent research presents several characteristics of the Swedish Police that may have implications for the possibilities to conduct research on the police, and the reception of the results. Scholars have argued that the police management is less open than the managements of other public authorities and in other sectors (Andersson-Arntén, Jansson, Olsen & Archer, 2017). One report questions whether the Swedish Police is capable of learning, when it comes to appreciating and identifying problems (Andersson-Arntén, 2013). Other reports describe a widespread fear of reprisals among police employees, which affects the willingness to address problems in the organisation (Holgersson, 2019; Wieslander, 2016; 2018). Moreover, police employees score the lowest value for how important they consider it to be that their work is grounded in science. On a scale from +100 to –100, university teachers score over 90, doctors and psychologists just under 90, engineers and teachers between 50 and 60, and priests 30. Police employees score –20. The police employees also scored the lowest value (–30) of all 18 professions concerning how important they consider it to be to be updated on new research findings (Brante, Johnsson, Olofsson & Svensson, 2015).

One scholar, who in numerous publications has identified problems and suggested solutions concerning the Swedish Police, reported that the police's reaction towards critical research has been multifaceted, and the consequences have been both positive and negative (Holgersson, 2015). Holgersson argues that it is possible to criticise without any negative outcomes, but the key is how much the result challenges the positive image that the police wishes to promote. It is particularly difficult to publish criticism if it does not support an image that high-ranking officials with great influence have put a lot of effort into creating (Holgersson, 2014; 2015).

It is important to identify and describe problems in order to improve organisational effectiveness and efficiency (e.g. Miceli, Near & Schwenk, 1991), but a fear of voicing criticism (Shepherd, Patzelt, Williams & Warnecke, 2014) and actions taken by what are known as 'information gatekeepers' (Bouhnik & Giat, 2015) can lead to misleading information being presented. Intense attempts by an organisation to 'look good' run the risk of creating an atmosphere in which individuals may believe, falsely, that their primary responsibility is to save face for the organisation by covering up wrongdoing (Goffman, 1956). Bayley (2015, p.11) concludes that in the past 50 years of police research, police organisations "have not been the source of significant reform ideas". Rather, the majority of innovations in police research (e.g. community policing, hotspots policing, problem-oriented policing) have all come from outsiders (Bayley, 2015).

In summary, an interest in branding by governmental organisations generates window-dressing activities, and this seems to be the case even for the Swedish Police. Further, research has shown that the Swedish Police is far from being a learning organisation: its transparency is low and there is a widespread opinion within the organisation that one risks retaliation when raising criticism. Thus, we suggest that conducting and presenting critical research on an organisation must be placed in the context of branding. Branding is significant for, and can contribute to, understanding why the independence and integrity of researchers may be challenged when conducting critical research on powerful organisations who put a lot of effort into branding.

Methodology

The aims of this study were to explore what prevents researchers from challenging the police's brand, and to describe how researchers can act when their results do so. The following research questions have been central to the analysis:

- How do researchers describe their experiences and reasons for not challenging the police's brand?
- What outcomes can be expected for researchers who challenge the police's brand?
- How can researchers act to avoid challenging the police's brand?

This study uses a critical research approach. Stahl (2008, p. 139) defines 'critical research' as "research characterised by an intention to change the status quo, overcome injustice and alienation, and promote emancipation". Myers and Klein (2011, p. 25) have stated that:

> […] critical theorists advocate values such as open democracy, equal opportunity, or discursive ethics […] The goal is not just to reveal the current forms of domination, but to suggest how unwarranted uses of power might be overcome.

We agree with these researchers. More importantly, we believed when starting this study that a critical approach would enable us to achieve its aims, which concern the conditions for independent research about powerful organisations.

Data

We collected data from several sources. The sources consist of:

Public records: Public records from agencies/government bodies were used. These included emails between researchers, emails between researchers and the police, and other public records from the police.

Reports and media: We used a large number of research studies and reports about the Swedish Police. The receptions of these studies from the police, such as official and unofficial statements in media and on the police's webpages, were included in the dataset. Additionally, we used the internet to identify researchers who had made critical public statements about the Swedish Police, and researchers who had mitigated critique. These media statements and research reports are also included in the dataset.

