

# REFLECTIONS ON A SUCCESSFUL SUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN POLICE AND RESEARCHERS: RESPONDING TO VIOLENT ASSAULTS AGAINST POLICE PROJECT IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

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## ABSTRACT

A corpus of research exists which focuses on the value of partnerships between police and academic researchers. Some of the literature highlights the potential positive outcomes of successful partnerships for police in terms of informing policing practices and for academic researchers as a way of enhancing the impact of their research. Other studies identify the potential obstacles for developing successful and sustainable partnerships such as obtaining funding to conduct projects as well as overcoming a traditional mutual mistrust between police and academics. This paper provides a reflection on a successful partnership between Queensland Police Service and researchers at James Cook University in Townsville with reference to a project which focused on police as the victims of violent assaults in the course of their everyday duties. This co-authored paper assisted members of the research team to engage in a reflective practice to identify ‘what works’ well in partnerships, such as having sufficient time to develop a genuine rapport, working within a participatory methodological framework for conducting the research and co-producing a set of outcomes couched in accessible language in order to inform police practices. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the partnership has the possibility of emerging as an example of the ‘third research tradition’ which is characterised by productive and sustainable long-term collaborative partnerships between academics and police.

## I INTRODUCTION

There is recognition within government and non-government agencies across Australia and other western nations of the need to work more co-operatively with each other in order to produce tangible outcomes for the benefit of society. A new rhetoric has emerged calling on agencies to overcome the ‘silo’ effect by developing partnerships by sharing knowledge and other resources as a means of reducing the replication of services and creating greater public value in terms of how taxpayers’ money is spent.

These ideas are conveyed in the higher education sector where there is an emphasis on universities to demonstrate that researchers are engaging with external agencies and producing research outcomes that directly benefit the community. For example, the Engagement and Impact Assessment National Report<sup>1</sup> stressed the Federal

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Research Council, *Engagement and Impact Assessment 2018-19 National Report* (2019) <<https://dataportal.arc.gov.au/EI/NationalReport/2018/>>.

Government's commitment for universities to engage with community and industry end users to produce identifiable outcomes that benefit members of the community. In a media statement the Federal Minister for Education, Dan Tehan, stated:

The people who pay for university research — the Australian taxpayers — want to know their money is delivering results that are saving lives, strengthening the economy and improving our quality of living. The transparent reporting of university performance will encourage universities to focus on working with industry and other stakeholders on research projects that deliver real results for real people.<sup>2</sup>

These sentiments are echoed in key strategic documents by other federal and state government departments such as the Queensland Police Service (QPS) which highlights its commitment to developing collaborative endeavours with community-based agencies to address crime through informed evidence-based policing practices. The Queensland Police Service acknowledges the importance of developing external collaborations as stated in one of its current research policies which states: 'Make the Community Safer — Foster collaborative partnerships with government agencies, non-government organisations and community groups to maximise community safety'.<sup>3</sup>

The recognition of the potential value of successful partnerships between police services and academics has been the subject of a number of studies. In a national survey of law enforcement agencies in the USA for example researchers attempted to identify the factors which contribute to long term partnerships with universities.<sup>4</sup> A major outcome of the study was the recognition from both partners that research collaborations:

... are founded on the assumption that collaborations between agencies and researchers will integrate scientific knowledge and methodology in agency efforts to understand social problems and evaluate responses, which in turn will make them effective in serving their respective communities.<sup>5</sup>

In the Australian context, the Centre for Excellence in Policing and Security and the Nexus Policing Project in Victoria are two examples of successful ongoing partnerships between police and academic researchers. The potential advantages of successful partnerships for both are identified in greater detail in other studies such as Engle and Whalen's paper which argued that police can benefit from academic input in terms of improving their overall operational efficiency.<sup>6</sup> They also posited that research from 'outsiders' such as academics provides a form of external validity and aids in greater transparency when the research results are disseminated to the wider community. In addition, the authors argued that partnering with police is beneficial for academics in

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid 1.

<sup>3</sup> Queensland Police Service, 'Research Priorities 2017-2018' 6. <<https://www.police.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-19/QPS%20Research%20Priorities%202017%20-%202018.pdf>>.

