Maintaining hope in partnership policing

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Abstract

Purpose – This article examines how hope for an effective partnership approach to policing is maintained in everyday policing.

Design/methodology/approach – Data collection involved 22 qualitative interviews, and observations with police officers and municipal employees in Stockholm, Sweden. It also includes an analysis of their documents.

Findings – Using the concept of mechanisms of hope (Brunsson, 2006, 2009), this article explores how police officers and other actors in the security landscape maintain hope in partnership policing despite having compelling reasons to be cynical and sceptical. The findings indicate that mechanism of hope is an important element in the way police handle uncertainty and maintain institutional pressures in their everyday policing practices.

Originality/value – By demonstrating how actors responsible for implementing a partnership approach to policing maintain hope in partnership policing, this article advances our understanding of myths in policing, as well as the institutional settings in which policing is conducted (Crank, 2003). Moreover, this article provides insight into the opportunities and challenges embedded in the social configuration of hope.

Keywords Partnership policing, Sweden, Collaboration, Mechanisms of hope, Institutional theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A significant development in police studies has been the application of institutional theory to make sense of police organisational behaviour. Institutional research has mainly explored how structures (e.g. specialised units) and strategies (e.g. zero-tolerance policing and community policing) are initiated and shaped by norms and powerful actors in the institutional environment rather than by efficiency (Crank, 1994; Newburn and Jones, 2007; Manning, 1977, 2001; Katz, 2001; Sedgwick *et al.*, 2021; Carter, 2016). Consequently, this body of work indicates that policing rhetoric veers far from the myth of hierarchical command-and-control bureaucracy and is decoupled from decisions and practices; that is, there are weak ties between what police organisations claim to do, what decisions they make, and what ultimately gets done in the name of policing (cf. Brunsson, 1989). Subsequently, given institutional pressures and the uncertainties in policing (Manning, 2001), the actors involved can only *hope* that their efforts – police reform, new technology, new strategies, legal changes, and more personnel – will deliver the expected outcomes (e.g. less crime and a safer public).

While institutional theory provides vital tools for interpreting police organisational action, much less is known about the ways institutional myths are maintained in everyday policing

(cf. Lawrence *et al.*, 2009; Suddaby *et al.*, 2010). Against this backdrop, this research aims to build upon previous studies by investigating the role hope, namely the belief that a strategy or a method will work, plays in policing. Specifically, I argue that Brunsson's (2006, 2009) concept *mechanisms of hope* offers a fruitful theoretical lens to understand how hope is fostered and maintained in an organisational setting, even when actors experience disappointing results. According to Brunsson, hope is maintained via interpretive frames that allow actors to exercise "naïve hope" by ignoring empirical reality and believing in ideas about reform, change, and progress (Catasús *et al.*, 2016).

The case study in this article focuses on the ways police officers and their partners in Stockholm (Sweden) maintain hope in partnership policing by using the following five techniques: propagating the partnership discourse, assuming that the partnership model works, blaming others, talking and writing, and maintaining that "We are on the right track". In short, the analysis shows how institutionalised myths are maintained using mechanisms of hope, which in turn clarifies how policing ideals (often with scarce empirical evidence) are produced, maintained, and disseminated across the policing landscape.

Partnership policing and institutional theory

Today, partnerships are a "mantra" (Crawford and Cunningham, 2015) in policing and crime prevention discourse across most part of the world, including the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the European Union (see, for example, Fleming, 2006; Crawford, 1999a; Oliver, 2006; Sedgwick *et al.*, 2021; Deflem, 2006). Although this trend can be traced back to the mid-1990s, the 9/11 events in New York have played a significant role in fostering collaborations amongst various law enforcement agencies (Deflem, 2006; Oliver, 2006). The collaborative strategy posits that the police cannot solve crime without the involvement of other actors (Rosenbaum, 2002). Importantly, a partnership approach is attractive considering the police's "impossible mandate" of being expected to control crime but in reality exercising limited control over key crime markers such as employment status, income, education level, gender, age, ethnicity, and family structure (Bayley, 1999; Manning, 1977; Mastrofski and Uchida, 1993).

Existing scholarship has described police organisations as "institutionalized organisations" (Crank, 2003, p. 187). As such, police systems are shaped by what Meyer and Rowan (1977) refer to as a "rationalised myth" (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), that is, an unsubstantiated idea and belief that is widely held as true. In this context, myths are rational in that they identify problems (i.e. crime as a multivariant issue) and express solutions to those problems (i.e. partnership policing). However, Scott explains that "these beliefs are myths in the sense that they depend for their efficacy, for their reality, on the fact that they are widely shared, or are promulgated by individuals or groups that have been granted the right to determine such matters" (Scott, 1992, p. 14). Organisations that conform to the ideas and beliefs prescribed to them by their environment are more likely to obtain "cultural support" and, thus, improve their chances for organisational resources and survival (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Conversely, those organisations that do not conform to the ideas and beliefs that are held by their institutional environment are at risk of being perceived as useless or unimportant, and they may lose any legitimacy that was previously granted by their institutional environment (Crank and Langworthy, 1992).

