



# Experience, Seniority and Gut Feeling—A Qualitative Examination of How Swedish Police Officers Perceive They Value, Evaluate and Manage Knowledge When Making Decisions

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There is a debate in current scholarship regarding whether or not education and training is an effective tool to change police officers' conduct. Compared to the United States, Sweden has longer training for officers who experience 2 years of academic training and 6 months of practical training. The Swedish police training is also, contrary to the American training, standardized. This paper aims to investigate how Swedish officers value, evaluate and manage knowledge when making decisions. To examine this further 27 qualitative interviews were conducted with 14 male and 13 female Swedish police officers during 2018. The interviews were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis in both English and Swedish to uncover themes and codes. Findings suggest that police officers utilize experience, seniority, and gut feeling when valuing, evaluating and managing knowledge. Furthermore, the results imply that certain types of knowledge are valued differently by officers. These findings can inform how and if education can be used as a tool to potentially change how officers in the US and other countries make their decisions.

**Keywords:** knowledge, police training, Swedish police, knowledge hierarchy, decision making

## INTRODUCTION

Police officers make many decisions every day. For example, officers decide what information goes into police reports, which car they should stop in the street, and whom they should arrest. Although many things may guide these decisions, one of the essential factors is knowledge. Thus with the many decisions officers make every day, officers are forced to practice knowledge application, i.e., utilize knowledge to make decisions. Police officers make decisions that impact individuals. Extensive scholarship highlights that officers make biased decisions that negatively impact non-whites (Brunson, 2007; Quinton, 2015; Vito et al., 2017) and stigmatized populations such as individuals with a prior criminal history (Tillyer, 2014). Education and training are some of the tools that are often suggested to try and minimize the biased decisions officers make (Krameddine and Silverstone, 2015). However, empirical evidence provides mixed support for the effectiveness of education to change officers' behavior (Malmin, 2012; Bruns and Bruns, 2015).

To further explore potential educational and training initiatives in the US police, this paper will examine how Swedish officers describe evaluating and managing knowledge. Sweden has a two-and-a-half year-long training that heavily relies on theoretical and academic training to provide officers with extensive academic training. This paper aims to understand how Swedish police officers

describe evaluating if certain knowledge is applicable or not, how officers value different types of knowledge in relation to each other, and how officers manage knowledge when making decisions. The research question guiding this present study is: How is knowledge valued, evaluated, and managed by Swedish police officers? I will answer this question by analyzing 27 semi-structured interviews with Swedish police officers.

Police officers describe knowledge as an essential aspect of the job. However, knowledge comes in different types, according to officers (Eliasson, 2020). For example, officers describe that knowledge can be theoretical and practical (Eliasson, 2020) and to familiarity and experience (Holgersson and Gottschalk, 2008; Holgersson et al., 2008; Karp and Stenmark, 2011). However, there is a gap in the current literature addressing police and their understanding of knowledge (Eliasson, 2020), more specifically studies which address how officers perceive that they manage, navigate and value different types of knowledge. This study can contribute to the gap in current empirical scholarship by further expanding the concept of knowledge and understanding how it is thought of and used by officers. Through this contribution more knowledge can be gained of how educational requirements and pre-employment training will not necessarily be enough to elicit desired behaviors and reduce misconduct/bias.

Furthermore, by understanding how Swedish officers value, evaluate, and manage knowledge, we can learn more about how officers with extensive academic training use knowledge. The implications of these findings can be further discussed in relation to US policing and inform how and if education can be used as a tool to potentially change how officers in the US make their decisions. Thus the findings can inform policymakers and policing organizations of how officers' application of knowledge could be explored to develop strategies best contributing to reforming or changing the police and their practices. Findings can also contribute to sharing knowledge on how police officers make decisions and which actions are needed to change the decision-making process that potentially leads to police misconduct, which, to an extent, reduces the police's legitimacy among civilians.

## KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

Many notions are considered when officers make decisions; two example are knowledge and experience. While experience and knowledge are terms commonly used, the meaning of these terms is dynamic and can vary depending on the context in which they are discussed (Hoel and Barland, 2020). Although this paper does not aim to discuss how officers understand and perceive knowledge (i.e., Eliasson, 2020), it is essential to understand how concepts such as knowledge and experience are conceptualized.

Experience and knowledge are heavily intertwined and do not operate independently of each other (Dewey, 2005) and should thus not be dichotomized. For example, previous scholars have examined the impact experience and training have on officers' conduct and decision-making and argue that they both can

improve the outcome of police use of force (Johnson et al., 2018). More specifically, officers with more experience utilize less verbal and physical force (Paoline and Terrill, 2007), and that shootings involving officers decrease with seniority (McElvain and Kposowa, 2008). However, existing scholarship shows that police officers often think of experiences as having a practical component related to occupational tasks that are learned and conducted in the field. On the other hand, knowledge is often thought of as information obtained through academic or theoretical contexts. (Aas, 2016; Karp and Stenmark, 2011; Eliasson, 2020). Several studies have found that the differences between these two concepts are highlighted when officers discuss what type of expertise they think are the most important in their occupational role (Holgersson et al., 2008; Holgersson and Gottschalk, 2008; Gottschalk and Dean, 2010; Fekjær et al., 2014; Back, 2015).