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Rojek, Hayden Smith and Geoffrey Alpert, 'The prevalence and characteristics of police and practitioner – researcher partnerships' (2012) 15(30) *Policy Quarterly* 241.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 242.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Engle and James Whalen, 'Police-academic partnerships: ending the dialogue of the deaf, the Cincinnati experience (2010) 11(2) *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal* 105.

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that it potentially assists in the demonstration of impact for their research and provides them with accessibility to data-sets which may not otherwise be easily obtainable.

## II IMPEDIMENTS TO SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

Despite the perceived advantages of police-academic partnerships, a number of other studies have highlighted the impediments which often prevent the development of successful sustainable research partnerships. A major pragmatic barrier is a lack of funding to support projects. Funding from traditional category one sources such as the Australian Research Council (ARC) is more competitive, meaning many researchers now have to seek funding from alternative sources such as philanthropic organisations or non-government organisations. For example, of 2921 submitted applications for ARC Discovery Projects for 2019 only 653 were approved for funding — which highlights the increased competitiveness for these prestigious grants. The difficulty in locating funding to conduct collaborative research ventures was highlighted in a major survey in the USA of 591 law enforcement agencies which found that 56% (328) of agencies stated that lack of funding was the major factor for not engaging in partnerships with external agencies.<sup>7</sup>

Another major barrier relates to the differences of institutional cultures between police and academics. In a classic paper entitled, 'Dialogue of the Deaf', MacDonald argued that a major barrier to successful partnerships was due to a 'mutual misunderstanding that negatively impacts police-academic relationships'.<sup>8</sup> Other authors such as Bradley and Nixon cite the differences between police and academic cultures as a major impediment to forging productive research relationships.<sup>9</sup> They state that police have often been adverse to working with disciplines such as criminology and sociology due to the perception that academics have been overly critical of police and lack an understanding about the complex demands of policing which have produced, 'lingering cultural mistrust between police and academia that can hinder research partnerships'.<sup>10</sup>

A further identified barrier to successful collaborations has been a contested view as to what constitutes an effective outcome of research. Police have often been critical of research which is not couched in accessible language and which has outcomes or recommendations that cannot be adopted and transferred into practice.<sup>11</sup> Bradley and

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<sup>7</sup> Jeff Rojek, Hayden Smith and Geoffrey Alpert (n 4)

<sup>8</sup> Barry MacDonald, 'Research and action in the context of policing: An analysis of the problem and a programme proposal' (Unpublished manuscript commissioned by the Police Foundation of England and Wales, 1987) 23.

<sup>9</sup> David Bradley and Christine Nixon, 'Ending the "dialogue of the deaf": Evidence and policing policies and practices, an Australian case study' (2009) 10(5-6) *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal* 424.

<sup>10</sup> Sue Wilkinson, 'Research and policing – looking to the future' (2010) 4(2) *Policing* 146, 147.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Fyfe and Peter Wilson, 'Knowledge exchange and police practice: broadening and deepening the debate around researcher-practitioner collaborations' (2012) 13(4) *Police Practice and Research* 306.

Nixon contend that practitioner knowledge and experiences must therefore be valued to avoid unequal power relationships within a partnership.<sup>12</sup>

Goode and Lumsden observe that these problems can be overcome if researchers co-produce research with but not on police, ensuring that police have opportunities to learn research skills as valued members of research teams.<sup>13</sup> According to them, 'In this sense, it is possible to advance police theory and research when police officers are "actively involved in the research process and in finding solutions to practical problems"'.<sup>14</sup>

The co-production of research between academic researchers and police may also result in what Bradley and Nixon call the 'third tradition'<sup>15</sup> of research which has superseded the previous critical and policy traditions of research into policing. The third tradition is characterised by successful long-term sustainable collaborations between police and researchers which, over time, enlists the skills and talents of other individuals from both institutions in other endeavours.