Interviews with researchers: Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with all Swedish researchers who have had experience of publicly challenging the Swedish Police's brand on several occasions. We asked about their perception and experiences of making such challenges. Three further researchers were interviewed who had been employed by the police or another Swedish government agency conducting research on the police. Two of these had criticized the police and one had not. These ten researchers met the requirement of having extensive postdoctoral research experience of researching the police. Nine of these interviews were conducted by telephone, and one by email.

Research process and selection of data sample

We used an iterative research process, in which an analysis of the data collected was used to determine whether there was a need for more data collection. In the initial data collection and analysis, we intended to answer the research questions using our own field notes and by

referring to research reports, statements from both researchers and the police, media reports and public records to which we had access, such as emails to and from employees in governmental organisations. We decided to supplement this material with interviews with researchers who have presented extensive criticism of the police. In the following, we describe how the research process developed, the selection of the data sample in this process, and the nature of the data that were used for analysis.

Google searches using several search terms were used for two main purposes. Firstly, this identified media articles in which researchers challenged the police's brand, and secondly, it gave us the names of researchers to contact for interviews. Furthermore, we sought articles by specific researchers who we believed to have written articles critical of the police, while being unsure of the extent of criticism. Details of these searches have been anonymised to ensure confidentiality. We defined "challenging the brand" as presenting criticism that described structural problems for which the police is the problem-owner. This meant that we excluded criticism such as pointing out that the police need more resources, that they need help from others in society to solve a problem, and that they need new laws. In the same way, we did not define statements as "challenging" if they were formulated in a way that presented the police in a positive manner, such as reports that the police are on their way to solving a problem, and that they are using (or are about to use) new tactics or methods to improve police work (see Holgersson, 2014). We defined "several times" as three or more different cases of challenging criticism. The same criticism presented in different media articles or in different channels was calculated as one case.

The search resulted in nearly 1000 media articles. Of these, many were excluded because the person criticising the police was not a researcher, or the critique did not challenge the police's brand. The remaining articles were qualitatively analysed. This data gave information of the manner and content of the challenge to the police's brand. In this analysis, we also identified researchers who had expressed themselves in ways that mitigated critique of the police's brand. Reports and research connected to these researchers were also read, and compared with the statements in the press. Questions guiding this phase of analysis were: are the report and the statements in press compatible, and on what scientific grounds are the critique or the mitigation of critique based? In this analysis, we classified the type of criticism and calculated how many times it had been published. In summary, these media records and reports written by researchers were used in the analysis to gain a broad understanding of how the independence of researchers can be challenged when conducting research on powerful organisations. This data sample is used to provide various examples of this phenomenon, and we do not claim that it illustrates the full variation in terms of generalisation (Larsson, 2009).

In this data search, over 50 researchers who had expressed criticism of the police were identified. Forty-two of these researchers did not fulfil the criteria for inclusion in the sample, since they had not challenged the brand, or had challenged it only once. Eight of the 50 researchers were included in the analysis, having criticized the police *several times* in the media in a way that had *challenged its brand*. The purpose of this selection was to ensure greater reliability and provide additional perspectives on the research questions – since they deal specifically with reasons that prevent researchers challenging the police's brand, and the description of how researchers can act when their results do so. One of the authors of this article was among the eight researchers who had challenged the police brand several times. We interviewed the other seven researchers who fell into this category (referred below as "Researchers A-G").

In order to develop the dataset and collect more data, we attempted to interview other researchers with extensive postdoctoral experience of researching the police. We identified six researchers who fulfilled these criteria. Three of these researchers had presented criticism of the police of various degrees of severity, and three of them had not. Of these six, we interviewed two, and one sent answers via email (Researchers H-J). Two of these had criticized the police and one had not. The remaining three were not interviewed: one could not be contacted, and two declined to participate. They responded to our email in a way that clearly indicated that they declined to participate for reasons that were in line with the answers given by other researchers who were interviewed in this study.

The data from the different sources did not differ qualitatively concerning content. It is true that we initially found a difference in that in the results from the media search we came across researchers who stated that criticising the police was not a problem and that the police were open to research. However, when we analysed this further it became clear that these researchers had not challenged the brand. Although the dataset does not contain any conflicting ideas, the interviews generated data on motivation, and included explanations from researchers that the public records lacked.

