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Abstract

Since 2003 many hundreds of Australian police officers have served in police peace-keeping and capacitybuilding missions in Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea. Working within bilateral or multilateral engagements, these police have encountered significant differences in legal and policing cultures as well as political and community environments. This paper considers how these experiences influence Australian police officers' thinking about policing in general, and how they view the legacy of their service. It explores the extent to which Australian police think they have had their own capabilities altered by the very processes through which they attempt to build the capacity of host police forces. We label this process 'reverse capacity building' and argue that there is a major benefit for domestic policing from such engagements.

Keywords

International, police, missions, reverse, capacity, building, experiences, Australian, police, personnel

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International Police Missions as Reverse Capacity Building: Experiences of Australian Police Personnel¹

Vandra Harris* and Andrew Goldsmith**

Abstract Since 2003 many hundreds of Australian police officers have served in police peace-keeping and capacity-building missions in Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea. Working within bilateral or multilateral engagements, these police have encountered significant differences in legal and policing cultures as well as political and community environments. This paper considers how these experiences influence Australian police officers' thinking about policing in general, and how they view the legacy of their service. It explores the extent to which Australian police think they have had their own capabilities altered by the very processes through which they attempt to build the capacity of host police forces. We label this process 'reverse capacity building' and argue that there is a major benefit for domestic policing from such engagements.

Introduction

Since 1964, more than 3,000 Australian police officers have been deployed on overseas missions, primarily with the United Nations and also in missions led by the USA (Haiti 1994–95), Australia and New Zealand (Bougainville 1997–2000; Solomon Islands 2000–02 and 2003–present) and one exclusively Australian mission (Papua New Guinea 2004). This paper focuses on the Australian missions to Timor-Leste, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea since 2003. These missions have been overseen by the

Australian Federal Police (AFP), and since late 2004 by the International Deployment Group within the AFP. Australian police roles in these missions have included both in-line (executive) policing and capacity building of local police forces in order to strengthen the host nation. The missions operate under different timelines but are mainly short term, varying in length from a few months to several years. The expectation has been that Australian police, as *peacekeepers*, will assist in the restoration of law and order, and, as *capacity builders*, will enable

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the local police to become stable, independent and sustainable.

This paper engages with a latent irony of these engagements—that while these missions are intended and planned to provide a transfer of skills and capacities to the local police and populations with whom they engage (*capacity building*), the relative strangeness of the settings into which they are sent and the challenges that arise inevitably also impact upon those mission police. The legacies that Australian police personnel retain from their overseas mission experiences have potential consequences for how they go about domestic policing upon their return to Australia. Some of these effects may be positive (e.g. improved cultural awareness, more patience in dealing with people); others may be negative (e.g. greater job dissatisfaction, different attitudes to use of force). Both kinds of outcomes for Australian police officers can be considered *reverse capacity building*, although the kinds of ‘capacity’ built would not always have been anticipated by their home police commanders or viewed by those same commanders to be positive attributes. It is these largely unanticipated outcomes of overseas police missions and their impact upon domestic policing, as disclosed by Australian police in post-mission interviews, that is the focus of this paper.

As part of a larger study, we interviewed more than 120 police officers regarding their deployment to Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and/or Timor-Leste in the period 2003–07. Some officers interviewed had served in more than one mission, often in different countries or locations. The questions posed as part of the interview schedule used for Australian police officers were wide ranging and relatively comprehensive, covering reasons for serving overseas; preparatory training; relationships with international police, police and communities in the host nation, and Australian colleagues; debriefing; and the experience of settling back into professional and personal life in Australia. This paper addresses the responses to the specific question, ‘how has this [mission experience] affected you as a police officer?’ The responses were collected post-mission, usually

within a few months of the officer’s return, though in some cases it was up to two years later. The responses point to self-reported attitudinal change, rather than evidencing actual behavioural change. We compared answers to this question with participants’ responses to questions about their motivation for going, as well as which mission/s they served on, but no significant correlations were discovered, so this aspect is not discussed in depth.