Experience and knowledge are often studied in relation to specific decisions police make or specific points of conduct. For example, previous studies have examined how experience and knowledge influence the use of force (Johnson et al., 2018; McElvain and Kposowa, 2008; Paoline and Terrill, 2007), perception of performance (Bruns and Bruns, 2015), complaints against officers (Gottschalk and Dean, 2010), and interactions with civilians (Shjarback and White, 2016). Although these studies offer robust and valuable knowledge about the context in which knowledge and experience operate, it is also of value to understand how officers perceive that they navigate knowledge on a more general level. By learning more about how officers perceive that they navigate knowledge and experience in their occupational role on a general level, we can learn more about the attitudes officers have on what skills and information they perceive as valuable while thinking about their profession on a more holistic basis level. Thus, this paper's findings aim to inform the overall understanding of officers' perception of navigating knowledge and experience in their occupational role rather than decisions in a specific context.

## POLICE TRAINING

Two of the most suggested efforts to impact police behavior and their decisions are education and training (Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Hallenberg, 2012). Education refers to the schooling that officers have before becoming police officers, such as high school diplomas or college degrees and training refers to the training officers obtain in the academy.

Although some scholars argue that the police profession is a craft that relies on craftsmanship obtained that is not obtained from science (Wilson, 1968), the push for professionalizing the police has drawn attention to the role education, and training has for professionalization and changes in police conduct (Suss and Boulton, 2018).

It is important to highlight that the empirical support for the impact education has on police behavior and changes in behaviors are mixed (Conti and Nolan, 2005, Fekjær et al., 2014; Paterson, 2011). For example, Shjarback and White (2016) found that agencies requiring officers to have an

associate degree before hiring had a lower frequency of citizens' complaints than agencies with only a high school degree. However, no significant findings were found for the number of training hours in the academy, field training, or in-service officers had. Another study finds that highly educated supervisors and trained moderate subordinate officers use high levels of force (Hyeyoung and Lee, 2015). Based on these findings, one can conclude that although empirical findings support that education may have an impact on specific aspects of policing, the extent to which education sufficiently can change or impact officers' conduct is debated.

In addition to education, training is another aspect that is often proposed as a way of changing officers' behavior. However, scholars highlight numerous challenges with the way current officer training is conducted in the US. Thus, scholars have argued for reforming the current police training, changing aspects of existing or introducing new training incentives (Birzer, 2003). For example, scholars argue that police training is a tool to break down barriers against stigmas about mental health and other perceptions officers may have adopted due to inherited norms in police culture (Papazoglou and Andersen, 2014). Thus, officers' training is one of the critical propositions when trying to develop strategies for improving the US police (Haberfeld 2002; Papazoglou and Andersen, 2014) and their relationship with the community (Skogan et al., 2013).

These problems are exemplified through the numerous studies reporting on implicit biases among police, biased decisions against non-whites (Brunson, 2007) and overuse of force and violence. In addition, empirical evidence suggests that the way training, more specifically in the US, is designed today does not change officers' perceptions or behaviors. For example, a study examining academy training's impact on already existing high levels of colorblind racial ideology among police trainees finds no significant changes in the officer's racial perceptions after finishing the academy (Schlosser, 2013). Thus, the current efforts to train officers in diversity and reduce non-biased perceptions about race are insufficient to change already existing negative racial perceptions. Another challenge of the current way police training is conducted in the US is that it is not standardized (Connelly et al., 2019), which means that various officers in various states and even in the same state can have different curricula (Blumberg et al., 2019). In light of not having standardized training, there is a need to understand what effective training is to ensure fair and effective police (Connelly et al., 2019).

Although studies are addressing the benefits of training officers (Hyeyoung and Lee, 2015; Shjarback and White, 2016), scholars argue that the way current training is facilitated in the US does, for example, not reduce or encourage change in officers' perceptions on notions such as race and diversity (Schlosser, 2013). Due to the limited aspects of current police training, scholars have suggested a wide range of implementations for changing and reforming officers' training in the US, which for example, has included increasing the theoretical aspect of training to complement the already extensive practical training of officers (Blumberg et al., 2019).

## Swedish Police Training

During the recent 2 decades, the Swedish police academy has focused on increasing the academic training of officers. During the 1990s, Swedish police training was heavily examined and evaluated to best train officers (Karp and Stenmark, 2011). One of the implications of this examination was that the police training should include more problem-oriented learning and subject integration (Andersson, 2007), which set the guidelines for the reformation of the Swedish police training. Although there have been alterations of the police training in Sweden during the last 2 decades, one of the core aspects of the training is that there should be a theoretical foundation of the tactics and practical knowledge evaluation that officers conduct in their occupation (Adang, 2013).

The current setup of the Swedish police academy is that it consists of 2 years of theoretical training and 6 months of practical training. Thus there is no other formal educational requirement. During the academic portion of the training, trainees take courses that engage with individuals in demanding situations, such as individuals with suicidality and psychological distress (Ghazinour et al., 2019) and take law and social science-oriented classes. The Swedish police training is standardized and is currently offered by five universities in Sweden.