Analysis of data

The analysis used an abductive approach with a dialectic relationship between data and theory. This approach can be described as a link between inductive and deductive work, by contributing interpretations or hypotheses to the data that are associated with deductive implications (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2010). This process has resulted in a new way of describing and understanding the particular and its relationship to the general, and thus makes clear the authors' re-contextualisation of the data. In this reflexive research approach, we combined the use of theories and previous research of the police with a categorisation of the empirical findings into dominating themes (cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2010; Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Ethical considerations

The organisation addressed in this study is not anonymous. The names of the officials involved are not mentioned in the paper, but sometimes figures in these organisations are so visible that it is not possible to protect their identity (Pettigrew, 1997). The public records, research reports and media articles that we have used are all freely available, and it was not necessary to obtain the author's consent to use these. All participants who were interviewed were informed about the purpose of the study, and all gave their consent. They were offered the opportunity to read through and revise their statements, and have given their consent to publication. Several informants stated that they could be named in the study, but we decided not to provide the name of any participant, in order to enhance and secure the confidentiality of all participants. This includes the lack of explicit references to statements and reports presented by various researchers. We concluded that the confidentiality of the individual is more important than the opportunity for the police to defend itself. However, it is still possible for the police to respond to the general results of the study. It is a major disadvantage for the transparency and validity of the study not to be able to support the examples we give with references. We have, however, concluded that the benefits of identifying individual researchers are not sufficiently large to justify this breach of anonymity.

Findings

The first section focuses on researchers' experiences and reasons for not challenging the police's brand, and what they consider may be possible outcomes for researchers who do challenge it. This section deals in detail with material that has emerged in interviews with the researchers, and includes other data, such as email, statistics, governmental decisions, governmental reports and other types of public records.

The second section focuses on how researchers can act in order not to challenge the police's brand, and describes how researchers avoid challenging or even contributing to a challenge of the branding of the police. This section contains information from interviews with researchers, together with large quantities of data from other sources, such as public records, research reports, and media statements from researchers, both those who have been interviewed and those who have not been interviewed.

Reasons for not challenging the police's brand

A suppressive research climate

In the data analysis, we identified two central factors that put researchers into difficult situations, and that together contribute to a suppressive research climate. Firstly, pressure is increasing for the police to sustain a positive brand and, secondly, acceptance of internal and external whistleblowing is low. These results correspond with those of previous research (e.g. Andersson-Arntén, Jansson, Olsen & Archer, 2017; Holgersson, 2014; 2015; 2019; Wieslander, 2016; 2018).

The data make it clear that it has recently become important for the police to look good and maintain a positive brand. Several researchers (A, F, G and H) describe how the prospects of conducting research within the Swedish Police have worsened in recent years. One of them (G) describes how research has come to be seen as a threat, and this researcher now feels diminished and is given a poorer reception than that given two decades ago. Other researchers have also described how a strong and growing aim of the police to look good affects not only the conditions for doing research but also the way in which the results are received. Researcher G suggests that this development arises from the increasing number of civilian communicators in the agency, and to a change in management in which the management team has become "insecure". This has led to critical research being received in a different way, most often described as a defensive, "hedgehog" approach. Another researcher (C) explains how an "atmosphere of silence" has arisen from the specific secrecy characteristics that surround police work. This creates a space for communicators to promote the organisation, and the police has obtained "an army of communicators whose purpose is not to give an objective picture of policing, but to present police work in the best possible light" (Interview researcher C, November 2017).

Presenting critical research challenges the aim of the organisation to look good. The researchers interviewed stated that this kind of whistleblowing is followed by sanctions. Some state that sanctions were experienced not solely on an individual basis, but widespread among both officers and researchers:

> My experience of conducting research within the police is that the highest managers are actively uninterested in research. If you questioned anything, it was not met positively. […] Open discussion is not encouraged, and that was something I felt as an employed researcher. This has also become clear when talking to both officers and other researchers. (Interview researcher D, December 2017)

One researcher (B), who has neither been employed nor been granted funding by the police, describes a sense of discomfort even at a distance when criticizing the police:

> Even at a distance you can get a sense of discomfort when you criticise the police […] I would probably not manage to be employed within the police to do research. There is such an extensive power to control inside the police. (Interview researcher B, December 2017)

These feelings of unease and discomfort are frequently expressed in the interviews, and are a significant part of the reasons given that researchers do not challenge the police's brand.