Other studies identify inter-personal factors as being critical for developing successful research teams. Fleming highlights that there needs to be an emphasis on building trust and honesty among the participants.<sup>16</sup> He argues that the 'right' people need to be identified to take on specific roles and they need to be willing to put in the required time to complete their tasks within the team in order to meet crucial timelines and research milestones. Foster and Bailey add that research teams also require effective leaders who are good communicators and have the flexibility to make changes to the navigation of the research if required.<sup>17</sup>

At this juncture the paper has identified the potential advantages for police and academic researchers forging long-term partnerships as a means of 'finding solutions to practical problems' or in finding practical solutions to problems.<sup>18</sup> At the same time an analysis of some of the literature has highlighted the major barriers which inhibit the development of successful collaborations. The next section of the paper will provide a case study of how a multidisciplinary research team consisting of police and academics were able to overcome some of these potential impediments and successfully complete a research project. Following this the discussion will focus on how the partnership can be extended through other collaborations as characterised within the third research tradition.

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<sup>12</sup> David Bradley and Christine Nixon (n 9).

<sup>13</sup> Jackie Goode and Karen Lumsden, 'The McDonaldisation of police-academic partnerships: organisational and cultural barriers encountered in moving from research on police to research with police' (2018) 28(1) *Policing and Security: An International Journal of Research and Policy* 75.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* 79.

<sup>15</sup> David Bradley and Christine Nixon (n 9).

<sup>16</sup> Jenny Fleming, 'Qualitative encounters in police research' in Lorna Bartels and Kelly Richards (eds), *Qualitative Criminology* (Hawkins Press, 2010) 13.

<sup>17</sup> Janet Foster and Simon Bailey, 'Joining forces: maximising the way of making a difference in policing' (2010) 4(2) *Policing* 139.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Wood, Jenny Fleming and Monique Marks, 'Building the capacity of police change agents: the Nexus policing project' (2008) 18(1) *Policing and Society* 72, 72.

### III CASE STUDY OF A SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIP: RESPONDING TO VIOLENT ASSAULTS AGAINST POLICE PROJECT

The research collaboration had advantages for Queensland police and academics at James Cook University. For police, this collaborative opportunity was advantageous in potentially addressing the risks to the safety of police as well as the community, as a means of improving relationships with the public and in terms of supporting the strategic intent of continual improvement across the service. By comparison the academics perceived that the opportunity for collaboration would assist in their engagement and impact agendas and possibly result in other collaborations in the future. The factors that led to the successful collaboration are discussed through a number of key themes. Prior to this, a brief description of the project entitled 'Responding to Violent Assaults Against Police Project' is presented to give the reader some contextual details relating to the aims, scope, methodology and outcomes of the project.

#### A *Responding to Violent Assaults Against Police Project*

The 'Responding to Violent Assaults Against Police Project'<sup>19</sup> consisted of a two-year study which attempted to answer the research question: 'What are the main reasons why police officers in Queensland are assaulted in the course of executing their official duties?' To address this question a mixed methodology was adopted consisting of qualitative data derived from interviews with 40 police across four sites in North Queensland as well as a similar number of prisoners who were incarcerated for assaulting police. In addition, quantitative data was obtained from the police and prisoner cohorts by using a series of psychological scales which measured behavioural and attitudinal characteristics of individuals. Finally, interpretive data relating to the analysis of five cases recorded from body-worn cameras was obtained to identify factors which led to police becoming the victims of assaults. The triangulation of the data allowed for the formulation of a number of research outcomes which formed the basis for the 22 key recommendations for informing police practices to reduce the high number of assaults against QPS front line workers.

The major outcomes of the research were contained in a number of themes such as the value of recruits being taught communications skills during pre-service training as a means of de-escalating potential conflict situations, the need for officers to be trained in situational awareness to reduce the likelihood of being assaulted as well as the value of educating recruits about cross-cultural awareness in order to communicate better with Indigenous people. In addition, first-hand accounts from assault victims highlighted the physical and psychological impacts which also affect the family members of QPS officers. Importantly the research outcomes and recommendations have potentially provided QPS with an opportunity to reflect on existing practices and processes to improve frontline police responses.

