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Research Article

Police professionalism and critical thinking: model alignment and application to training

Steve Hill

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Abstract:

The professionalisation of policing in the UK has evolved significantly, especially since 2012, with structural changes like the establishment of the College of Policing and the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners, although recent changes in police entry routes could challenge this professionalisation journey. This paper explores the role of critical thinking in UK policing and its potential to enhance police professionalism. It examines professionalism aligning the National Decision Model used in policing with selected academic frameworks. The paper argues that embedding critical thinking within police training enhances ethical decision making, problem solving, and adaptability, thereby reinforcing professionalism. Ultimately, the integration of critical thinking into policing is deemed essential for advancing UK policing's professionalisation.

Keywords: Police professionalism; critical thinking; police training.

Introduction

Since 2012, with the formation of the College of Policing, an independent Chief Inspector of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies, the introduction of Police and Crime Commissionaires and the restructuring and re-purposing of the Independent Police Complaints Commission, policing is now considered a profession. [1] However, this recognition is contemporary and the journey that enabled such acceptance has been well documented. The notion of professionalism is a sociological construct and academic work analysing policing as a profession is instrumental in this regard. Critical thinking as an aspect of professionalism has been much debated with divergent views framing it as a non-specific skill, or a skill to be applied in a specialised context. [2] Expanding on the existing discourse, the relationship between critical thinking and professionalism in policing warrants a deeper exploration. The inclusion of critical thinking as a core component of professional development in policing is not merely an academic exercise but a practical necessity that influences operational effectiveness. Policing requires officers to navigate complex, dynamic, and often high pressure situations where the ability to analyse, evaluate, and make sound judgments is crucial. The decision making process in these scenarios is intrinsically linked to the officers' capacity for critical thinking, which involves not only the application of procedural knowledge but also the ability to adapt to unpredictable circumstances, weigh ethical considerations, and anticipate the consequences of various actions.

There are numerous conceptual frameworks of critical thinking that can be utilised and the UK police have their own procedural model, the National Decision Model (NDM), which emphasises a structured approach to decision making. [3] This reflects an institutional recognition of the importance of critical thinking. However, the extent to which this model aligns with broader academic constructs of critical thinking remains a subject for further investigation as there is currently a gap in the academic literature examining such an approach. Understanding this alignment could offer insights into how the professionalism of policing may be enhanced. By embedding critical thinking more deeply, policing can

move closer to achieving a standard of professionalism that is not only recognised in theory but is also consistently demonstrated in practice. Therefore, the theoretical research question I pose to close this knowledge gap is to synthesise the alignment between professionalism, the NDM and selected academic models of critical thinking.

Methodology

This paper is a theoretical study synthesising the relationship between professionalism and critical thinking in UK policing to demonstrate the overarching alignment. Scholars already recognise such theoretical qualitative analysis is used to describe concepts and relationships by directing attention to a subject of interest. [4] I will employ a critical interpretative framework utilising comparative theory analysis to explore then synthesise the intricate relationships between selected models of professionalism and critical thinking from the existing literature. Critical interpretative synthesis has been recognised as 'especially useful and relevant for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers'. [5] In support of this, others have recognised that combining differing theoretical categories derived from the available evidence fosters a deeper comprehension of the subject matter studied. [6]

For background and context, I will initially explore the historical professionalisation of policing in the UK followed by the contemporary police professionalism debate. I will then introduce critical thinking before leveraging the NDM as a primary lens to map the intersections and divergences between selected critical thinking conceptual frameworks. This approach will show how professional competence and critical thinking is conceptualised, developed and operationalised to uncover the underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions embedded within. I will then discuss my theoretical synthesis prior to concluding the paper.

From the outset I wish to recognise two limitations with this paper: firstly, the focus is on a qualitative theoretical stance without any empirical data introduced; secondly, the analysis is specific to the UK policing context so generalisability is tethered to that geographical area and should not be applied universally.

Policing as a profession

The ongoing debate regarding the professionalisation of policing in the UK reflects broader tensions within the discourse of professionalism itself. Police claims of being a profession in the UK can be traced back to 1948 when Sir John Moylan posited that the Metropolitan Police were entering the professions. [7] Since then, numerous authors have argued for, and against, policing as a profession. [8] Whilst still a contested concept, the majority narrative is in favour of recognising policing as a profession. [9] It is important to recognise the role that the sector's professional body, the College of Policing, has sought in positioning themselves as the custodians of occupational standards, ethical codes and professional development, in the same way that similar professional bodies have undertaken in medicine, law and teaching. This is not merely a matter of historical trajectory but also of contemporary relevance, as it shapes the identity, practices, and expectations placed upon policing.