In the interviews, the researchers describe their own understanding of researching the police, and the positive perceptions of other researchers. For instance, researcher I argues that researchers who express a positive opinion about the police's reaction towards their criticism are either promoting their personal career, or they have not witnessed any consequences in practice:

> If scholars state that the police are highly accepting of critical research, they either have a lack of insight or they state this as it will have an effect on their own chances of gaining further access within the police. (Interview researcher I, December 2017)

Researcher I also states that it is possible to have a positive dialogue with a manager who agrees with the results, but who can act differently when the results have been published and a public response to them must be given:

> When results are presented at the highest managerial level, one-to-one, one can get confirmation of the results: that they are accurate, and that the manager agrees. However, when the results are made public, controversy can arise, and you can receive criticism and be sanctioned by the same person. (Interview researcher I, December 2017)

Researcher I explains that having a manager listening to research results, and being able to present and publish them within the police, can be interpreted by researchers as a willingness from the police to listen and take action in accordance with the criticism. This researcher has seen that it is possible to present criticism if it does not compel the police to take action as a consequence of the results, and that the police instead can easily brush off the criticism.

Several researchers have reached the same conclusion: that one significant factor influencing reactions from the police is whether the research challenges the organisation's aim of branding. If so, it can result in negative actions taken by the police management against the researcher. Researcher J concludes that one factor that influences the way in which research is received is whether or not the researcher has attempted to understand the complex situations that affect police work.

The organisation's negative reactions towards research results

How an organisation responds to critical research results also stands out as significant for the relationship between the organisation and the research community. Researchers describe how they have been questioned about the research design and their credibility, and how they are forced to carry out self-censorship – especially researchers employed by the police. Similar reports have been made concerning researchers who study the National Danish Police (Holmberg, 2014; 2015). Research carried out by both authors of this paper with results likely to negatively affect the police's brand has been publicly dismissed as dead

or bad research. For example, one research report presented by Holgersson showed that the Swedish Police's way of formulating goals has negative consequences in restricting the use and availability of narcotics (Holgersson, 2007). The national police commissioner responded to the research study with a news article entitled: 'Incorrect criticism about the police's narcotics work' and stated that the result of the research study was wrong (Polisen, 2007). During a speech to several hundred participants a few months later, he said:

> This spring, there was a so-called researcher in police science who wrote a report on how the police carry out work with narcotics. It horrified me, because it was of such poor quality that even an untrained person like myself could see that it just was rubbish. (Grahn, 6 December 2007)

Another research study published by Holgersson (2014) was dismissed by police representatives in the national media:

> *Holgersson's claims are 'insolent'. – He lacks insight. (Röstlund, 11 January 2014)*

Researcher I describes how police supervisors have adjusted, toned down and deleted the results of 'problematic' reports. This researcher also describes how supervisors argued that reports should not be printed or published, giving as a reason, for example, that the results are irrelevant or dead. Researcher F described how the "National police commissioner did all he could to stop a report, and the National Police Board greatly interfered in the process". For another researcher (A), it became clear how management within the police could act if it wanted to stop criticism that challenged the organisation's brand. The researcher was shocked that management forbade the researcher to talk about how the management had interfered in the research process:

> I was also forbidden to talk about this, which means that they deprived me of my freedom of speech. It was a shocking experience. The real reason was probably that they were afraid that the results of the research study would counteract the image of the police work that was presented by the management. (Interview researcher A, November 2017)

Researchers who have not personally experienced difficulties in presenting research results described the experiences of others. Two researchers (B and C) have not experienced personal difficulties as a result of their own research, but they noted that other researchers have run into problems, as described below:

> Instead of the police appreciating criticism as a welcome contribution, they have met it with silence, critics have been questioned – even hounded – and research results have been rejected. (Interview researcher C, December 2017)

Several researchers describe how this reaction from the police is associated with a branding strategy – an effort from the police to fend off criticism. As an example, one researcher (B) relates that a manager at the top of the hierarchy demanded a copy of a report before it was published. This researcher believes that the police's interest in research reports was to facilitate preparing a defence from the criticism in reports, a defence that often includes statements in the media that the police has begun to use, or is in the process of introducing, new techniques, or that it is educating the personnel, to eliminate a problem. Researcher B finds the silence and the lack of receptiveness to the criticism most frightening, in addition to the actions of managers:

> At one time I presented my research report at a police station where the report had been brought and distributed to the officers listening to the speech. When the presentation was finished the supervisor collected all the reports and went away with the box of reports. (Interview researcher B, December 2017)

Some researchers state that not only has their research been questioned, criticism has been made on a personal level. A researcher (E) who got into bad standing with the highest management within the police concludes that:

> If you criticise the police in an informed way you are in trouble in the sense that higher managers put time and effort into questioning you as a person, rather than the issue you have raised. (Interview researcher E, December 2017)

One researcher (I) told of going from being appreciated to being a "pariah" when reporting critical results within and about the police, and described how reporting results that may harm the brand is unpopular and costly.

Impaired possibilities for further research.

One reason often stated for the reluctance to challenge the police's brand is that it may decrease the possibilities for further research. This may take several forms, such as difficulties in obtaining access to data, and decreased possibilities for financial support or research positions.

Several researchers (A, B, C, D and I) describe how the publication of critical research results has affected them in many ways, such as "decreased chances of receiving further assignments", "lack of economic resources for new studies as well as personal consequences". They describe how the police can make it difficult to proceed with research projects in various ways, such as restricting access to data. People outside the police organisation may find it difficult to do research if the police denies them access to the organisation. One way for the police to obstruct research is to reject (or ignore) requests to gain access to personnel or to public records, such as in the following cases:

- The police say that the requested documents do not exist (e.g. Polisen, 2009) – despite the fact that they have been filed (Polisen, 2008).
- The police do not respond to requests to access documents (JO, 2016).
- The police delay the disclosure of documents (JO, 2017), even though the court concluded that the justification for withholding documents was incorrect (Kammarrätten, 2017).
- The police prohibit the use of the internal email system or the employee's time to ask questions about the employees' ability to voice criticism (email, February 2012).
- The police withdraw the access rights of the researchers for computer systems and police stations, even though this violates labour law (Kjöller, 2016). In the case in question, the withdrawal was not recorded in official records.

Some of the impaired possibilities for further research concern financial support or research positions at the police. Naturally, the police can easily obstruct researchers employed within the organisation. One researcher (D) described the process of being phased out due to critical results as follows:

> What happened was that I did not receive any kind of resources to be able to continue with research. (Interview researcher D, December 2017)

The police's power to prohibit research affects not only researchers employed within the organisation. When external researchers apply for funding, it is common that one precondition is approval from the organisation that will be the focus of the study. This condition has been used in some cases to limit the possibility to study the police when the management believes that the study may negatively affect the brand.

During 2017, the police received 82% of the targeted funding from Brå (the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention), which enables the police itself to be responsible for conducting evaluations of police work. The police's recruitment processes for the researchers who will conduct these evaluations have not been open or transparent. None of the researchers employed have officially criticized the police.

How researchers can act in order to avoid challenging the police's brand

Researchers face choices in how to act in order to avoid challenging the police's brand. We have identified two main strategies for researchers to avoid challenging the police's brand: to avoid engaging in critical research, and to contribute to a positive branding of the police. These findings derive from several sources of data that include statements from interviewed researchers and statements from researchers found in research reports, media statements and public records.

To avoid engaging in critical research

An avoidance of engagement in critical research is expressed in two ways: avoiding collaborating (openly) or being associated with researchers who present critical results, and avoiding undertaking critical research. We found motivations or explanations for avoiding engagement in critical research in some cases (in interviews and in public records), and in these cases the researchers had avoided such research in order to promote their opportunities of carrying out research in the future. These considerations about the risk of challenging the police's brand by being associated with a critical research report are here illustrated by two emails (public records). Two researchers (not interviewed in this study), who had been helpful with reading and commenting on the draft of a research report that was banned by the police officials, declined to be officially thanked in the foreword of the report. One of the researchers wrote in an email that:

> […] I don't want to be dragged into possible conflicts with RPS [Rikspolisstyrelsen/National Police Board] […] It would not be very smart of me […] when I'm dependent on external funding. The reality is unfortunately like that. It's not about the quality of the report. (Email, December 2011)

The other researcher expressed similar concerns:

> […] We have connections to RPS and could get into trouble because of the report, in one way or another. Hope you understand our standpoint. (Email, December 2011)

Although the researchers' decision not to be mentioned in the foreword is not in line with academic tradition, their motives are reasonable in the light of the organisation's efforts to achieve positive branding. Apprehension about the reaction to criticism in the report also played a part in their decision. An individual researcher may put a great deal at risk when using a form of expression that the police management does not appreciate. Researcher F

believes that the police's way of dealing with criticism tends to corrupt researchers, and that several research colleagues acquiesce in requests for silence from the police.