Capacity building—the concept

Capacity building in international development terms refers to a process that is centrally concerned with building ‘the ability of people to function effectively to influence the conditions of their communities’ (Barakat and Chard, 2002, p. 820). Eade (2007, p. 632) points out that the concept originates in ‘the belief that the role of an engaged outsider is to support the capacity of local people to determine their own values and priorities’. In the last few years, the term *capacity development* has also emerged within the literature of agencies such as the World Bank and the OECD (e.g. OECD, 2006), with specific reference to development of the capacity of institutions and public systems in developing countries. While opinions will differ, it seems to us that the terms remain largely interchangeable. Our usage in the ‘reverse’ sense refers to the impact upon personnel from donor countries (in this case, Australia) who have engaged in assisting national development elsewhere.

We can find nothing directly on reverse capacity building *per se*, and certainly nothing in the policing literature, about attitudinal changes in police personnel who have served in overseas missions. There are critiques of police capacity building in the context of a North to South flow (e.g. Peake and Brown, 2005, p. 520; Goldsmith and Dinnen, 2007), but nothing on the reverse process (South to North). In the human resources field, there is a literature on overseas deployments, mainly derived from the experience of multinational private corporations. Within this literature, there is some consideration

of the issue of repatriation of staff, but this tends to focus on issues of post-return settlement and ways of channelling dissatisfaction so as to minimize career mobility contrary to the interests of employers (e.g. Black *et al.*, 1999).

Our inquiry is particularly directed to what our findings of attitudinal change might point to in terms of potential consequences for domestic policing. Can we say, in other words, that there is likely to be a positive gain from sending police on such missions? Here, some understanding of 'good policing' becomes relevant to assessment of perceived effects from mission service. Echoing William Ker Muir (1977), who draws upon Max Weber's essay, *Politics as a Vocation*, we anticipate that overseas missions can contribute to what Muir calls 'perspective'—in other words, a 'knowledge of tragedy' (Weber), a 'comprehension of the suffering of each inhabitant of the earth, a sensitivity to man's [*sic*] yearning for dignity, and ultimately, "some kind of faith" that no individual is worthless' (Muir 1977, p. 50, quoting Weber). On the other hand, we might predict, overseas experience may in some cases exacerbate or trigger in some officers a sense of 'otherness' and hostility towards those being policed, reinforcing the 'us versus them' distinction between police and policed noted in much domestic policing literature over many decades, including Muir. As we shall show, there are some strong indications arising from our research that the kind of 'tragic' policing model championed by Muir, in which police avoid simplistic dichotomies of human pathology and human potential and engage in more professional self-examination, can be readily found among many of the personnel interviewed in our study.

Results from interview analysis

Around 80% of officers who discussed the impact of the mission upon them as officers² identified a positive effect. One-third of them summed up their experience as having had a very positive general impact on them, saying that they were now a 'better

person' (Respondents 40, 54 and 55), a 'better' or 'more rounded' police officer (Respondents 45, 74 and 111) or a 'better colleague' (Respondent 56). Some were ebullient in their summary, as for example Respondent 52, who called his international deployment 'just the most magnificent professional experience'. Similarly, Respondent 28 reflected that: 'some of the people here get a bit annoyed when I keep talking about my overseas experience but I'm quite glowing in [that] I saw it as some of the best policing I've done'.

This general perception was teased out to obtain a greater understanding of the specific impact they identified.

The policing environment in each of these three very different countries was dynamic, challenging and exciting, and with approximately half of our respondents citing a desire for change as one of their reasons for going on these missions, their positive assessment may be unsurprising because they definitely had this goal met. The overseas environments into which Australian police were sent between 2003 and 2007 certainly offered experiences closer to the 'police myth' of police work as dangerous, volatile and physically demanding (Martin and Jurik, 2007), compared with their domestic environments in (mainly urban) Australia.