Although evoking a more theoretical training for officers, which aims to better prepare officers for the demanding nature of the occupation, Karp and Stenmark (2011) highlight that newly trained officers are exposed to contradictory forces once entering the field. Although newly trained officers obtain extensive theoretical and practical training, they are subjected to strong professional norms once entering the field. These professional norms are defined by officers working in the field and consist of perceptions, beliefs, and definitions of the knowledge and skills essential for policing. And these professionals' norms do, according to Karp and Stenmark, these professionals' norms impact the way newly graduated officers learn as they come out in the field and have implications for how they will conduct their work later on in their career (Chappell and Piquero, 2004). Thus although Swedish officers receive expensive training in the academy, the socialization and exposure to professionals' norms once entering the field can permeate the training they have obtained in the academy.

Current policing scholarship fails to address in-depth how officers discuss knowledge in combination with professional norms. More specifically, scholarship fails to address what officers argue are the most essential and valued knowledge in their profession. This study aims to address this gap in the literature but qualitatively analyze how 27 Swedish police officers describe what knowledge is most valuable in policing and what type of knowledge they use when making professional decisions. By understanding more about how officers manage, evaluate, and value knowledge, we can understand how to develop educational efforts to reduce biased acts and officers' decisions. Thus, the goal is to expand the idea of "knowledge" from theoretical training provided in school and preservice training to experience gained on the job.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, I conducted 27 semi-structured interviews with Swedish police officers to understand more about officers and their professional knowledge. The data was collected during the spring of 2018 and was conducted by the author, a native Swedish speaker. The Swedish population was chosen for this study because compared to the United States, Sweden has longer training for officers who experience 2 years of academic training and 6 months of practical training. By examining how a country with police training is heavily influenced by academic and theoretical aspects and is centralized, we can learn more about what possible implications these aspects have on officers' attitudes and usage of professional knowledge, which can inform possible efforts to change police training in other countries with less academic training such as the US. This paper is a part of a larger study that focuses on professional attitudes and perceptions of Swedish officers (Eliasson, 2020).

The interviews lasted 30 min to 1.5 h and were conducted at either a police station, the officers' home or the researcher's home. A qualitative semi-structured approach was chosen to study this topic because it allowed the interview to have a conversational structure and allowed the officers to ask questions to the interviewer if there was a need for clarification, the same being for the interviewer and the interviewer respondent.

The respondents were asked a variation of questions regarding different areas of policing. However, the key notions explored in this paper are perceptions of knowledge and how knowledge was perceived to be used by officers when conducting occupational tasks.

The interviews were conducted in Swedish, and I, a native Swedish speaker, then transcribed them in Swedish and translated them into English. Once themes and nuances were created, I compared and contrasted the two analyses made, one in each language, and ensured no language differences or thematic differences in the findings. I recorded the interviews on tape-recorded, and all the officers agreed that their Swedish statement would be transcribed by me and translated to English by me. When translating the verbatim quotes from officers, I made sure to stay as close to the Swedish expressions as possible to increase certain statements' integrity and meanings in Swedish. However, some of the wording I altered to convey the Swedish meanings accurately in English.

The strength of utilizing qualitative methodology in this study is that it captures meanings of notions such as knowledge and information and enables us to understand more about concepts such as knowledge which can be viewed as rather abstract. Specifically, this study provides an insight into the police officers' perception of their occupational tasks and how they use knowledge in their own words (Esterberg, 2002). However, a weakness with using interviews is that the study will not be able to capture the actual behavior of the officers but only can grasp how police officers themselves perceive their knowledge of navigation in their occupation. Thus, the findings in this study will not reflect officers' actual behavior (Denscombe, 2009).

As with every methodology, there is a wide range of limitations using qualitative methods. Specifically, challenges arise with

validity and reliability (Esterberg, 2002). In this specific study, several steps were taken to increase the validity of the findings. Firstly the several rounds of analysis and coding conducted on both the Swedish and the English transcripts were done to improve the authenticity and integrity of the data (Denscombe, 2009). Secondly, the study acknowledges that self-reporting could be considered not reliable when discussing specific behavior. However, this study does not aim to study specific behavior but rather to understand how officers describe and perceive their behavior. Thus, although the accuracy of self-reporting can pose an issue, this study's ultimate goal and findings do not focus on actual conduct and specifically highlight the value of self-reporting since it is the perceptions officers describe that are the aspect studies. The study acknowledges at an early stage that the findings are based on self-reporting and do not make statements about officers' actual behavior. Thirdly, several steps were taken to be transparent in the coding and analytical process. For example, a coding book was developed in the initial stages of the coding process to provide a systematic practice for code application. Furthermore, if respondents did not adhere to the belief of the majority or provided non-responses, this is stated throughout the result section, and percent estimates are disclosed to give specific insight into how widely the perceptions were shared across the sample (Esterberg, 2002; Franklin and Ballan, 2001).