Other reflections made by researchers concern an avoidance to undertake critical research. Although researcher H has never presented criticism of the police, this researcher is not inclined to undertake any research that may cause negative reactions within the police:

> I have never had any problems with negative reactions concerning my research results. But I know colleagues who have been exposed to it […] It is not that these researchers have done anything wrong, they have just addressed a question that is not appreciated. […] I would take a step back from undertaking any research that risked causing negative reactions within the police. (Interview researcher H, December 2017)

This indicates that even though researchers themselves have not experienced any negative reactions, the experience of others can influence their willingness to undertake critical research.

To contribute to the branding of the police through expert-shopping

Researchers can contribute to the branding of the police in several ways. One implication of the police organisation's aim of positive branding is "expert-shopping", as described in an interview:

> One consequence of the police's interest in creating an attractive image of the operation – that they are on the right path, etc. – is to utilise so-called 'expert-shopping'. They try to get hold of people who support the things they want supported and might have their own agendas that coincide with the organisation's. They might make use of scientists and other experts. (Interview researcher E, December 2017)

Interviewees state that this way of researchers taking part in positive branding of the police by being used as representatives for expert-shopping is important to maintain good relations with the police, which are vital for one's future career. The way of presenting and using research results publicly by both researchers and the authority can contribute to presenting researchers as guarantors for good police work or that work is improving. The police's way of presenting positive results with the aid of researchers has been reported also in Nordic police research (Holmberg, 2015).

Researcher D exemplifies how the independence and integrity as a researcher were challenged by an interest in using the research to enhance a positive image of the police:

> My experience of how the Police Board wanted to use me as a researcher was that they wanted me to tell things and tone down criticism towards the police by stating that "this was still rather good work" even though it wasn't. (Interview researcher D, December 2017)

This researcher stated that the Police Board was positive towards surveys that presented a positive image of the police, and that these reports could be used for expert-shopping, by which the police could make statements "with evidence/support from research". Researcher D also describes how it would have been easy to conform to the wishes of the management, and in this way achieve a comfortable work situation. The researcher in question, however, could not act in this way, and felt compelled to react to unsatisfactory situations or circumstances. This resulted in negative consequences for the researcher.

Four dominating and interrelated ways of expert-shopping can be distinguished in the data: being a representative for expert-shopping, choosing a selective research design, downplaying criticism, and overemphasising improvements.

As illustrated above, researchers can contribute to positive branding by *being a representative for expert-shopping*. This can occur in various ways, such as: (a) Researchers state that the police management is now accepting the results of research in a positive manner, even though the researchers do not have any experience of criticizing the police's brand. (b) Researchers are members of reference groups or participate in producing a report in a manner that can be perceived as guaranteeing the quality of the research, even though the researchers in reality have a limited influence on the contents of the report. (c) Researchers produce a manual that the police can use to strengthen its brand by pointing out that it now has a manual produced by researchers.

A selective research design can be formed in different ways, such as: (a) Researchers conduct a study with a weak research design that is insufficient to assess accurately the effect of a certain activity. The weakness of the design is not emphasized when the results are summarised, and the positive effects are highlighted in the media. (b) Researchers focus on a limited question that does not challenge the police's brand. (c) Researchers choose not to address structural problems that are closely associated with the matter being studied. (d) Information provided by the police is used in research without necessary triangulation being carried out. The image presented by the police is reflected in reports, even though this image may be misleading or wrong. The police can subsequently refer to the reports to strengthen their image. (e) Researchers cite one or more research studies that validate a successful working method and/or form of organisation, and avoid presenting research results that suggest a different conclusion or indicate that it is difficult to make such positive conclusions.