Thirty police respondents spoke of having developed a new perspective as a result of having worked in a much poorer country and experiencing the determination of local police to work with what few resources they have. Expressing a sentiment shared by other officers, Respondent 5 articulated an appreciation of life generally, and of the skill base of the Australian police force in particular, stating, 'we are a very, very lucky society'. In the context of police resources, Respondent 18 was one of many who pointed out the contrasting expectations saying, 'We're so well off, you know. The RSIP [Royal Solomon Islands Police] haven't got a pen and paper and my guys bitch and whinge about not having enough computers'.

² Twenty-two of the interviews did not address this question, while the remaining 100 addressed it at length.

Comments like these illustrated a clear shift in priorities for some officers that the officers themselves acknowledged. As a result, they felt that they were less agitated by mundane challenges and complaints, which they viewed as petty. As Respondent 18 continued, 'that just doesn't faze me any more. If there's not enough computers, well boo-hoo'. They also perceived as petty some of the Australian community's expectations of police. As Respondent 35 (who served in Timor-Leste as part of Operation Serene, a peace restoration intervention in 2006) said: 'You've got big problems over there: murders, houses being burnt down and stuff. I mean you come back here and someone is ringing up because the dog next door is barking and you sort of, yeah, try to get things into perspective'.

Thus the changed priorities were a real double-edged sword for returned police officers, who had to draw on new-found wells of patience to approach these issues with equanimity. In spite of being irritated by demands they felt should not be police issues, officers described being very patient in responding to them as part of their professional duty. Respondent 35 concluded that 'you still ... [go] over and see Auntie Betty and tell her to keep the dog quiet, but ... there are bigger issues out there'.

Building skills

Police stated that they had returned with enhanced skills and attitudes across a range of areas. These reports fell into three categories: *structural*, in the sense of understanding Australian policing; *external*, in the sense of how they relate to the public and *internal* in terms of their perception of the approach to the work.

A small number (nine of the officers) stated that they had returned with a better understanding of the way Australian policing works. In the words of Respondent 48:

I've now got...a helicopter view of this organisation...When you're in the Solomon Islands, you tend to look...[back at] the service as a whole,

and I think I now have a better organisational flavour and understanding of some of the issues that confront the organisation, rather than me specifically sitting in a particular part of the organisation.

This perception echoed the thoughts of eight other officers, who reflected that this broader understanding helped them to appreciate the rules and regulations of their state/territory or federal force, as well as understanding how other Australian police services manage particular issues. They felt that the ability to compare gave them more options in responding to structures or processes that they felt needed improvement.

In reflecting on their internal changes in the context of their police work, the most common notion was that police officers felt they had become more flexible. A key aspect of this new flexibility was that officers felt that they had a body of experiences to draw on, not only from other areas of Australian policing but also from other national forces in response to a difficult and different environment. As Respondent 25 explained, 'in the back of your mind there's always just that other option available. . .you've just got more clarity in having to deal with different things'. Etter (2001, p. 31) has stated that Australian police need to exercise greater flexibility in the context of 'continuous, rapid and, more often than not, unpredictable change', and these reports are a positive move in that direction. For seventeen of the officers we interviewed, this expanded range of options and increased flexibility has led to a sense that they are now more open to different ideas, and more confident to explore other responses.

Another aspect of this is that they have greater 'resilience' (Respondent 56). This was expressed in a number of different ways by our respondents, including being less 'defensive' and developing a 'tougher edge' (Respondent 96), or a clearer understanding of what is important—and thus of what they do not need to spend their energy on. As

Respondent 48 explained, 'I tend to not have ownership of anything, and so therefore you tend to be able to step back and look probably more critically at the way you work'. This sense of being clear about their own abilities allows them to be more open and flexible, and they perceive this as making them better officers. They feel that they are no longer caught up in trivial issues or in trying to prove their own value or skills, and that the resulting clarity frees them to focus on more important issues.