Sedwick *et al.* (2021) show that one important driver of collaborative practices is that police organisations, private businesses, citizens, and public bodies must collaborate in crime control and crime prevention to gain legitimacy (Christensen and Molin, 1995; Crank, 1994). The global spread of partnerships, then, reflect its status as a "true" and legitimate

model (Jacobs, 2010; Sedgwick *et al.*, 2021; Burruss and Giblin, 2014; Giblin and Burruss, 2009; Carter, 2016)."Institutionalized organisations" (Crank, 2003, p. 187) such as the police are particularly prone to embracing similar strategies and structures. In their ground-breaking analysis, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) highlight the role of isomorphic processes (imitation, coercion, and normative pressures). Existing police scholarship has used institutional theory to explain the adoption of community policing (Burruss and Giblin, 2014; Crank, 1994; Mastrofski and Uchida, 1993), police reform (Terpstra, 2020), intelligence-led policing (ILP) (Carter, 2016), and collaborative practices (Cohen, 2018; Sedgwick *et al.*, 2021).

The institutional pressure to work across organisational boundaries can, in part, be traced to the growing dissatisfaction with the police and the criminal justice system that swept over Western countries in the 1970s. This pressure was a reaction to the persistently rising crime levels of the 1960s and the 1970s and served to create a consensus that crime was to be managed via a conglomerate of diverse measures, including (1) risk-based practices, (2) repression, (3) and community and joint partnership approaches (Garland, 2001; Crawford and Cunningham, 2015; Sedgwick *et al.*, 2021). As the public administration and public management literature clarifies, the introduction of collaborative governance (and indeed risk management) is far from being isolated to policing. In fact, fuelled by neo-liberal rationalities, collaboration emerged as a result of political attempts to move away from hierarchical command-and-control regulation (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003; Fleming and Rhodes, 2005; Provan and Kenis, 2008). Consequently, the article contend, the partnership approach has become the 'right way' to do police business because its underlying values – building linkages between the 'responsibilised' good forces of society (Garland, 2001) – are taken for granted (Crank, 2003).

Institutional pressures, I would argue, are applicable to the Swedish case. Swedish and Nordic police models are usually connected with state police institutions that enjoy comparatively high trust amongst citizens. However, the past four decades have witnessed the growth of collaborative networks and plural policing arrangements (Hansen Löfstrand, 2021; Uhnoo and Hansen Löfstrand, 2018; Nøkleberg, 2022). In Sweden and other European countries, the popularity of partnerships has been attributed to reflect the political success of the Labour Party's third way politics in the United Kingdom (Alstam and Forkby, 2022). In addition to mimicking international models, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, via professional networks, research, conferences, and websites, has exercised normative pressure on the Swedish policing system – pressure where partnership agreements hold a central position. Today, more than 90% of Sweden's 280 municipalities have signed a partnership agreement with the Police Authority. (Patel, 2013).

Despite the contemporary hegemonic status of partnership-based policing approaches, research has cast serious doubts regarding the effectiveness of the collaborative approach. Indeed, there is limited empirical evidence that partnerships reduce and prevent crime (Choi and Choi, 2012; Crawford and Evans, 2017). A common problem is that collaborative approaches to crime problems rarely are subjected to rigorous evaluation (Mazerolle *et al.*, 2021). When positive effects are measured, they tend to be modest (Gill *et al.*, 2014), coalesce with other social changes and management practices (Kelman *et al.*, 2013), and involve projects in which a collaborative approach is combined with other policing strategies (e.g. problem-oriented policing) (Gill *et al.*, 2014). Likewise, while the rhetoric of partnerships and community policing has moved to the fore, research suggests that police practices are unchanged (Manning and Singh, 1997). While there are some exceptions (O'Neill and McCarthy, 2014), research on partnership work consistently highlights the strained relationship between the police and their new partners. In particular, years of organisational research show that collaborative arrangements are impeded by cultural fragmentation (Cohen, 2018) and often struggle with 'inertia', inadequate funding, and a

lack of leadership and institutional support (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Yet, there is research suggesting that one response among police officers is to develop informal collaborative networks to circumscribe some of the barriers in formal networks (Cohen and Cohen, 2023). Thus, whereas support for collaborative public management within higher levels of government has remained strong and unwavering for well over three decades, there has been little empirical evidence supporting the realisation of this strategy's claims (i.e. cost efficiency, higher quality in public services, and reduced social problems) (Goris and Walters, 1999; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Jacobs, 2010; Kelman *et al.*, 2013; Teisman and Klijn, 2002; Cohen, 2018; Forkby, 2020; Mazerolle *et al.*, 2021). How is it that individuals persist in their pursuit of effective collaborative practices?