As Cockroft states "The work of [prior] writers…is invaluable as a means by which we seek to understand how the discourse of professionalism is being applied to…policing". [10] Theories on the nature of professionalism with two distinct themes have emerged. Firstly, McClelland provides professionalism from within; Kemshall posits individualised judgement based on flexibility and responsiveness; Gundhus postulates experience based professionalism. Evetts has succinctly encapsulated these with her terminology of 'occupational professionalism'. Secondly, Mclelland presents professionalism from above; Kemshall furnishes actuarially based knowledge and Gundhus imparts standardised professionalism which Evetts has deemed 'organisational professionalism'. [11]

The dichotomy between 'occupational professionalism' and 'organisational professionalism,' as articulated by Evetts, provides a useful framework for understanding the complexities of this debate. [12] On one hand, 'occupational professionalism' emphasises the role of individual officers as autonomous practitioners who rely on their experience, discretion, and situational judgement to navigate the complexities of their work. This perspective aligns with traditional notions of professionalism that prioritise the expertise and ethical standards upheld by members of a profession. On the other hand,

'organisational professionalism' reflects the increasing influence of managerialism and bureaucratic control within policing. This form of professionalism is characterised by the standardisation of practices, adherence to protocols, and the use of performance metrics to ensure accountability and efficiency. While this approach may enhance consistency and reduce variability in service delivery, it also risks undermining the professional autonomy of individual officers, potentially leading to a more mechanistic and less adaptive police service.

The tension between these two forms of professionalism is not merely academic but has practical implications for the future of policing. As the police navigate these competing demands, the challenge lies in finding a balance that allows for both the preservation of professional autonomy and the need for organisational accountability. One answer to this challenge may be in cultivating critical thinking into police training practices and this stance is explored as the paper develops.

2011 – 2020: A new police professionalism

Neyroud produced a report that expansively detailed a wholesale differing approach to police leadership and training. [13] Among the recommendations that he included were qualifications delivered by higher education institutions for all new police officers and the establishment of a professional body, the College of Policing. Candidates aiming to become a new police officer had three possible entry pathways post January 2020. [14] Firstly, individuals can join the police as an apprentice for a minimum of three years, are salaried and undertake a degree in Professional Policing. There is an eighty/twenty percent split between work and education. Secondly, those individuals already possessing a non-policing undergraduate degree can join the police and undertake a reduced educational workload based on prior academic achievement and obtain a graduate diploma in Professional Policing with the option to specialise at an earlier stage than others. Thirdly, individuals could undertake a degree in Professional Policing prior to joining the police. Voluntary service as a special constable is encouraged for those undertaking this pathway. The introduction of the degree-based entry pathways represented a significant shift in the professionalisation of policing, reflecting broader trends in enhancing the

educational standards and specialised knowledge within the service. The emphasis on higher education, particularly the integration of academic qualifications with practical experience, is intended to elevate the status of policing, aligning it more closely with other professions that require formalised training and certification. The inclusion of the term 'professional' in all three qualification routes underscores this intent, signalling a deliberate move towards recognising policing as a skilled and knowledge-based occupation.

In 2022, the then Home Secretary announced this degree only entry route would be supplemented with an option of a non-degree route of entry, mimicking police training prior to 2020. [15] This two-year adherence to degree only entry had been met with increasing concern that degree only entry routes may unintentionally limit the diversity of police recruits. Advocates of reintroducing non-degree pathways argued that broadening access was essential for improving representation and inclusivity within the police service. [16] This option commenced in April 2024. [17] This reintroduction of a non-degree entry route marks a potential pivot in the professionalisation trajectory by creating a disparity that could lead to varying levels of critical thinking abilities amongst the differing cohorts of officers, potentially affecting decision making processes and problem-solving approaches in the field. The degree-based routes, particularly the apprenticeship and pre-join degree options, offer structured environments for developing critical thinking skills. These pathways integrate academic rigour with practical experience, developing a more analytical approach to policing. The academic component encourages officers to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and consider multiple perspectives, all crucial elements of critical thinking. However, the reintroduction of a non-degree route raises questions about the consistency of critical thinking development across policing. While practical experience is invaluable, the absence of formal academic training could result in a less systematic approach to developing critical thinking skills.