## Recruitment

I selected participants using snowball (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Handcock and Gile, 2011) and purposeful sampling methods (Emmel, 2013) to recruit respondents. I was intentionally targeting police officers working in the southern region of Sweden because it was geographically possible for me to interview these respondents. After identifying key gatekeepers, they gave me additional information to respondents who they thought would be willing to participate in my study. Thus, the only requirement that I had for respondents was that they were police officers and working in the southern region of Sweden. Thus, the requirement method of this present study reflects a mixed usage of snowball sampling and purposeful sampling.

## Sample

I used purposeful snowball sampling to obtain the respondents. Guidelines for determining sample size for qualitative study tend to suggest sample sized ranging from 5 to 50 (Dworkin, 2012). Although there is a wide range of sample sizes in qualitative scholarship which specifically use interviews to examine various aspects of policing, most studies have sample sizes range from 9 to 38 (Brown et al., 2020; Lone et al., 2017; Lumsden, 2017; Reynolds et al., 2018; Rhodes et al., 2006). Despite that sample size have an impact on the finding's generalizability, much qualitative scholarship relies on saturation to determine sample size (Malterud et al., 2016). In this study I chose to use saturation point to determine sample size as suggested by Malterud et al. (2016) and the final samples size of 27 interviews. These 27 interviews fell in the range of suggested sample sizes for qualitative studies (Dworkin, 2012) and the range of sample size in existing qualitative studies examining police officers

(Rhodes et al., 2006; Lone et al., 2017; Lumsden, 2017; Reynolds et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2020).

I interviewed 27 police employees during the spring of 2018, who all worked in Sweden's southern police district. Sweden has seven police districts based on geographical areas in Sweden, including various urban, suburban, and urban areas. The interview sample consists of 52% ( $n = 14$ ) males and 48% ( $n = 13$ ) females. The respondents ranged between 27–64 years old, and their experience in the profession ranged between 2 and 40 years.

Both police officers and civil workers are employed by the Swedish police. I aimed to interview an equal number of civil employees and police officers; however, the final sample consisted of 6 civil employees (22%) and 21 police officers (78%). Since the civil employees represent less than 30% of the sample, I do not compare the two groups in the analysis. The justification for including civil workers in this study lies in that they are a curtail part of the Swedish police force and conduct many similar tasks as police officers, such as investigation interaction with defendants and victims. The main difference between police officers and civil employees is that police officers have attended the police academy and civil employees have received shorter training within the police organization and often have a bachelor's degree from a university. In addition civil employees are not allowed to carry a gun or patrol the streets and instead often work as investigators. Other scholars have highlighted the value of including civil employees when studying the police (Lumsden, 2017). Thus, I included civil employees responses to reflect the true make-up of the Swedish police and because they also have valuable perceptions of occupational knowledge and experiences due to their extensive occupational overlap with police officers. In this paper, the civil police employees will be referred to as "civil workers" when quoted, and police officers will be referred to as "police officers" Furthermore.

## Analytical Approach

When all the interviews were collected, they were transcribed and themed using an inductive thematic analysis to identify how police employees assess victims and victimization. A thematic analysis was chosen as the analytic strategy because it highlights broader trends in the data and can emphasize nuances within the themes and trends. The inductive thematic analysis highlights themes related to the data and not any theoretical or previous empirical assumptions or trends. This choice was motivated because there is no goal to hypostasis testing nor prove a theory right or wrong. Thus, the key aspect of thematic analysis is identifying patterns in data.

The analytic process of this study is similar to the six analytical steps described by Braun and Clarke (2013). The first phase involved familiarizing with the data, including reading transcripts and listening to the interviews three times. During the second phase, the transcripts were read a fourth time and general codes were produced describing their training, how they perform occupational tasks and their perception of occupational knowledge and their role as officers. During the third and fourth phase, themes were generated based on the codes developed in phase two, and these themes were reviewed in

relation to both the Swedish and English versions of the transcripts. During the fifth phase, the themes were defined and contextualized regarding how officers perceived knowledge they use in an occupational context. During this phase, the themes of knowledge hierarchy and mechanisms navigating knowledge such as gut feeling were developed. Finally, the codes and themes were categorized and developed during the sixth and final phase until saturation was reached.

## RESULTS

This study aimed to understand how Swedish police officers value and manage knowledge in an occupational context. By learning more about how officers value, evaluate and manage knowledge, we can learn more about how officers make decisions and what factors impact their conduct. This result section will describe officers' perception of knowledge in relation to occupational tasks, decision-making, and assessments in their daily work. The three major themes that emerged through an inductive thematic analysis were individual experience, seniority, and gut feeling. Experience was discussed from an individual perspective which highlights how officers use experiences they have gained personally, experience that is shared from other colleagues, which is often accompanied and associated with seniority and gut feeling which officers used to navigate the various types of knowledge they have when making decisions.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