Mechanisms of hope

As mentioned, institutional theory helps us understand organisational action by emphasising environmental and institutional pressures (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). However, the perspective has paid less attention to the ways people in organisations respond to environmental pressures. Against this backdrop, recent scholarly work shows that individuals in organisations do not passively respond to pressures (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010). To this end, the term 'institutional work' has been developed to capture how actors actively build, sustain, and change institutions (Lawrence *et al.*, 2013). In a similar vein, the current article maintains that mechanisms of hope help us understand some of the institutional work actors do as a response to institutional and normative pressures.

Developed by Swedish organisational theorist Nils Brunsson, the concept mechanisms of hope explains how members of organisations remain hopeful about organisational reforms and strategies despite being unable to achieve their goals. When faced with demands to implement a strategy, reform, or working model based on faulty assumptions about organisational action, Brunson's model postulates that members reduce uncertainty by adopting techniques that rarely lead them to questioning the idea of the strategy (Brunsson, 2006, 2009). The concept was originally used to understand why organisations implement strategies (e.g. management by objectives or the use of balance scorecards) based on the 'fiction' that they are rational despite their well-documented irrationality (Barry and Elmes, 2017). Importantly, mechanisms of hope are especially critical in the framing of public management and administration of public organisations that are governed to embrace popular, but vague, 'magic concepts' such as 'innovation', 'transparency', 'governance', and 'partnerships' (Pollitt and Hupe, 2011). In essence, Brunsson's theory assumes that actors distort or divert their attention away from empirical reality. According to Catasús *et al.* (2016: 405), this implies 'a naïve belief that something that has never been achieved in the past (i.e. functional rationality) will work in the future'. As noted in other scholarly fields, people experience naïve hope when positive predictions are founded on flawed assumptions or stem from a denial of reality (Snyder *et al.*, 2002; Fitzgerald Miller, 2007). In practice, Brunsson (2006) shows how naïve hope translates into distinct interpretive frames, which he calls 'mechanisms of hope'. These frames include (1) separating practices from ideals, (2) paying attention to practices that do not threaten hope in the ideal, (3) claiming that the model (principle) is correct but the practices are wrong, and (4) distancing policymakers from failing projects (Brunsson, 2006).

An analysis of the mechanisms of hope used in policing stresses the legitimacy of police organisations and the ways they manage incongruent norms in their institutional environments. In keeping with the institutional approach in organisational analysis, the framework employed in this article assumes that police organisations, like *all* organisations, do not adhere to the ideal of rational goal-oriented bodies (Terpstra, 2020; Crank, 2003); rather, they are 'hypercritical' (Brunsson, 1993). This approach implies that police organisations

'may reflect inconsistent norms by systematically creating inconsistencies between talk, decisions and products. They can talk in consistence with one group of norms, decide according to another, and produce according to a third' (Brunsson, 1986, p. 171). In essence, this means that ideals and practices are decoupled so that 'actor identities – structures, policies, plans, and constitutions – are statements about what should happen, but will probably not happen' (Meyer, 2010, p. 14).

Mechanisms of hope have been utilised in this article to understand how hope for the ideal organisation (rational, intentional, and goal-oriented) is maintained despite the irrationality that characterises organisational action (Brunsson, 1989). The analysis was inspired by Brunsson's theory of hope for reforms, progress, and change. However, rather than considering the 'sellers' of public administrative reforms, the article seeks to explore the role of hope among actors in partnership policing responsible for turning strategy into action. Indeed, the 'mechanisms of hope' addressed in this article refer to the ways actors maintain hope in a future where abstract ideas, strategies, and models will have proven appropriate and effective and will have delivered desirable and promised outcomes. Here, Brunsson's concepts are used as a lens to unearth the meaning and value the research participants ascribe to partnership policing. In so doing, the article examines how actors maintain hope as they are responsible for implementing institutionalised norms about proper, true, and legitimate policing.

Data and methodology

This article is part of a larger project analysing the organisation of the collaboration agreement between the city of Stockholm and Police Region Stockholm. This partnership is formal, voluntary, and structured. Voluntarism distinguishes Sweden from jurisdictions where the police and local authorities have a statutory duty to develop partnerships, such as the UK. Still, like such contexts, Sweden assumes a shared leadership approach, that crime and safety are complex, and that solutions must be multifaceted and involve multiple actors (Mclaughlin and Hughes, 2002).