The impact of this policy change on the overall professionalism of policing will be a critical area of study, particularly in assessing long term outcomes such as job performance, public trust, organisational culture and the evolution of policing as a recognised profession. As data becomes

available, it will be crucial to analyse how this dual pathway system influences the identity and efficacy of the police service in the UK and whether or not this route leads to a 'loss of enhanced professionalism'. [18]

Critical thinking literature review

A brief overview of the critical thinking literature is provided below, followed by an introduction to critical thinking, initially from a generalist viewpoint, and then scaffolded from an academic perspective. The literature on critical thinking stems from the fields of philosophy, psychology and education. [19] The philosophical position advocates the ideal persons quality of thought, capabilities and reflexivity. Academics such as McPeck, Ennis, Lipman, Facione, Paul and Bailin et al. have all been instrumental in this area. [20] The psychological position focuses on how individuals think in practice and the types of actions and behaviours they undertake. Sternberg, Halpern and Willingham have produced work advancing these concepts. [21] The educational approach advocates teaching and analysing critical thinking via frameworks. Authors such as Bloom, Kennedy et al. and Sternberg are oft cited supporting this position. [22] Whilst these three positions have their differences, areas of similarity do exist, such as ability and disposition (see for instance Ennis and Facione). [23] That being said, differences still remain in areas such as the role of dispositions, domain specificity, transferability and the role of criteria. [24] In trying to develop some of these differences, specifically, domain specificity and transferability, three positions have emerged. Generalisability, specificity and a blended approach, all take positions, as the name of each implies, on the subject matter and context of the application of critical thinking. [25] It is within the educational field of critical thinking, and specifically, the blended approach, that critical thinking models, or conceptual frameworks, may be applied to **synthesise the relationship between professionalism and critical thinking within** policing. I will return to this below in the analysis when I discuss police training and critical thinking.

In a generalist sense critical thinking refers to a broad set of cognitive skills, such as analysis, evaluation, synthesis, and reflective judgment, whilst being grounded in real world actions and decisions. In an abstract sense, critical thinking is about cultivating intellectual habits like curiosity,

skepticism, and open mindedness. It involves questioning assumptions, identifying biases, and approaching problems systematically. However, critical thinking becomes concrete when applied to specific contexts, such as problem solving in the professional environment, ethical decision making, or assessing evidence in complex scenarios – skills very much in need within all aspects of policing. Academically, Cottrell postulates critical thinking as 'a cognitive activity…learning to think in…analytical and evaluative ways…using…judgement'. [26] A much more detailed definition is posited by Facione stating:

> We understand critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgement which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgement is based…The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgements, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit. [27]

These two concepts of critical thinking provide a comprehensive framework that is essential for understanding its application in policing. Facione's detailed definition highlights the multifaceted nature of critical thinking, emphasising not just cognitive processes but also the dispositions and attitudes necessary for effective judgement. [28] This aligns with the complex demands placed on officers, who must navigate high pressure situations requiring rapid decision making, often with incomplete or ambiguous information.

However, there is debate that suggests that the very concept of critical thinking is vague in analysis. [29] Furthermore Halpern determined that within the differing definitions, as there was a general consensus as to what critical thinking was, then practitioners, such as police officers, could 'move beyond the definitional stage'. [30]

This debate about the clarity and applicability of critical thinking in practice is particularly relevant in the context of police training. McPeck's critique of the vagueness surrounding the concept suggests that while critical thinking is universally acknowledged as important, its practical implementation can be

challenging. [31] This is especially true in policing, where the abstract nature of critical thinking must be translated into concrete actions and decisions in real time scenarios.

There is also another interesting perspective raised by Ennis who suggests that critical thinking is both empirically and epistemologically domain specific. [32] He postulates that learning to think critically in one vocational aspect will not necessarily transfer that skill to another vocational aspect as critical thinking skills needed between the vocations differ. As policing has differing vocational domains, can Ennis' vocational assertion be overcome across the domains of policing? I will return to this question below when I evaluate critical thinking within policing.

Halpern's assertion that practitioners should 'move beyond the definitional stage' underscores the need for police training programs to focus not just on defining critical thinking, but on embedding it into the decision-making processes when officers undertake training. [33] Given the high stakes involved in policing, where decisions can have significant consequences for public safety and civil liberties, the adoption of Facione's comprehensive understanding of critical thinking is indeed apt. [34] It provides a structured approach that can guide the development of training programs, ensuring that officers are not only capable of analytical reasoning but are also prepared to apply these skills in a manner that is consistent, fair, and aligned with professional standards.