A third recurrent theme in the data is the *downplaying of criticism* in various writings and statements: (a) In press releases from research reports, criticism is downplayed and matters that may have negative outcomes for the police's brand are presented in a more positive way than they appear in the research report. (b) Vital criticism levelled in a project evaluation is mentioned in only one or a few sentences in the research report, which lowers the probability that journalists will become aware of the problems identified. (c) Researchers remain passive when the police refer to a research report in a misleading or erroneous way, and do not make official statements to make the true content of the research report clear.

Finally, a fourth way to improve branding is to *overemphasise improvements*: (a) Before a study is conducted, researchers make statements about working methods and/or forms of organisation to suggest that the police is on the right track when it uses these methods or forms of organisation, even though the purpose of the study is to investigate the effects of the methods or forms of organisation. (b) Researchers make statements about working methods and/or forms of organisation that put the police in a positive light, creating the impression that research findings have been published to support these statements, even though this is not the case. (c) Researchers put the police in a positive light by stating that the police has begun to deal with an identified problem. They may refer to, for example, an ongoing or forthcoming educational activity, new techniques or a method that the police uses or has an ambition to use.

Discussion

Bayley (2015) showed that police organisations have not been the source of significant reform ideas in the past 50 years of police research. Bayley's finding is not surprising. It is important for public organisations, such as the police, to promote an image of a well-func-

tioning organisation that can be trusted (e.g. Davies, 2016; Holmberg, 2014; 2015; Punch, 2015). When an organisation has a strong desire to 'look good', there is a risk that significant problems will be hidden or played down, and therefore remain undealt with (e.g. Miceli, Near & Schwenk, 1991). The concerns raised in public by scholars can, therefore, seem to be a natural consequence – that an increasingly collaborative policing research can have an impact on research independence and the ability to take a critical perspective on particular police practices (Bayley, 2015; Davies, 2015; Holmberg, 2014; 2015; Reiner, 2012). The findings presented here confirm that their worries are well-grounded. When powerful organisations, such as the police, place more emphasis and invest more resources in branding than before (cf. Forsell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014; Holgersson, 2014), we can expect that the strain on research independence and integrity will be intensified.

If an organisation is receptive towards research results, there is less need for researchers to make their criticism public. At the same time, research on police culture and management addresses the importance that researchers create a pressure for change, in order for the police to develop in a desired manner (Andersson-Arntén, 2013; Andersson-Arntén, Jansson, Olsen & Archer, 2017; Brante, Johnsson, Olofsson & Svensson, 2015; Wieslander, 2016). However, the work presented here indicates that researchers who have repeatedly challenged the police's brand share similar experiences and perceptions: publishing critical results may result in several disadvantages for the researcher, and obstacles to future research. This confirms previous results (Davies, 2015; Holmberg, 2014; 2015, Reiner, 2012).

A researcher relies not only on his or her own experiences when carrying out research, but also on those of other researchers. Researchers become aware of conditions and potential consequences as they share experiences in networks. The results presented here focus on the reasons given by researchers that they refrain from challenging the police's brand, but the police may also be aided by researchers in promoting and enhancing the police as a strong and positive brand. We have also given some examples of this.

Holmberg (2015, p. 55) asks whether research integrity and independence can be maintained in an environment of this kind. The results presented here suggest that there is a need to increase and sustain opportunities for independent research, where funding is granted by independent research councils, and where the effects of an agency's desire for branding are minimised. This is not only in the interest of the research community and the public good, but also of the police. Independent research can not only provide legitimacy and increase trust, but also contribute to the development of an efficient organisation. Either way, independent research (even with critical results) can, and maybe should, become a more significant part of an organisation's strategic branding, thus providing an image of an organisation that develops according to scientific standards.

The findings in this study reinforce arguments from scholars "to bring political economy and ethical critique back into academic policing debate" (Reiner, 2012, p. 107) and to explore critical questions about the underlying motives of the research (Davies, 2016, p. 163).We agree with the warnings given by Davies (2016) that shortcomings in researchers' independence and integrity corrode trust in police research as a whole (see also Reiner, 2012). The effect for the police can be the same in a long-term perspective. However, if an organisation wishes to create positive images in a short-term perspective, it can be tempting for it to put pressures onto researchers that interfere with the researcher's independence and integrity. We will therefore add our voice to those, such as Enterno and Silverman (2012), Holgersson (2014; 2015) and Rennstam (2013), who have pointed at the importance of a more comprehensive debate about branding within the police.