The most discussed aspect of how Swedish officers make decisions was experience, which was in one way or another mentioned by all 27 officers interviewed. When asked how they made decisions in their job, almost all officers responded by stating "experience." For example, one officer said, "Experience, experience, experience. You build your experiences from situations, so when you are put in front of a new situation, you relate to the old stuff you have been through" (*Male, 44 years old, Patrol, 9 years of experience*). As this officer highlights, in line with other officers, experience is perceived as essential when conducting police work. However, experiences were not only discussed in regard to what officers experience in the field but also that experience provides a reference for familiarity to situations and decisions that officers face on duty. Officers further explain experience as something that accumulates over time, and it provides them with a tool to assess situations they encounter in the field. For example, a female officer explained that her previous experience at crime scenes gives her something to compare current situations to:

Some things you can see are not right...you notice that a person is lying. A burglary, for example... It is extremely unusual that it happens in an apartment... It does not look like it should look like with burglaries, cash and another lot of expensive valuables is stolen, but you see that this is not what a burglary looks like, and you have

been on 1,000 burglaries... It is more like “here is how someone else thinks a burglary looks like,” but you know based on your experiences that the story is not true. It does not fit together. *Female, 34 years old, Patrol, 4 years of experience.*

The officers explain that if a situation she faced did not align with her previous experience, it was an indication that something may be “wrong” or “incorrect” in the situation she is facing. Thus, the knowledge she acquires through previous experiences informs her decisions in the field later on in her career. Approximately 70% of the officers discuss similar scenarios, where prior knowledge provides a “framework,” which they rely on when navigating how to handle situations they face. However, officers highlight that although that knowledge from previous experiences is essential to how they make decisions, it is essential to critically evaluate their own experiences and remember that the knowledge they gain from previous experiences is not objective. One officer explains:

You have a certain set of prejudices with you, which is based on your work experiences . . . however, my experiences are not empirically tested. Let us say; If I have stopped 20 people last week and they all turn out to be Romani—then the experience says...what does it say? Is it random or a pattern . . . that perhaps some groups of Romani are more criminal? If you just presented it straight up—then it is a prejudice. It is not empirically tested, not facts. But it is an experience . . . you have to have a critical attitude to your own experiences. Then you have the laws and the rules and what we also apply. *Male, 32 years old, Patrol and Investigator, 4 and half years of experience.*

As the officer highlights, although experience is one of the most emphasized aspects of navigating decision-making, it is essential to be aware that experience is subjective and needs to be evaluated critically. According to the officers, one way to be critical is to differentiate between personal experience and personal occupational experience. Many of them express that although occupational experience is the direct experience that impacts their decisions, personal experience is also present.

You always have your own opinion, I think it has to do with what you have for background in general . . . if you become a police officer, if you have done something else before and have more life experience in general... I think that is positive. *Male, 42 years old, Patrol 9 years of experience.*

Personal experience does not, according to the officers, have to be obtained through their occupation but can be based on events in their private life or life before becoming an officer, while personal occupational knowledge refers to the knowledge officers acquire while on duty. Having a critical mindset towards where the experience comes from is evaluating the experiential knowledge. Thus, what emerged from the interviews was an inherent perception of personal experience being valued lower than occupational experience, potentially due to the desired perception of maintaining a sense of professionalism.

## KNOWLEDGE FORM COLLEAGUES

The shared experience was contrasted against personal experience, in two ways, the first was that it is used as a tool to evaluate the individual experience. Thus, a way officers express critical evaluation of their own experiential knowledge was by explaining the importance of colleagues’ experience, specifically how colleagues’ experiential knowledge is used as a reference and their own personal occupational experience. This reference process reflected either a confirmation of officers’ own knowledge or was used as a guideline when their own knowledge was not enough.

Within the police, police experiences are always the most important experience. Which I do not agree with . . . you have the (personal) experience, and you have it with you. However, one should not forget that it is good to get some other inputs to . . . an older colleague’s experience usually weighs quite heavily, but one should not follow it blindly. *Male, 42 years old, Patrol 9 years of experience.*

The second function of shared experiences one it acted as a source of knowledge when there was no or a lack of personal knowledge highlighting that knowledge is shared between colleagues. One officer stated: “It is partly learning by doing, it goes from colleague to colleague. You check how others handle things, of course also legal texts, how they should be handled” (*Female, 29 years old, Patrol and Investigator, 3 years of experience*). All of the officers spoke about how important learning from colleagues is when working as police officers, from the early days as new officers and later on during their career. Officers spoke about this shared experiential knowledge as something that, together with the personal experiential knowledge, is higher valued than personal experiential knowledge in isolation. Thus, it was evident that shared knowledge, combined with personal occupational knowledge, is more important than singular personal knowledge from one officer.

## THE “IDEAL KNOWLEDGE”

Although shared experiential knowledge combined with personal experiential knowledge is valued high among the officers, one type of knowledge seems to be valued higher. Experiential knowledge from senior officers with several years on the job is often seen as the most desirable knowledge and overrides other types of knowledge. All officers express that knowledge from more senior colleagues reflecting their experience impacts how they navigate making decisions when they do not know how to solve a situation. One officer states: “You rely on an older colleague” (*Male, 42 years old, Patrol, 9 years of experience*). Knowledge and experience from senior colleagues are perceived by officers as important throughout different stages of their careers as officers. However, senior colleagues’

experiences and knowledge are essential when navigating decisions as a new officer.