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<sup>19</sup> Glenn Dawes, Mark Chong, David Mitchell, Margaret Henni, Roger Beale, Darryn Casson and Christine Cullen, 'Responding to Violent Assaults Against Police' (Unpublished report, 2019).

B *Reflections on a Successful Research Partnership*

At the conclusion of the project members of the research team took the opportunity to engage in a period of reflective thought to identify the factors which contributed to the success of this new partnership. That allowed individual members of the team to focus more on the research process in terms of 'what worked' for the team and resonated with Glesne's interpretation of reflexivity: 'For me reflexivity means you are concerned with the research process ... you ask questions of the process all along the way. You ask questions of yourself and you record your reflections in your field log'.<sup>20</sup>

An outcome of this reflexive exercise was the identification of a number of themes which were considered to be the most influential factors contributing to the success of the collaboration which forms the basis of discussion in the next section of the paper.

1 *A multi-disciplinary team based on mutual respect and common goals*

The literature on successful partnerships often under-states the importance of time to develop positive relationships which contribute to productive research outcomes. The project team benefited by having a two-year lead in period which allowed the members to develop rapport and come to a mutual agreement regarding the research question and sub-aims for the project.

Over this period the two agencies were able to overcome the problem of 'the dialogue of the deaf'<sup>21</sup> by developing a mutual trust through a series of informal meetings which developed a rapport whereby individuals felt secure to speak candidly about the overall research design. An important outcome of the preparation phase was a general agreement that the project should focus on a topic which would inform police practices, as identified in Wood's statement that research should be about 'finding solutions to practical problems'.<sup>22</sup> The sharing of data by QPS from their statistical data-base was another tangible sign of the mutual trust which developed in the preparation phase as it provided the team with solid empirical evidence of the value and potential impact for the addressing the over-arching research question and in identifying the factors which contribute to police becoming the victims of violent assaults.

The value of regular informal meetings over an extended time also provided an opportunity for members to commit to the project and to identify roles for each member according to their interests and skills. In this way it was more likely individuals would be motivated and not perceive their involvement in a multi-agency project as an additional burden to their existing workloads, as fore-shadowed by Jacobs who stated:

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<sup>20</sup> Corrine Glesne, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction* (Pearson, 2006) 125.

<sup>21</sup> Barry MacDonald, 'Research and action in the context of policing: An analysis of the problem and a programme proposal' (Unpublished manuscript commissioned by the Police Foundation of England and Wales, 1987) 23.

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Wood, Jenny Fleming and Monique Marks, 'Building the capacity of police change agents: the Nexus policing project' (2008) 18(1) *Policing and Society* 72, 72.

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partnerships necessitate formal face-to-face interaction across different agencies. Meetings are a way of achieving this but they are sometimes viewed by those attending as an additional workload task and often highlight the tensions within organisations.<sup>23</sup>

An additional factor which contributed to the success of the partnership over the four-year period was the overall stability of the team-membership. i Possessing a stable team overcame a further barrier to successful partnerships as identified in the literature where, often, police co-researchers may be seconded or transferred during the course of a project which necessitates the recruitment of other people who may not necessarily possess the commitment or skills of the original team members.

## *2 Maintaining Resilience and Flexibility*

There is limited discussion in the literature about the importance of research partners to exhibit resilience and flexibility when they encounter unexpected barriers which threaten to derail their project. One major barrier identified by Rojek, Smith and Alpert is the increasing difficulty in attracting funding to conduct a project.<sup>24</sup> Our project encountered this potential impediment during the planning phase due to the team's inability to secure funding from a number of philanthropic, government and non-government agencies. However, through persistence, the researchers eventually acquired internal funding from the research office at the university, from a new grant supporting partnerships, as well as a small grant from Queensland police.

While there was enough funding to start the project, the team had to maintain a flexible focus by downscaling the original research plan, which included a whole of Queensland study, to a smaller, more discrete study of North Queensland police due to a reduced overall budget. In addition, the research team exhibited resilience and flexibility in working with other government departments such as Queensland Corrective Services. For example, there were some unanticipated delays in gaining access to some of the correctional facilities to interview prisoners who had assaulted police which necessitated a revision of the timeline for completing the project. However, the researchers were able to negotiate with managers of the correctional facilities with face to face meetings which resulted in them gaining access to the prison cohort.