Fifteen officers felt that the international experience had also enabled them to think more strategically, taking into account both the long-term implications of decisions, and other influencing factors such as the political context. Respondent 96 had learnt that in the international context, 'we need to understand that these things can't be fixed overnight and that our plans need to be long ranging and...our expectations need to be pulled back a little bit'. This had helped him to apply similar considerations to policing in Australia, in terms of thinking long term, taking into account assessments from other agencies, and considering political and cultural inputs. An ability to see the big picture and think strategically are important management qualities and this is no less the case in policing.

Indeed, MacDonald (1995) lists six enduring qualities essential to police leadership, namely strategic vision, ability to manage change, getting the best from staff, communication skills, as well as the ability to balance industrial concerns and to manage the media. The police in this study reported a perceived increase in the first four of these qualities, indicating that they feel both more confident as leaders and more effective police officers. For Australian police forces, to have a growing contingent of well-developed leaders constitutes a strengthening of our force that is likely to continue as these officers take on greater responsibility. It may be that international policing can be perceived as an important management training ground, in which police develop skills and strategies for dealing with the unpredictable range of issues they will face in Australian policing.

In terms of their 'external' skills, one in three police personnel described themselves as being more tolerant, patient and understanding of cultural minorities, as well as being better communicators. Respondent 21 stated that, 'I think it's given me a greater understanding of humans, humanity and different cultures', while Respondent 54 said, 'it sounds corny [but] I'm more culturally aware and sensitive'. Indeed one officer (Respondent 118) confessed that, 'I learnt that I wasn't as tolerant as I thought I was', which she felt was a significant lesson that had improved her policing.

Serving within the AFP's International Deployment Group gave officers a tangible experience that increased their understanding of what had previously been perceived as alien or other. Thus, not only did police officers feel that they were calmer about responding to the sorts of issues they encounter in Australia, but they also felt that they managed the encounters better because 'you tend to respect people a little more' (Respondent 87) and have greater 'empathy' for the people involved (Respondent 37). Such attitudes are encouraging but also vital in an era of Community Policing characterized by deep social heterogeneity. Overall, police officers described a range of improvements to their capacity to function effectively in their work. Kaplan (2000, p. 124) suggests that capacity builders are 'artists of the invisible', who must 'deal with ambiguity and paradox, uncertainty in the turbulence of change, new and unique situations coming to us from out of a future of which we have had as yet little experience', necessitating greater resourcefulness. One-third of the officers in this study felt that they had experienced aspects of what Kaplan described, and had discovered that resourcefulness within themselves.

Building confidence

Alongside these specific skills and attributes, there was a significant sense that they have much more confidence in their own abilities, which makes them more relaxed in their approach to policing in Australia. As Respondent 15 stated, international

policing 'wasn't easy and I got through that', sharing with other returned officers a sense that having handled that, they could handle anything. According to Respondent 54, who had served in both Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea:

you start to appreciate your organisation's ability and what they've trained you for and I actually didn't realise what I was capable of. A lot of other police said that to me. They've achieved a lot more and if you told me before—six months before what I'd be doing in that period of time, I would have thought you were joking. But when we're trained and put in these positions we deal with them quite adequately. There's no problems. We just approach the situation, assess and deal with it.

This is a positive reflection on police training in Australia, not only in the breadth of skills developed but also in the uptake and retention of them.

Another side of this was a sense of having dealt effectively with incredibly challenging situations that are unlikely to be replicated in Australia, certainly in terms of intensity (see Goldsmith, 2009). As Respondent 47 stated after his service in Solomon Islands: 'You get your angry man out there, they're not fucking angry, you know. Until you're carrying a machete in one hand and a coconut in the other and you're trying to cave my head in, you're not an angry man at all. So, they don't bother me.'

This increased confidence in dealing with police work in Australia fed into a strong sense of pride expressed by many officers in the work they had been able to do overseas. They were keenly aware of having helped others, and talked of the remarkable sense of satisfaction of having: 'gone over there and you've achieved something. You've gone over there and you've helped them in some way to build their police service and I guess at the end of the day to try and help their country get on track' (Respondent 120, who served in all three countries).