You learn from the people who have worked longer. That is how it works most smoothly. When you see positive things from someone who has worked for a while, you take it with you and try to do the same. Although no situation you face is the same, one tries for example, it can be that a person (senior colleague) usually tells a special joke in a situation, and it works, then I also tell that joke. There are such little things and bigger things. How to handle security in certain situations and so on... *Female, 34 years old, Patrol, 4 years of experience.*

There are several aspects of senior colleagues' experience that other officers can utilize. For example, jokes or jargon may be used to light up the officers' interactions. Officers also explain that it is not only the seniority of knowledge that impacts how they make decisions. They note that the law is essential when navigating occupational decisions.

Some work tasks were (learned) through officers through practical exercises. There is much focus on legal support and paragraphs, but you must know what (goals) you are working towards. You learn by hand from other colleagues. *Female, 38 years old, Investigator, 8 years of experience.*

However, as seen in previous empirical work (Eliasson, 2020), officers differ between theoretical and practical knowledge and value practical knowledge based on experience higher than theoretical knowledge. Almost all Swedish officers highlighted that experience impacted their decisions, but only a few officers expressed that the law affected their decisions. One officer stated: "Through older colleagues . . . mostly. One had to be legally clear on what I had to do and not. The practicalities I got from older colleagues showing me" (*Male, 42 Years old, Patrol, 17 years of experience*). Although both "sources" of knowledge may impact decision-making, Swedish officers frequently discuss experience as more essential than the law in policing.

As the interviews went on, there seems to be an unspoken rule that reinforced senior knowledge as the most influential and valued knowledge. This unspoken rule suggests that the occupational hierarchy reinforces the idea that certain types of knowledge, specifically senior colleagues' experiential knowledge, are the most valuable knowledge. One officer stated:

In the police, it has always been that the younger ones (officers) should know their place and "follow the line." It has changed, but it still exists . . . It used to be more, but sometimes you could hear when you make suggestions—"no, we have always done it like this, and therefore it will continue." But then there are colleagues who are open to listening—and say, "good, why I did not think of that." But it is not always easy to

get new ways of thinking implemented. *Female, 34 years old, Patrol, 4 years of experience.*

In line with a few others, this officer expresses a hierarchy in relation to occupational rank and dynamics between officers, which has implications for officers' decision-making. Close to 40% of the officers express that seniority impacts decision-making when patrolling with a more senior colleague. This seems to reflect an unspoken professional norm that reflects "how things are done" will continue to be done, this was further reinforced by a senior officer. The senior officer expresses that now when he is the more senior colleague, he is expected to take on a specific role as teaching others and be a point of guidance, which he used to have someone else be for him.

Now I have become this older colleague, so now, when they come back completely new, I have the responsibility to take care of the new, the same way that I have been treated . . . *Male, 42 years old, Patrol, 17 years of experience.*

Thus, seniority is recognized by younger officers who learn from more senior officers, but it is also acknowledged by senior officers who become expected to carry on the legacy of teaching and guiding newer officers.

Overall, officers regard knowledge coming from more senior colleagues as one of the ultimate impactors of their decisions. The officers highlight that it is the word of an older colleague that is valued highly and a part of the organizational structure and is used when teaching new officers how to conduct their job. This finding is important because it highlights that specific knowledge is valued higher and alludes to how knowledge is valued, evaluated, and managed according to professional norms within the police. The police's professional norms and structure contribute to the way knowledge is valued, evaluated, and managed by officers by providing them with spoken and unspoken rules saying that knowledge from more senior officers is considered very valuable along with knowledge from other colleagues combined with knowledge from other colleagues personal experiential knowledge.

## GUT FEELING—A TOOL TO NAVIGATE EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE

The third and final aspect of valuing, evaluating, and managing knowledge is gut feeling which officers describe as a tool that officers express using when deciding what type of knowledge to draw from. Although the officers express that experience was essential and that the most valued experiential knowledge came from senior colleagues, they all note that the ultimate tool they use when deciding what to do is gut feeling. Gut feeling helps them manage what type of knowledge they decide to use, i.e., their own experience, more senior colleagues, or legal paragraphs.

When explaining what gut feeling is, many officers show difficulty describing it in one word. They explain that gut feeling is not one thing but rather something generated from

multiple factors, which creates a “sense” or a “feeling.” One officer says: “You get a gut feeling...It is an experience you bring with you. Knowledge about people, meetings with people, you build it up” (*Male, 44 years old, patrol, 9 years of experience*). This officer highlights how the gut feeling in his eyes is not coming from one specific thing but rather from experiences in the field and meetings with people. Officers then carry this with them from situation to situation and the gut feeling further develops every time an officer encounters a situation. When asked to explain or define what a gut feeling was, one officer replied:

You get a certain gut feeling. I would say that in most cases, it is a gut feeling. When we choose to stop a car, why do we choose to stop a specific car and not another . . . I think it has to do with experience, and then it becomes unconscious knowledge, so I think that you look at certain patterns...you see what does not belong with the norm and the usual. I think you get better at discovering such stuff. *Male, 42 years old, Patrol, 9 years of experience.*