## *3 A Collaborative Participatory Framework*

A major tenet for successful partnerships identified in current research is that police and academics should share equal power in the research relationship. Academics have often been perceived as 'the experts' when it comes to research and consequently have been perceived as 'belittling or ignoring police experiences and knowledge'.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, the Assaults on Police team developed a participatory framework whereby the research would not be 'on police' but 'with police'. This framework recognised the

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<sup>23</sup> Keith Jacobs, 'The politics of relationships: A study of police and housing collaboration to tackle anti-social behaviour on Australian public housing estates' (2010) 88(4) *Public Administration* 928, 934.

<sup>24</sup> Jeff Rojek, Hayden Smith and Geoffrey Alpert, (n 4).

<sup>25</sup> Bradley and Nixon (n 9).

value of the police and placed them on an equal footing with the academics as co-researchers who contributed in tangible ways to the development of the project.

The equal power relationships also overcame previous perceptions of academics as ‘outsiders’ who have a limited understanding of the complexities of police culture.<sup>26</sup> This was partly overcome because of existing relationships between the police and university. A pertinent example was the membership of the academic leader of the project who served as the university representative on the Community Policing Board. It which also consists of a broad range of community representatives who share knowledge with the police about crime and crime prevention

The participatory nature of the research also recognised that individuals within the team possessed different skills and knowledge which could be weaved into a coherent multi-methodological framework. The multi-disciplinary team consisted on a sociologist, a criminologist, a psychologist and a PhD student as well as QPS members consisting of three senior staff who worked in the public prosecutions arm of the organisation. Hence it was a relatively simple task to create a division of labour, with individual members being able to take ownership and responsibility for the various components of the data collection phase. 4 *Co-production of Evidence Based Outcomes*

Goode and Lumsden highlighted the need to overcome the obstacle of different understandings between police and academics of what constitutes ‘evidence of effectiveness’ when reporting the outcomes of collaborative research partnerships.<sup>27</sup> By this they meant that academics should value ‘practitioner knowledge’ by producing reports on the outcomes of research which are written in a language that ‘police understand if they are to be adopted’.<sup>28</sup> Our study overcame this potential hurdle by adopting a two-phase process of co-production with police officers who agreed to be interviewed with QPS research team members. The police officers who volunteered to be interviewed were asked to suggest strategies and practices that they believed would assist in reducing assaults against front-line officers. This valuable knowledge contributed to a number of key recommendations in the final research report. In addition, the final recommendations and outcomes of the research were co-written with the members of the QPS research team to ensure the suggestions were practical and couched in a language which would resonate with managers as well as the Queensland Police Commissioner and Police Minister.

#### 5 *Acknowledgement and Dissemination of Outcomes*

At the conclusion of the research project, team members discussed the most suitable format for disseminating the research outcomes to the wider community. We were reminded of the importance of giving back the results of the project by Searle who stated: ‘Social scientists have been criticised in the past for not sharing their research

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<sup>26</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Fontana, 1973).

<sup>27</sup> Jackie Goode and Karen Lumsden (n 13).

<sup>28</sup> Michael Bueger, ‘Policing and Research: two cultures separated by an almost – common language (2010) 11(2) *Police Practice and Research* 135, 135.

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findings with those who may use them'.<sup>29</sup> The team also wanted the opportunity for the wider community to acknowledge the partnership and to publicly celebrate the success of the venture. Senior police suggested that a public launch of the final report should be held at the university to symbolise the connectivity and sustainability of the partnership

The public launch of the report was attended by senior police, academics and members from a number of community agencies, and provided members of the team with an opportunity to address local, state and national media together as an additional form of dissemination. There were over 10 media reports on the release of the study which highlighted the potentially positive research outcomes. Conversations between the researchers with the Police Commissioner were also very positive in terms of highlighting the issue while a number of police who participated expressed their gratitude for elevating their voices to the community in the hope that there will be some changes within QPS. Other forms of dissemination included a number of articles for publication in high ranked academic journals and planned conference presentations nationally and internationally.