Conclusions

In order to develop an organisation, it is vital that significant problems are not hidden or played down (e.g. Miceli, Near & Schwenk, 1991). It is, therefore, important to carry out research that identifies and describes problems. However, governmental authorities, such as the police, are also influenced by an increased emphasis on value branding (Forsell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014). This concerns various image-promoting processes intended to make an organisation look good (Alvesson, 2013a; 2013b), rather than to address institutional obstacles and problems (Eterno & Silverman, 2012; Holgersson, 2014; Holmberg, 2015; Rennstam, 2013).

It is central to ethical procedures that research results are presented objectively and without any influence from stakeholders (Swedish Research Council, 2017). Organisational branding whose immediate aim is to create positive images of an organisation might challenge the independence and integrity of researchers.

We have identified two central factors that put researchers into difficult situations. Firstly, pressure is increasing for the police to maintain a positive brand and, secondly, acceptance of internal and external whistleblowing is low (see also Holgersson, 2019; Wieslander 2016; 2018). Researchers describe how the prospects for conducting research within the Swedish Police have worsened in recent years. They describe also how they have been questioned about the research design and their credibility, and how they are forced to carry out self-censorship – especially researchers employed by the police. Similar reports have been made concerning researchers who study the National Danish Police (Holmberg, 2014; 2015). Results that are likely to negatively affect the police's brand have been publicly dismissed as dead or bad research by police supervisors. Data suggest that police supervisors have adjusted, toned down and deleted the results of "problematic" reports. Some researchers state that it is not only their research that has been questioned: criticism has also been made on a personal level.

This article has identified several reasons that cause researchers to refrain from challenging the police's brand, based on data from several sources, such as interviews with researchers who have presented critical research results, and an examination of the way in which critical research is presented in the media. The reasons identified are: the existence of a suppressive research climate for critical research on the police; the perceived risk of negative reactions from the police; and the fear of decreased possibilities for further research, as a result of, for example, decreased funding, decreased chances of employment, and denial of access in the field. The article also suggests that researchers can react to these circumstances in several ways. Naturally, the reasons for the reluctance to challenge the police's brand are intertwined with the actions taken by researchers to avoid challenging the brand. Examples of these actions are an avoidance of (open) collaboration with researchers who present critical results, and an avoidance of undertaking critical research. Researchers may also contribute to the positive branding of the police by being representatives for expert-shopping, by adjusting reports or toning down criticism in reports and public statements, and by giving legitimacy to police work by appearing as a guarantor for good police work, or at least as a guarantor that the work is improving.

Limitations and implications

One limitation of this article is the selection of participants: it would have been possible to include more voices from other researchers who have not challenged the brand. The article, however, has been driven by curiosity and a desire to analyse problems that arise between

organisational branding and researchers who challenge the police's brand. It is, therefore, justified in selecting researchers who have presented research of this kind. Another limitation of the article is that it fails to consider explanations made by the police concerning the matters addressed. Instead, we have chosen to focus on the researchers' perspectives on how the police has reacted and acted, and how researchers experience the way in which they have been met by police representatives. This is at least as important to consider.

It is worthy of note that there is a high degree of agreement between data collected from all data sources, with few conflicting ideas. This does not mean that we can conclude what has happened, or that the researchers' perceptions of the events are accurate. However, we do argue that it is significant for both the research field and for practitioners to focus on researchers' perceptions of their possibilities and outcomes of conducting and presenting critical research and how this is received by various stakeholders, since these perceptions seem to influence if and how future research is designed and presented. As previous research has shown, it is not the actual risk of a reprisal but the perceived risk that influences one's behaviour (Holgersson, 2019; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Park & Blenkinsopp, 2008; Wieslander, 2018).

Other aspects also influence the independence and integrity of researchers, making the picture more complex. Of course, organisational branding can be carried out for positive reasons, and it may have positive outcomes, even if this article focuses exclusively on negative consequences. Even so, we have shown how organisational branding plays a significant role in how researchers perceive their opportunities to conduct critical research, and presented how researchers can act in those cases. Researchers have described possible ways in which presenting critical research results may influence their careers. It is, therefore, legitimate to ask how critical research results influence researchers' careers, for instance in terms of funding and employment at agencies closely connected to police work. We welcome further research on this topic.

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