Several officers talk about gut feeling as a vessel that manages the various kinds of knowledge the officers have. As they face situations in the field, the knowledge from experience builds up a gut feeling used by the officers to manage how to decide in a certain situation. Two officers explain the process further:

It comes from the spine, stomach, and chest at once. I feel that something is wrong. It is often right. This is true when someone says something that is not the truth. It is not true, it does not add up . . . It is the experience, when something is correct, then it feels correct, and it is very often right . . . the evidence speaks the whole time . . . but it is often that the gut feeling is right. But equally, when we feel that something is not right and we investigate, but we find no evidence in phones and computers when we go through. *Male, 42 years old, Investigator, 18 years of experience.*

A lot is gut feeling, it is this feeling one gets. Sometimes it can be wrong, and sometimes it can be right. But it is also a lot that you write and report . . . but partly the gut feeling... *Female, 29 years old, Patrol and Investigator, 3 years of experience.*

These officers explain how gut feeling is related to experience and knowledge, impacting how they make their decisions and conduct. The experienced officers obtain a foundation that creates a gut feeling that is later used in other situations. This process can be argued to permeate what actions the officers take in a certain context or situation. The gut feeling becomes an inner tool for the officers to use to manage and apply knowledge before they act.

Altogether, it is essential to note that the gut feeling and experience should be viewed as tools that work independently or

in a vacuum. They are not notions that are not impacted by external factors, such as organizational norms. Thus, the way officers manage what knowledge to use when making a decision is heavily affected by the norms implemented within the police force, which is supported by previous empirical findings (Karp and Stenmark, 2011). More specifically, the norms reinforce the phenomenon that certain knowledge is valued higher and should be valued higher. However, using officers’ perception and doing an inductive exploration of how knowledge is valued, this study cannot assert that one factor has a higher numerical impact than the others but instead describes the themes and aspects that emerged when talking to the officers.

## DISCUSSION

This study’s major finding suggests that officers perceive experience, seniority, and gut feeling to be influential when valuing, evaluating and managing knowledge. For example, while explaining how they make assessments or make decisions, many officers use the word “experience” to derive where their knowledge originates from. In addition to this, many officers use the term “gut feeling” when describing how they make certain decisions. The third and final finding suggests a hierarchical evaluation of knowledge, mostly related to the type and quantity of knowledge a police officer has. For example, the knowledge that seems to be valued highest in the knowledge stems from policing experience and not theoretical training (Eliasson, 2020). However, the more policing experience someone has, the more respected they are by other police officers and the more that experience is considered important by the other officers. These findings reflect and further expand on other empirical findings related to police and occupational knowledge, highlighting the importance of practical knowledge (Holgersson et al., 2008; Holgersson and Gottschalk, 2008; Gottschalk and Dean, 2010).

However, the in-depth exploration provided in this paper of how officers’ knowledge perceptions give a broader understanding of how police officers, according to themselves, make decisions, value, and manage knowledge. Based on the findings in this paper, a process related to how knowledge is valued and managed by police officers emerges. This process consists of professional norms that reinforce how individual officers and the organization value occupational knowledge. The police’s occupational norms create a “knowledge hierarchy” or “knowledge cycle,” where knowledge from senior officers is valued the highest within the police force.

When analyzing the hierarchical knowledge evaluation further, the findings in this study alludes to that aspects of the hierarchy’s evaluation are based on that knowledge is categorized by officers (Eliasson, 2020). The knowledge generated through peer modeling in the field is viewed as more desirable by the police. This knowledge’s key factors are that it is more related to practical and experiential knowledge, and officers learn it from senior colleagues who inhabit extensive occupational knowledge.

This paper’s findings contribute to an analytical suggestion of this knowledge cycle that can be interpreted as regenerative.



Almost all officers value the importance of learning from other police officers. However, what could be considered a significant finding in this data is that more senior officers have an essential role in the learning process. Suggesting that although other officers impact their learning, there is a special meaning attached to learning from more senior officers and can imply that certain relationships' may be meaningful than others when learning. The practical implications of these findings are that senior officers may be most in need of post-employment training since they are such important role models or that formal mentoring programs may be needed to formalize this passing on of the knowledge from senior officers. Thus, these findings imply that it is essential to involve senior colleagues in the training initiatives to change police behavior.

However, this paper offers additional knowledge and how it is valued and managed by officers. According to the officers, senior officers' knowledge is more desirable because senior officers manifest "ideal" knowledge in the knowledge hierarchy. There is a specific meaning attached to the hierarchy between younger officers and senior officers created by police norms. The senior officers become meaningful because the police organization's norms reinforce the value of senior knowledge and become an essential product of reinforcing the importance of senior knowledge. Thus, senior officers have desirable knowledge and teach new police officers that the senior knowledge should be valued highly according to the organizational norms, thus creating a cycle. The importance of seniority within the police is something that has been highlighted by several previous empirical studies (Hoel and Barland, 2020; King, 2005; Karp and Stenmark, 2011).