The Stockholm partnership consists of 14 partnership agreements (one central agreement and 13 local agreements). The central level consists of a steering group of senior representatives from the City of Stockholm and Police Region Stockholm, as well as a planning group. At the local level, collaborative practices are organised around a steering group, a planning group, thematic subgroups, and thematic project groups (one for each joint priority). The overarching aim of the partnership was to reduce the actual number of crimes and to increase the public's sense of safety. To this end, the Police Authority and the municipality agreed on a 'smorgasbord' (Crawford, 1999a) of ten shared priorities: (1) the school as a crime scene, (2) illegal settlements, (3) unlawful influence, (4) CCTV, (5) private security guards, (6) vulnerable victims, (7) youth crime (8), gang-desistance, (9) violent extremism, and (10) hot-spots.

During the research project, 19 interviews were conducted with police officers and city employees working within the Stockholm partnership. The total number of participants was 22 as some were interviewed in pairs, see Table 1. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling; that is, it was based on recommendations. The majority of the interviewees were members of the partnership's steering, planning, thematic subgroup, and project groups. Also, police officers who were not formal members of any group, were included in the study because they implemented partnership decisions (i.e. targeted neighbourhood patrols, inspections of restaurants and night clubs). The research participants also had to perform other job duties, such as case management (social workers) and patrols (police officers).

Two city district departments, Districts A and B, were chosen as case studies. District A, situated in the heart of Stockholm, has a population of over 130,000. District B is a suburban area located near Stockholm, with a population of about 100,000 people. Despite the varying socioeconomic situations in the districts (such as a vibrant nightlife in the city centre), the 'mechanisms of hope' outlined in the current study apply to both districts.

The interviews included questions about partnerships. For example, I asked about their definition of partnerships, the advantages and disadvantages of the Stockholm partnership, goals, assessments, institutional support, and network relationships. The interviews were conducted by the author, and I took an active role in probing emergent themes and issues (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The interviews were conducted in Swedish, and quotations were translated into English by the author. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Observational data was collected between April and November 2022. I attended meetings, a partnership conference, and collaborative activities. Observations were recorded in fieldnotes. These data sources were complemented by an analysis of partnership documents (i.e. the formal collaboration agreement, local collaboration agreement, situation analysis, activity plans, etc.).

The analytical focus on the mechanism of hope emerged over time. My initial research interest was in partnership work in general. Gradually, I became interested in why the participants continued to voice support for partnership working while they also recognised that they did not know if the strategy worked. This uncertainty stood out as a core theme in the interview and the observational data. The research questions that caught my attention were how they avoided the police culture's well-documented inclination for disbelief and cynicism. Subsequently, the data were re-read, re-coded, and analysed using Brunsson's theoretical framework. For instance, the codes included blaming, administrative practices (talking and writing), and core assumptions. The coding of the data, then, evolved parallel to the literature review and reflects my deepened understanding of the empirical and scholarly setting.

There are limitations to the study. The study's reliance on data from two police districts within the city of Stockholm may not fully represent other police districts in Stockholm and elsewhere. Relatedly, whereas qualitative approaches deepen our understanding of experiences and culturally situated interpretations, the findings should be viewed with some degree of caution in terms of their generalizability. As an illustration, the study does not aim to evaluate the extent to which the themes are spread. However, given that many police forces adapt to institutional pressures rather than designing rational solutions to crime problems (Crank, 1994; Crank and Langworthy, 1992; Burruss and Giblin, 2014), "mechanisms of hope" are likely to emerge across policing systems. This issue warrants future research in centralised systems, such as those in the Nordic countries, and in fragmented policing systems, such as those in the European Union and the United States.

Role	No. of participants
Police officer	10
Social worker	3
Social worker manager	4
Municipality administrative manager/coordinator	5
Source(s): Table by author	

Table 1.
Research participants

Maintaining hope in partnership policing

The qualitative data were analysed using the following concepts in Brunsson's theoretical framework:

(1) *propagating the partnership discourse*, referring to the 'magic', optimistic, and symbolic dimensions of partnership policing;

(2) *assuming that the partnership model is right*, whereby criticism concerns implementation and practices, not partnership policing as a strategy;

(3) *blaming others*, referring to the tendency to shift blame for operational and strategic failures to others (i.e. senior management, other stakeholders);

(4) *talking and writing*, demonstrating a strong concern for the administrative form rather than the implementation of a partnership approach to policing; and

(5) *maintaining that 'We are on the right track'*, highlighting the ways professionals maintain hope by stressing that steps are being taken 'in the right direction', suggesting that collaboration will work in the future.

