

Public engagement strand update 2019/20

Over the last 12 months, there have been no new activities or events for the public engagement strand. Due to the departure of the research associate working on the deliberative events and difficulties recruiting another researcher, it was not possible to follow through on plans to hold further deliberative events during 2019. However, this time has presented an opportunity for me to reflect on what we have learned from the work undertaken, and to think about how this learning might inform the future activities of the N8PRP. I have worked on further analysis of the data collected during the two “deliberative events” held in 2018, as well as looking back over key findings from the previous activities.

Over the last 4 years, as the lead academic of the public engagement strand of the N8PRP Catalyst Project, I have worked with colleagues across the partner forces and universities to explore the meaning of the term public engagement in the context of a large, collaborative research partnership of this kind. The strand activities have included collaborative seminars; a review of force engagement strategies; two public surveys (one online, one a face-to-face street survey); interviews with 22 individuals involved in engagement activities for police forces and OPCCs; a public engagement ‘showcase’ event and two deliberative events with members of the public (one on restorative justice, the other on road safety).

The work confirmed that reference to “public engagement” in the context of this project has always been somewhat ambiguous and that different stakeholders in the partnership had different expectations about what the strand should be doing. The key area of ambiguity was over whether the purpose of the strand was to engage the public with the research-focused activities of the N8PRP, or to undertake work to help understand, support and develop existing public engagement activities by forces and OPCCs themselves. As a result, strand activities have oscillated between trying to address these two rather different objectives and have sought, where possible, to find ways to reconcile them.

Returning to the research conducted earlier in the Catalyst project life cycle I have been reminded of the very strong public support expressed by survey respondents for the idea that universities ought to be conducting independent research on policing, as well as the much more lukewarm response to the idea that the police should help set universities’ research priorities. I was also struck again by the importance of remembering that in the ordinary run of things most people have little or no interest in policing issues. This is important to bear in mind when seeking to recruit participants for engagement events. Most people, most of the time, are not thinking about policing. In addition, when they do think about policing, sadly it is usually because issues of crime or anti-social behaviour are having a negative impact on their lives.

I have also revisited the discussions conducted with practitioners working within police forces and for police and crime commissioners and thus been reminded that when they seek to engage members of the public there is always a tension between the normative and pragmatic aims of their efforts. In Strand Update 6, researcher Lisa Weston and I noted that

whilst many practitioners referred to the potential for engagement work to benefit both “the community” and the police/OPCC, there was a need to subject this assumption to interrogation. Moreover, practitioners themselves identified an ongoing knowledge gap in terms of assessing the outcomes of their engagement activities and expressed desire for their efforts to be evaluated. However, Lisa and I also noted that the community engagement practices of police and OPCCs, and their objectives, were so varied that gauging the effectiveness of engagement in general would be an impossible task. We identified a need to clarify and draw distinctions between the different objectives practitioners

are pursuing through activities badged as “engagement” and for practitioners to specify the causal mechanisms they assume are at play in their activities. Such a process of clarification could support a more critical interrogation of their effectiveness. Perhaps this could form part of the future work of the N8PRP.

Finally, further analysis of the deliberative events indicates the need for careful consideration of why and how deliberative methods might feature in future N8PRP activities. The final research briefing for the strand will provide a fuller account. However, one highly pertinent finding is that in deliberative discussions power can operate in very subtle ways. Power can be at work in the framing of the events, and in the ideas, words and stories that participants use to conduct their discussions.

The framing of the deliberative events as part of a policing research partnership, and the involvement of police as “experts”, immediately positioned the issues for discussion as naturally requiring a police-based response. However, discussions often ranged much more widely. Some participants expressed the view that the police ought not to be involved in things they currently deal with and argued that resources should be reallocated from police to, for example, social workers. Can such findings be accommodated under the umbrella of a policing research partnership? If the police want to involve the public in working out how they should respond to certain issues and the public say “do nothing, let others have your resources” is that something the police are able to hear? In my view, genuinely democratic public deliberations on issues relating to policing must provide space for the public to explore non-police solutions to their problems and acknowledge that the utility of the police institution in different contexts is contestable. I will elaborate on this further in the final update for the strand, which will be published on the N8PRP website by the end of May.

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