The findings of this study specifically contribute to the existing scholarship by highlighting the various nuances of how knowledge is navigated by for example highlight the ties to organizational norms which are confirmed by other policing scholars which discuss organizational norms and police conduct (Andersson, 2007; Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Karp and Stenmark, 2011; Lone et al., 2017). The organizational norms that power the knowledge hierarchy can be explained as a semi-hidden structure embedded within the police organization. This paper's findings, supported by Eliasson (2020) findings, argue a certain type of knowledge being viewed as more desirable because it is passed down from one officer to another. Hence the meaningfulness of differentiation between different kinds of knowledge is passed down generationally in the occupational context by more senior officers and learned by new officers. Since the desired notions, such as experience and gut feeling, according to officers developed through experience, the more senior officers become teachers because they have what is considered the desired by the knowledge hierarchy. However, they also become important actors that generate the notions of what is desired based on the fact that they are the teachers.

All officers acknowledge that training and learning take place early on in their careers as officers. However, they make a clear distinction between the knowledge they associate with the academy and the knowledge they learn from other more senior officers in the field which is highlighted by previous findings (Eliasson, 2020; Hoel and Dillern, 2021). This

distinction becomes important because it results from the knowledge hierarchy that they have experienced as police officers. Hence, many officers associate the knowledge learned during the training in the field by senior officers as more desirable than prior education or training because of what seems to be an organizational invoked belief of what should be more desirable. Consequently, a regenerating cycle powers the police's knowledge hierarchy, making experiential knowledge passed down by more senior officers and what is considered the most desirable, which emphasize the impact of the organizational structure of the police (King, 2005).

This study's findings imply that changing the way officers apply knowledge when making decisions is not only related to educating individual officers or exposing individual officers to experiential knowledge highlighting change, which is a notion that have been discussed by scholars examining the effectiveness and impact of police training and education (Haberfeld, 2002; Conti and Nolan, 2005; Karp and Stenmark, 2011; Paterson, 2011; Aas, 2016; Connelly et al., 2019; Hoel and Dillern, 2021). The findings contribute to and reaffirms the current scholarship by finding that the application of knowledge conducted by officers is highly related to organizational and occupational norms within the police, which reinforces and regenerates the value hierarchy of knowledge. These norms are central aspects of making changes within the police on how information is valued, evaluated and managed when making decisions that could lead to differential treatment or misconduct. Thus, only introducing more training or changing the current training of officers may not have the desired impact on changing officers' behavior since it does not address the professional norms, which, according to officers, are highly influential on their occupational conduct.

Overall the findings in this paper contribute to international scholarship that examines policing by highlighting how Swedish police employees perceive themselves as navigating knowledge. Many existing studies specifically examine how Scandinavian police officers navigate various aspects of their job and how training, education, and experience impact their professional conduct (Karp and Stenmark, 2011; Adang, 2013; Lone et al., 2017; Hoel, 2019; Hoel and Barland, 2020; Hoel and Dillern, 2021). This paper contributes explicitly to this scholarship by describing how officers perceive themselves navigating decisions made in an occupational context and situates this knowledge navigation within existing social, organizational, and power relationships within the police force.

Based on the findings in this paper, policy suggestions that aim to change police officers' occupational decision-making and conduct also need to focus on changing the professional norms within the police organizations. Since the findings in this paper and previous research show that the time officers spend with colleagues, especially more senior colleagues, are highly influential on the officers' conduct, it is essential to address the occupational norms that officers collectively abide by. By specifically addressing the existing occupational norms and encouraging independent critical thinking, new officers can question the existing norms or learn how to navigate the existing power structure which exists within the police and impacts the occupational norms. Thus, education and training

could encourage critical reflection among individual officers and further involve senior officers in education and training initiatives.

Additionally police makers could specifically focus on how to further incorporate their theoretical and academic training efforts in more interactive learning environments. The findings in this study highlight that current policy efforts which incorporate theoretical or academic knowledge to change police officers conduct may be informed by incorporation of more interactive teaching methodologies. By using interaction methodologies that reflect practical learning yet inserting theoretical knowledge in practical settings police officers' perceptions of theoretical or academic knowledge could potentially be dismantled.

This study has limitations; firstly, this study can only account for the perceived ways in which knowledge is applied. Thus the findings do not attest to how officers actually manage knowledge when they make a decision. Although this is a limitation of the study, there is still value to understanding how officers perceive themselves valuing, managing and navigating knowledge because it gives an insight into how officers themselves perceive knowledge. This insight can contribute to broadening the understanding of how knowledge is conceptualized within the police. Secondly, findings are based on 27 interviews which offer challenges for extensive generalizability of the results. However, this limitation is present in many qualitative studies. Finally, although the sample size is a limitation, the interviews were conducted until saturation was reached, suggesting that the emerging themes are relevant for a larger population beyond the sample size.

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In light of the findings in this study, future research should focus on understanding how experience could be incorporated into current police training and how mentorship could be further integrated into the academy training of officers. Furthermore, research should also examine the effects of standardized training of officers in contrast to non-standardized training to understand what type of training is more efficient to ensure effective police conduct and non-biased decision-making.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusion of this article will be made available by the author, without undue reservation.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the IRB. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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