Generally, the interview data shows that all five techniques are applied in ways that do not challenge the core assumption - shared by the research participants and expressed, for instance, at meetings - that the institutionalised norm (partnership policing) is an appropriate method. Additionally, hope in partnership policing, the article maintains, tends to strengthen some of the adverse implications of certain dominant assumptions within the prevailing partnership discourse, including the emphasis on an 'ideology of unity', conflict avoidance, formalism, and a failure to address differential power relations (Crawford, 1994, 1998, 1999b; Fleming, 2006).

Propagating the partnership discourse

One salient aspect of the experience of the Stockholm partnership concerns the influence of the partnership discourse and the ways it shaped the participants' experiences. As research makes clear, 'Collaboration', 'partnerships', and 'working together' are loaded with positive, symbolic connotations that, in the current setting, signal that the police and their partners join forces to create order and security. Ultimately, I argue this is a discourse of hope for a better and more orderly future. In countries like Belgium, the partnership model has been accepted at face value in an unambiguous fashion (Goris and Walters, 1999; Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007; Sedgwick *et al.*, 2021). The Stockholm partnership received similar acceptance, which highlights the symbolic and mythical role (cf. Meyer and Rowan, 1977) of the partnership approach. For instance, the partnership documents and interview data offer no detailed explanations or analyses of why the police and the City of Stockholm should collaborate, why it would be appropriate, or why one should expect the Stockholm partnership to be an effective method for preventing crime. Rather, partnership work was justified by being referenced as 'necessary' to achieve 'structured and effective measures against crime'. As noted in the collaboration agreement:

> Structured collaboration between the City and the Police is necessary to achieve effective coordinated crime prevention work that contributes to increased safety and security.

References to the partnership work in a self-explanatory fashion are also evident in other documents. For instance, each city district department and police district was instructed to base its activities on a joint local situation analysis. The local situation analysis utilised a series of variables, such as 'collective efficiency', electoral demographic data, educational data, socioeconomic data, and crime-level distributions. While these data are useful for crime

mapping, a striking feature of the analysis is the working assumption that the Stockholm partnership structure is the best way to manage some of the shared priorities (which, as we soon shall see, created practical problems). In other words, the document was written based on the assumption that the problems were to be managed within the partnership structures, as exemplified by the following conclusions drawn from the situation analysis:

> Reversing the trend in these areas requires long-term work aimed at several different sectors of society [. . .] Children and young adults who are at risk of becoming involved in crime need to be identified early and supported to leave a destructive lifestyle. It is therefore important that all of society's available resources are mobilised to stop undesirable development for these people.

Consistent with previous research on partnership policing (Jacobs, 2010), and institutional theory (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010), this current study suggests that the everyday meaning of collaboration in the Stockholm partnership is shaped by the participants' personal experiences and their incorporation of partnership discourse. Consequently, the Stockholm partnership was described by many interviewees in generic terms referring to positively charged concepts, such as 'synergy', 'working together', 'common goals', 'letting nothing/no one fall between cracks', and 'efficiency'. For example, a police officer expressed this general understanding of partnerships when asked to describe what practices they had actually practiced when they collaborated: 'A common goal, that we know where we are going' (Police officer, Interview 6). Another police officer reiterated this conception, stating that 'collaboration is a broad term for something in which the aim is to move forward together [. . .] Collaboration is key to success' (Police officer, Interview 14).

The use of generic conceptualisation is a documented technique for maintaining hope in administrative and managerial ideals (Brunsson, 2009). As outlined here, positive outcomes, appropriateness, and assumed crime-preventive effects rather than empirical experience are embedded in the discourse on partnership. This means that a thorough analysis of specific crime problems is less important than the symbolic role attributed to fighting crime. Drawing on partnership discourse, the Swedish Police Authority and the City of Stockholm manifest their shared and firm determination to take a holistic approach to crime and reinforce the hope that Stockholm is an ordered and safe place. However, being a 'magical concept' (Pollitt and Hupe, 2011), the partnership discourse also hampers critical reflection, and thus learning, regarding the appropriateness of partnerships (Crawford and Jones, 1995). The Stockholm case does not provide any convincing answers on why the Stockholm partnership is likely to succeed, whether one or more of the ten priorities are managed by one actor, and whether it is an effective resource use. These critical issues, I would argue, tend to fade into the background since the discourse on partnership conveys that advocating against partnership policing essentially implies advocating against a positive change and against the fundamental reasoning behind partnerships.