*(a) Towards the Third Research Tradition: Sustaining the Partnership*

Based on this positive initial experience members of both agencies are keen to sustain a relationship which resembles Bradley and Nixon's conception of the third research tradition which is characterised by an, 'intimate and continuous partnership between police and the university system',<sup>30</sup> with the intent of enhancing police practices. Engel and Whalen suggested a number of strategies which could nurture the partnership within a North Queensland context.<sup>31</sup> The authors contend that opportunities could exist for academics to work closely with selected QPS staff to train them in research skills, so they are able to conduct their own research. If funding were made available an in-house research arm of the local police service could be established which could work with university academics and other agencies on pressing issues such as youth crime and domestic violence. A police research unit would also create the possibility of incorporating graduate and postgraduate students who could work with QPS to collect data and focus on problem solving efforts as part of their university studies.

Another identified area for ongoing collaboration is what Birzer calls 'writing partnerships' whereby academics and police publish the outcomes of their research in high quality journals and present papers at national and international conferences.<sup>32</sup> This strategy serves to integrate academics and police with other networks which may in turn assist the adoption of more effective police practices in the local context. To some extent this initiative is already occurring at the annual Criminology Conference

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<sup>29</sup> Clive Searle, *Researching Society and Culture* (Sage, 2012) 110.

<sup>30</sup> Bradley and Nixon (n 9) 424.

<sup>31</sup> Robin Engle and James Whalen (n 6).

<sup>32</sup> Michael Birzer, 'Writing partnerships between police practitioners and researchers' (2002) 3(2) *Police Practice and Research* 149.

at James Cook University where academics are working with police and other practitioners to write and present papers on topics based on their collaborative research efforts.

Finally the research partnership between QPS and the university could be formalised through the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) which would allow for the development of long term planning in terms of writing collaborative research grants, educating graduate and postgraduate students, up-skilling police in research methods and working co-operatively to develop training packages for police recruits in areas such as communication and de-escalation skills.

#### IV SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Based on the experience of working together on the Assaults Against Police Project the outlook for ongoing collaborations between the QPS and the university is promising. The literature cited earlier extols the advantages of successful partnerships for both organisations but also cautions that a number of factors can emerge which prevent the establishment of long term sustainable partnerships as exemplified in the ‘dialogue of the deaf’ tradition which is characterised by mistrust and a perceived unequal balance of power.

In reflecting on the success of our project it is surprising that there is less emphasis on the necessary lead-in time to mould and consolidate teams. Our reflections on the success of the project highlight that potential partners require adequate time to develop rapport and build trust before they embark on the research journey. They also require the support of management who need to appreciate that research projects may go beyond the expected timeline for completion due to myriad factors. Good rapport-building assists in the identification of the skill sets of each individual which, in turn, allows them to take leadership roles in specific tasks associated with the project’s overall aims.

The other major factor which contributed to success was the acknowledgement that we were working ‘with’ and not ‘on’ police. The development of a participatory methodological framework ensured that all members of the team were empowered by having an equal voice in the formulation and carriage of the project. It also elevated the voices of front-line police officers through qualitative interviews which served as an alternative to the use of quantitative data, which is the predominant data utilised by police.

To conclude, it is too early to identify how police practices have been impacted at this stage as the research outcomes are still under consideration by QPS. What is encouraging is that there is still momentum and that a dialogue between police and academics continues in terms of searching for new forms of collaboration for research projects, as well as work on training and education for police and university students. There is also the potential to replicate this study in southern Queensland as assaults against officers continues to be a problem in major metropolitan areas. There is also scope to expand the focus to other public service front-line workers who suffer assaults

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in the line of their everyday work. At the time of writing, members of the research team have been approached to write a literature review on this topic by the Department of Justice and Attorney General in Queensland because of their work on the police assaults project. If this momentum is sustainable, we may be some way on the journey towards the third research tradition, not only with police but other public service providers, to address real life problems with real life solutions.