Critical thinking and professionalism

The following section offers insight into the dovetailing of critical thinking and professionalism. Decision making, problem solving and ethical judgements are essential factors in policing with critical thinking being integral to all three of these elements. The complex and multifaceted scenarios that officers face require sound evaluation of evidence, consideration of multiple perspectives and the ability to make informed decisions under pressure. In this environment the ability to think critically enables officers to systematically analyse and assess the reliability of information whilst avoiding cognitive biases that may otherwise affect judgement. [35] Mezirow's transformative learning with its emphasis on cognitive shifts, self-reflection and the reconstruction of meaning aligns with the development of

professional practice. [36] This reflexive capability is crucial in such dynamic environments where officers must adapt to new challenges and changing circumstances. In addition, critical thinking supports ethical professionalism as it helps officers to discern ethical dilemmas, understand the consequences of their actions and choose the most morally sound course of action. [37] Therefore, critical thinking reinforces the ethical standards and responsibilities that define professional policing conduct.

Analysis

The following sections will analyse the interplay between police training, academic critical thinking models, specific professionalism theory and an alignment of selected critical thinking conceptual frameworks.

Police training and critical thinking

The academic literature on police training is important and a snapshot of such follows. Drury and Reicher examined collective action and psychological change identifying that police needed to be able to identify individuals' expectations of their rights to be upheld; how policing altered perceptions; why police de-escalation skills were crucial; and understanding why differentiated responses may be needed for different groups. [38] Reicher et al. further developed the psychological interpretation and provided additional thoughts on the importance of understanding psychology, recognising that people were not inherently irrational or violent; why strategies for planning events in collaboration with event organisers were necessary to establish collective aims; and, how technology played an important role within policing. [39] Stott posited police training must be updated to integrate contemporary scientific knowledge and psychology, moving away from outdated theories. Training should focus on developing non-confrontational tactics, dynamic risk assessment, and effective communication skills to enhance police interactions. Additionally, a research capability should be established to continuously assess and improve training practices based on evidence and best practices. [40] Sanders et al. analysed the new police personal safety training curriculum which aims to reduce uses of force while enhancing officers' ability to manage conflict safely and effectively. It emphasises evidence-based practices and scenario-based training to better prepare officers for real life situations. This approach is aimed at fostering greater public trust and safety by minimising harm during police public interactions. [41]

As alluded to in the section above on critical thinking, it may be helpful to identify and expand on some of the educational field's blended approach to conceptual frameworks. For instance, works such as Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Burch's Learning Stages model, Schon's The Reflective Practitioner, Ennis's Evaluating Critical Thinking and Leicester's Teaching Critical Thinking Skills all offer such conceptual frameworks, albeit differing in context, from within their respective works. [42] There are other models available however in the interests of brevity and space, I will desist from continuation.

Police training deals with a complex set of problems that require resolution by applying actions based on perceived situations to satisfy desired outcomes. Applying a relevant academic critical thinking model or models to assist with policing is subjective, although ideally based on specific need, complexity of the problem, environmental factors relating to the work processes to be undertaken and the stakeholders involved. On that basis the two academic conceptual frameworks that I have chosen to evaluate against a police specific conceptual framework are both introduced generally, then developed in the police training context.

Model 1 - Learning Stages of Competence model

This model was developed by Burch in the 1970's and has evolved, now being commonly referred to as either 'the Four Stages of Learning' or 'the Four Stages of Competence'. [43] It offers a framework for understanding the progression of learning and skill acquisition. It outlines the journey individuals undergo as they develop new skills and knowledge. Each stage reflects a specific relationship between awareness and competence, and the model is widely applied in skills training, hence my inclusion of it to juxtapose Leicester's model and the NDM. [44] Below is an explanation of each stage in the police skills learning context:

Unconscious Incompetence - At this initial stage, officers lack both the knowledge of how to perform the task and the awareness of their own inadequacy. This lack of awareness often leads to overconfidence or ignorance regarding the necessity for improvement. For effective progression, officers must first be made aware of their deficiencies, often through feedback, exposure, and guided

personal reflection. The transition out of this stage typically requires external intervention from a police trainer as motivator, to develop awareness of the skill gap.