Assuming that the partnership approach works
Translating managerial and administrative ideas into action is always risky, as it is easy to maintain hope in principles as long as they are not applied in practice: 'It is precisely when we try to turn our ideas into practice that we are likely to discover that they are not easily translated into practice' (Brunsson, 2009, p. 141). In a similar vein, Brunsson (2006) also shows how mechanisms of hope restore hope in rationality (even though there are many signs of irrationality). Similarly, I would argue, the current study shows that negative experiences were framed in a way that did not jeopardise the participants basic belief in the institutionalised norm. Specifically, critical remarks targeted some organisational dimensions of the implementation of the Stockholm partnership rather than its fundamental idea. Conversely, the interview data suggests that the participants assumed that partnership policing was necessary, and the emerging problems were technical issues.

Put slightly differently, police officers and municipal employees assumed what Brunsson (2006) referred to as 'the principle is right, and the practice is wrong'. In short, I maintain, this technique allowed the participants to voice critical remarks without challenging the partnership idea. Specifically, the findings suggest that two areas of the Stockholm partnership were deemed particularly problematic. The first area is related to issues such as definitions, priorities, goal specificity, and result indicators. Whilst the participants offered several suggestions on how the rational aspects of partnership work could be improved, few displayed hesitancy regarding the idea of partnership work. However, and in keeping with the original formulation of 'mechanisms of hope', this criticism did not question the general assumption that the model was right. Indeed, following Brunsson's (2006, 2009) own analysis of organisational rationality, seeking to improve organisational strategies in this way reinforces the notion that the model will work. In particular, the tendency to embrace partnership working was evident in cases where local city district departments and police districts, according to informal discussions with research participants, created partnership groups despite not having problems within their jurisdiction. Such cases make it difficult to find collaborative tasks in practice. For example, it is mandatory for all city district departments and local police districts to establish joint gang desistance groups, and despite how frustrating this task may be, the participants said it has enabled them to explore ways for the police and municipal employees to collaborate and maintain communication (that is, they did not challenge the idea of partnerships).

There were examples in the data that deviated from the general pattern. For instance, one research participant claimed that certain joint priorities were not suitable for collaborative action.

> There are things in the partnership agreement that do not belong there. First there were six problems that we would work together on, but then illegal settlements, CCTV, and security guards were added, and for me, these are things that we have to do anyway. We do not have to sit in a group and talk about it. (Police officer, Interview 2)

Also, while some participants rejected the idea that partnership work can solve many crime and safety issues, many maintained hope as they stressed the benefits of including these in the partnership agreement. For example, both police officers and municipal employees said that it was difficult to suggest activities within these areas, but they found some comfort in the fact that 'there is an agreement'. A municipal employee elaborated on this point:

> I think that the added value, although I sometimes find it a little difficult to see, is that if there is an agreement, and you can refer to that agreement, and now you and I have an agreement, and you have signed it and I have signed it, and then you must also try to ensure that your staff work according to this agreement. (Municipal employee, Interview 7)

The perceived necessity of a formal agreement was fuelled by experiences where the municipality could not implement decisions because there was no formal agreement with the police. For example, it passed a resolution that the police, when apprehending a child who had committed a crime for the first time, should refer the child to social services within forty-eight hours and attend a meeting with the family, the child, and social service representatives. However, 'the police don't have that mission, so they say that it sounds like a great idea, and we will attend when and if we have the time, but this can't be a priority' (Municipal employee, Interview 7). Accordingly, formal collaboration (a partnership agreement) is appreciated by actors on the ground as an instrument for regulating organisational relationships.

It is confirmed by the interview data that the participants experience a tension between adopting forms symbolically rather than substantively (Crank and Langworthy, 1992). For instance, despite the intentions spelled out in the agreement, many interviewees mentioned

problems with commitment and motivation among staff members who were not formally allocated to the Stockholm partnership. The definition of real work (Paoline, 2004) or professional views of policing and social work framed these issues. With respect to the police, this framing involves the traditional image of the police role as bandit catching. Meanwhile, a municipal employee conveyed a lack of motivation (among colleagues) because the partnership work pulled resources away from the core mission of the social services. This lack of motivation was expressed through statements such as 'what am I doing here?', I'm supposed to apprehend victims of child abuse', and (Municipal employee, Interview 1). Police officers also mentioned communication problems in relation to first responders: 'We do not have a strategy for channelling the partnership agreement [. . .]it is very difficult to explain it to them [patrolling police officers] in a simple way (Police officer, Interview 6).

In sum, implementation problems offer opportunities for hope. These opportunities are evident in the participants' tendency to select issues that might be changed (emphasising common goals) or find a silver lining even with problematic aspects (stressing the value of an agreement). Framing negative experiences in this manner promotes the hope that partnership policing will be successful in the future. The study also indicates that the partnership agreement was significantly valued by certain interviewees because of the commitment it required of the parties. On a positive note, this reflects the fundamental belief that partnerships are a good thing which could facilitate implementation (Carter, 2016). However, such 'mechanisms of hope' might also cause problems if negative experiences are not taken seriously. Problems in finding relevant activities and motivation, as noted by the interviewees, could indicate that some areas are not suitable for partnership policing.