Several officers reported that they had taken on greater leadership whilst overseas. Sometimes this was a specific allocation of responsibilities, while in other cases it was how they had experienced working together with colleagues as a capacity builder. Respondent 3 reflected that:

you have to really take on a leadership role and particularly amongst police officers who quite often have got more experience than you have and of a higher rank. I was in a position where I was capacity building an RSIP Inspector who had been in the job longer than I had. . . and I guess that is kind of a good thing in a way because it makes you . . . think a bit harder about what you are doing.

Thus in encouraging local counterparts to extend their policing skills, Australian police officers needed to think more carefully about their own actions and choices, which in turn enhanced their skills. Like several other police officers, Respondent 36 reported that 'you're forced to work at a level that's perhaps higher than you would normally operate at', and that he was 'empowered' by succeeding in this.

While working at a higher level sometimes meant taking on a more responsible role than they usually performed in Australia, at other times it was about being resourceful in responding to challenges they had not encountered previously. Respondent 49, who describes himself as 'a hundred mile an hour guy' was challenged by having to do things more slowly, and having to work from scratch rather than building on previous work, for example in writing rosters. He reflected that: 'in terms of skills. . . it made me dig deep in myself on a number of occasions, to previous and past experiences—to draw on that, to develop things up. And I had people to run things across but I was the one responsible and I loved it. Absolutely loved it'.

Interestingly, most of the police officers who reflected that they were more confident as a result of their missions also stated that a key motivation

in volunteering for the mission was to learn more about other policing styles, while few of them nominated a desire for change or a desire to help others as their motivations.³ Each officer was interviewed only once after their return, so it is possible that their experience shaped their recollection of their motivations, just as it is possible that their initial motivations influenced what they identified as the benefits they had gained.

Negative effects of missions

Not all police officers interviewed saw their international deployment experience(s) in such a positive light. Indeed of the 100 officers who gave explicit answers to this set of questions, 19 stated that nothing good had come of their experience. The strength of this response varied. Some held a quite neutral perspective, as for example expressed by Respondent 24, who said that, 'to me it was just the ... same job, different place'. Others were stronger in their critique, like Respondent 8, who said that there was nothing positive 'whatsoever' and that it was 'a year out of my life'.

There were no clear correlations between a negative perception of the experience and motivations for going. Just over half (11 of 19) went because they wanted a change (in job, in scenery or in general), with an equal number wanting to expand their policing skills through the experience, while other possible motivations such as career advancement were reported even less by this group. Interestingly, all of those who concluded that the experience was negative had served previously in state forces, not the AFP (and did not indicate that they served overseas as an entry requirement of the AFP). This may indicate that the AFP has strong structures for recognizing international service, while state police services do not. In spite of this, the majority of state/territory police officers were positive about their experience. South Australian police officers demonstrate this clearly, with seven of the nine SAPOL officers interviewed

reporting an increased appreciation for policing in Australia, and only one describing the experience as entirely negative.

In addition to the above group, there were 17 officers who identified positive aspects of their overseas service but nonetheless felt that their careers had been damaged by the experience. These officers were divided roughly evenly between state/territory and federal services (eight were AFP). They described being perceived as being on a holiday, or at best simply absent from their policing duties. Respondent 31 said, 'I've heard a number of people say that, "Don't worry, whatever you've done overseas means nothing to the [state police service]"'. Several also described being reallocated to other areas (including other stations or even other cities) with little or no consultation, and in a manner that implied that their overseas service was an inconvenience and annoyance in the view of management.