Blaming others

Another strategy to maintain hope in partnership policing was to shift blame. Shifting blame to others involves assuming that partnership policing is effective under the right conditions (produced by others). While many participants reported negative experiences with respect to the implementation of the Stockholm partnership, they avoided responsibility by focusing on the problematic practices of others rather than on their own. As expected, among people 'on the ground', the managerial level was a common target of criticism. For example, several participants stated that the source of the organisational rationality issues mentioned earlier was the steering group's failure to present clear, user-friendly, and auditable goals and instructions. A police officer explained at an interview,

> The steering group has come up with something, and we can sit and discuss it for a very long time. What do they mean by this? How should we do it? Offer support to victims faster, yes, but how should we do it? (Police officer, Interview 11)

Similarly, senior management was blamed for failing to gauge the effects of partnership policing. However, at the time of data collection, several police officers and municipal employees expressed hope that the management would address these difficulties within a short period. As we shall see later, this framing is linked to a mechanism of hope which states that collaboration will work in the future.

Another blame avoidance strategy involved identifying partner organisations as responsible for implementation problems. Several participants blamed the police or municipal employees for not prioritising or attending partnership meetings. Some of these blame shifting instances were rooted in the above-stated definition of each organisation's mandate or core mission; for instance, with respect to the two priorities 'the school as a crime scene' and 'unlawful influence', the police held the municipality responsible for the low referral ratio concerning crime committed at school and unlawful influence. The participants

attributed the low referral rate to a fear of involving the police. Both priorities were sources of ambiguity due to lack of clear definitions.

In sum, by shifting the blame on the managerial level or the other party in the partnership, the participants were able to maintain their belief in partnership policing as a potentially effective method to reduce crime (if others changed).

Talking and writing
Another mechanism of hope is focusing on the form and design of a working model (Brunsson, 2009), that is, maintaining interest in the design and minutia of collaborative structures, goals, and working processes. Compared to 'assuming that the model is right', this technique means that police officers and municipal employees allocate much time and energy to strategic documents, documents about documents (e.g. instructions on how to write a situation analysis), and meta-meetings (meetings about meetings). Indeed, structure, roles, routines, and norms generally constitute important dimensions of partnerships (Thacher, 2004). Moreover, it is natural to devote considerable time to these issues at the beginning of a collaborative project because there is a need to agree on and document priorities, strategies, and various groups tasked with implementing the partnership. Thus, unsurprisingly, the focus on form was visible in the data on the Stockholm partnership (Stenström, 2023). However, a striking feature of the Stockholm partnership was the *continuous* concern for form and administrative processes, that is, the collaboration revolved around partnership meetings and partnership documents (including 'meetings about meetings' and documents) (Stenström, 2023). Confirming research into a transnational police project (Åkerström *et al.*, 2020), the administrative dimension was a salient feature in the interview and observational data. This ongoing concern may be explained by the argument that maintaining interest in talking and writing or documenting 'may be rewarding enough because it signals good performance in a more visible and concrete way than the work of carrying out "interventions", which often involves vague or uncertain outcomes' (Åkerström *et al.*, 2021, p. 77).

In addition, I would argue that an interest in form and administration maintains the hope that effective concerted interventions and joint action are possible if the logic and form are correct. However, it may also conceal problems and inefficient actions, especially when senior management loses sight of actual practices and the appropriateness of collaboration with respect to a particular crime problem. For instance, as mentioned above, it was not completely clear to the practitioners why certain priorities had been included in the partnership agreement. Moreover, the administration might detach professionals from the messy practical realm, where the feasibility of the idea of partnership is tested. Nevertheless, the participants' experiences resulted in doing more administration rather than abandoning the idea of partnership policing, thereby representing another mechanism of hope. A focus on how processes might be designed, how the Stockholm programme relates to other strategies, how to document, and so on symbolises and confirms the underlying assumption that it is possible to produce desired effects. This is connected to the final mechanism of hope, which is to assume that 'we're on the right track'.

Maintaining that 'We're on the right track'
Lastly, hope was maintained based on the participants' experience that the Stockholm partnership 'was on the right track'. Although many participants mentioned areas of improvement, several noted that the partnership was 'moving in the right direction'. As one police officer explained at an interview, 'I am proud, I think, I think we are succeeding. Small steps are being taken forward all the time, and I am also happy about the tone of the conversation or the dialogue. There are lots of promising conditions in it' (Police officer,

Interview 2). As the quotation suggests, 'steps in the right direction' tends to concern the participants' perception of partnership relationships (i.e. the 'tone' of the conversation or dialogue). Relatedly, the participants expressed a belief in the future without offering more concrete examples as to why the partnership work was improving: 'I feel that we are on a good path when it comes to collaboration and partnership agreement' (Police officer, Interview 8).

Moreover, the participants emphasised that the progress was steady but slow. For instance, some participants said that they were taking 'small steps' that will enable the partnership to generate desirable effects in the future. A municipal employee noted that 'we say baby steps, we move forward slowly' (Interview 4). The notion that partnership policing is about incremental progress and that successes will materialise in the future was seen as an important reality of doing partnership work:

> We have to make the best of the situation. I think [my colleague] has been good at twisting and turning and discussing and so on, and finding, together, and trying to find some kind of way forward. Even if it is a small step, it is still in the correct direction (Police officer, Interview 5).

Given that the participants' work was characterised by uncertainty regarding the effects of their concerted efforts, the current framing is particularly important: it suggests that they believe the partnership approach will be successful in the future. In contrast to *blaming others*, it entails the belief that incremental steps are being taken in the right direction.

Conclusion

Existing research shows that environmental pressure has been important in the global spread of police strategies and structures, such as community policing (Burruss and Giblin, 2014; Crank, 1994; Mastrofski and Uchida, 1993), reforms (Terpstra, 2020), intelligence-led policing (ILP) (Carter, 2016), and partnerships (Cohen, 2018; Sedgwick *et al.*, 2021). The current study deepens our understanding of the ways institutional pressures are experienced within police systems. In short, the analysis highlights the importance of the mechanism of hope in the adoption of police strategies. The techniques outlined in the article promote hope, even though there is little empirical evidence that partnerships actually reduce crime. Importantly, the findings stress the need to toe a fine line between maintaining hope and abandoning collaborative practices that, in reality, are unfeasible. On the one hand, pressing social issues such as crime require collaborative approaches (Agranoff, 2007; Agranoff and McGuire, 2003). However, the research reported here and elsewhere (Forkby, 2020; Crawford and Cunningham, 2015) provides support for Huxham's (2003) recommendation that collaboration should be avoided if it is not necessary. Consequently, one practical recommendation that can be deduced from the findings is that leadership needs to scrutinise the rationale for a particular partnership arrangement, promote critical reflection and questions, and be prepared to abandon practices that do not work. Even though the findings are limited to Stockholm, it is reasonable to assume that this recommendation applies to other police systems. On the other hand, the findings also support research that indicates institutional pressures can have a positive influence on the adoption of police methods (Carter, 2016; Darroch and Mazerolle, 2015). Symbolically, mechanisms of hope could play an important role in sending the message that all 'good forces' in society strive to cooperate against harmful actions. Also, mechanisms of hope offer a way of interpreting implementation failures and problems that preserves the participants' beliefs in collaborative governance. The findings suggest mechanisms of hope might contribute to a shared sense of meaning and belief, which is vital for effective collaborative practices (Cohen, 2018).

From a theoretical perspective, these findings have implications for the literature on institutionalism and policing. It is well-documented that police organisations are exposed to

environmental pressures and are faced with incongruent norms (Crank, 1994, 2003; Crank and Langworthy, 1992; Sedgwick *et al.*, 2021; Giblin and Burruss, 2009; Cohen, 2018). The research reported here highlights that people in partnerships do not merely passively respond to such pressures (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010; Arieli *et al.*, 2020; Meyer and Jepperson, 2000; Hwang *et al.*, 2019). At the level of implementation, institutional pressures translate into mechanisms of hope that connect people 'on the ground' in an isomorphic process that typically has been examined at the meso and macro levels. The analysis shows that mechanisms of hope sustain institutionalised norms about suitable forms, working methods, and structures. Even though there were signs of despair among police officers and municipal workers, mechanisms of hope can reduce complexity, uncertainty, and police cynicism.

Finally, there are good reasons to assume that partnerships will continue to play a key role in policing systems across the world. In Sweden, for instance, municipalities recently received a statutory duty to prevent crime, which is likely to involve more collaboration with the Swedish Police Authority. Also, given the complexities of crime, local authorities and police organisations need to collaborate on a local, regional, and global scale. However, the analysis cautions against adopting partnerships too lightly. Indeed, hope is a positive aspect of police work, but in keeping with the principles of problem-oriented policing, the prospect of a partnership must be judged based on the nature of the joint problems. Lastly, at least in the Swedish case, one problem is that that the police and their partners often create complex collaborative practices that are somewhat detached from the reality of people 'on the ground'. The impression is that meetings, goals, follow-ups, strategic documents, routines, and policies are in fact less important than mundane aspects of collaborative action, such as knowing who to contact in the partnering organisation.

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