This would appear to be a significant lost opportunity for Australian police forces if they are indeed overlooking these officers. In this sense, overseas service functions like a practical training program for middle and senior ranks of the force, effecting a significant boost in capacity both for domestic and future overseas policing tasks. The powerful formative significance of overseas service is also seen in the management field, with Black *et al.* (1999, p. 2) contending that international service is both 'the single most powerful experience in shaping the perspective and capabilities of effective global leaders' and the greatest investment organizations will ever make in individual training. Measured against the general employee repatriation literature, it would seem that the experiences of Australian police forces with their returning personnel are not unique: according to one study, 80% of people who had worked internationally for their organization felt that their experience was not valued by their employer (Black *et al.*, 1999, p. 193). This is of great importance, since it has been argued that the effectiveness of the repatriation process is fundamentally

³ Desire for change and desire to help were the two most commonly identified motivators, each nominated by at least 50 of the 122 officers interviewed.

linked to the likelihood of staff staying with the organization after returning (Hyder and Lovblad, 2007, p. 267). In spite of its importance, it is also acknowledged that 'repatriation may be the most problematic stage in the expatriation cycle', particularly with regard to long-term repatriation planning (Stahl *et al.*, 2002, p. 222). Clearly, given the kinds of positive policing attitudes reported in our study, losing police personnel upon their return would constitute a double loss, for domestic as well as for future overseas service.

Conclusion

In an address to the National Press Club in October 2006, Commissioner Mick Keelty said:

I believe the Australian police officer who serves in one of these missions comes back to their domestic role with a much greater understanding of community policing, has a greater cultural awareness and is much more appreciative of the facilities and technology that policing in Australia sometimes takes for granted. (Keelty, 2006, p. 12)

Our research suggests that Keelty's perception is accurate, and that his comment encompasses the key areas in which police themselves believe they have been transformed. The data set indicates that Australian police who have served on international police-building missions have experienced reverse capacity building, in the sense that they believe that they have become more effective, confident, patient and flexible in their work. These attitudinal shifts have the potential to generate dividends for policing in their home environments as well as for future overseas missions. These skills are hard to quantify, and often under-valued or labelled as 'soft' skills. In spite of this, they are 'the most difficult, demanding and challenging skills to master, and are critical to capacity building' (Kaplan, 2000, p. 521). Ironically, these officers report that they have been learning these skills at precisely the time they were expected

to be exercising them. Ensuring that officers who benefit in this way remain with the organization after their return will be an important challenge for their employers.

In addition, from a home police force perspective, reverse capacity building along the lines revealed by our data analysis offers not just personal development opportunities for individual officers but also the chance for further deepening the effectiveness of organizational policies directed against discrimination, racism and hostility or neglect towards certain segments of the domestic population. While often the short duration of such missions will militate against the chances of lasting attitudinal change, there is at least the opening provided by serving in missions in different environments, and away from the 'usual working circumstances' of their home forces, for changes to begin to occur. One of the interesting questions for further research that our analysis suggests (at least indirectly) is whether officers with mission experience, other potential variables being equal, generate fewer complaints from members of the public.

Finally, many of the benefits of reverse capacity building amount to contributions to the kind of 'perspective' Muir (1977) suggested was essential to good domestic policing. Many police officers, it would seem, return from overseas missions with a deepened sense of tragedy about human nature, and hence a greater capacity and tendency for empathy across social and cultural differences. Muir (2008, p. 20) has recently referred to 'the intensely felt need for dignity' among the populations with whom police have contact, something that enhanced empathy can permit the police officer to recognize and acknowledge. Overseas missions can provide a reminder of the value pluralism associated with police work in many environments today, and that both police officers and citizens are linked by having to negotiate uncertainty in everyday life. Under such fluidity, roles can easily be reversed. Respondent 5 very nicely summed up one important outcome of this process when he said, 'I've come back very humbled. I went away, I thought I went away as a teacher. I've

certainly come back in a lot of respects as a student'. This reflection is also consistent with the statement by respected development practitioner and theorist Deborah Eade (2007, p. 637) that 'you can't build capacities in others that you don't have yourself. And if you can't learn, you can't teach either'.

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