Conscious **Incompetence -** This stage is characterised by the officer's awareness of their lack of skill or knowledge. Officers understand the requirements of the task and recognise their inability to meet these demands effectively. This stage often involves feelings of frustration, self-doubt, or discomfort, as officers confront their limitations. However, this recognition is a fundamental step toward improvement, as it develops a willingness to learn and adopt new strategies. Police trainers play a vital role at this juncture, by providing guidance and encouragement to sustain officer motivation and focus.

Conscious **Competence -** In the third stage, officers have acquired the necessary skills or knowledge of the task but must apply them with conscious effort and concentration. Performance improves as the officer deliberately practices and applies the learned behaviors of the task. Though, at this stage, the new competence is not yet automatic and may be prone to errors if concentration lapses. This stage requires officer perseverance and structured practice to reinforce the learned skill. Police trainer encouragement, feedback and repetitive exercises are essential for moving towards automaticity, as they help refine performance and embed the competence into long term memory.

Unconscious **Competence -** At this final stage, the officer's acquired skill or knowledge becomes second nature. Officers can perform the task effortlessly and often without conscious thought, allowing for multitasking or adaptation to new challenges. This level of mastery reflects the culmination of training practice and integration, where competence is embedded into the officer's procedural memory. However, unconscious competence can present challenges in explaining the skill to other officers, unless undertaken by a police trainer, as the new expert officer may struggle to articulate or deconstruct their intuitive processes. In such cases, reflective practice can help officers reconnect with the foundational stages of their learning journey.

So, the Four Stages of Competence model provides a structured approach to understand the interplay between awareness and ability in police skill acquisition. It emphasises the dynamic and iterative

nature of learning, drawing on the importance of both officer self-awareness and guided practice in the police training environment.

Model 2 - Teaching Critical Thinking Skills

Leicester draws together previous work on critical thinking and adds new perspectives with the aim of offering greater insight. [45] One such element is work undertaken by Brookfield discussing the components of critical thinking. Brookfield advocates four components of 'identifying and challenging assumptions…challenging the importance of context…try to imagine and explore alternatives…imagining and exploring alternatives leads to reflective scepticism'. [46] Leicester refines this and states that two further categories could be added 'the hidden or implicit…forming our own point of view'. However, as a conceptual model, Leicester has shortened Brookfield's initial offering and has produced a model which he has deemed 'Four habits of thought…central to critical thinking'. Colloquially this itself has been shortened and is now known as Leicester's four habits: 'recognizing assumptions, taking account of context, imagining alternatives and developing reflective scepticism'. [47] This model provides a framework for critical thinking and decision making, emphasising the cognitive and reflective habits essential for navigating complex situations. It enables individuals to approach problems thoughtfully and responsibly, hence my inclusion of it to juxtapose Burch's model and the NDM. [48] Below is an explanation of each stage in the police skills learning context: **Recognising Assumptions -** In police training, recognising assumptions involves identifying the preconceived notions or biases that may influence officer decision making and interactions with the public. For instance, assumptions about the behavior of individuals can lead to inappropriate or disproportionate responses. Training programs should incorporate scenarios that challenge officers to critically evaluate their assumptions about personality dynamics, motivations, and risk factors. By cultivating this habit, officers can begin to better differentiate between law abiding citizens and those engaged in criminal behavior, ensuring that responses are proportionate and aligned with legal and ethical standards of contemporary policing. Recognising assumptions also mitigates the risk of escalating tensions due to misinterpretation or stereotyping.

Taking **Account of Context –** Police training scenarios are streamlined to run from simple to complex and are influenced by a range of contextual factors, including cultural, social, political, and environmental elements. The habit of taking account of context requires officers to analyse the broader circumstances surrounding an incident, such as the historical relationship between policing and the community, the sociopolitical significance of the incident, and the physical environment. For example, understanding the cultural or symbolic importance of an incident can guide officers in choosing non-confrontational strategies that respect and do not exacerbate community tensions. Police training needs to emphasise situational awareness and analysis, encouraging officers to consider how contextual variables shape behavior and the potential impact of their interventions.

Imagining **Alternatives -** This involves exploring a range of strategies and tactics for managing incidents. This habit is critical for developing adaptive and creative responses to dynamic and often unpredictable events. Training programs need to include scenario-based exercises that encourage officers to think beyond conventional approaches and consider alternative methods for reducing tensions, communication, and incident management. For example, instead of using force, officers could explore dialogue-based approaches. By cultivating this habit, police can enhance their capacity for innovation and reduce the likelihood of tension escalation.

Developing **Reflective Skepticism -** This involves critically evaluating the reliability of information and questioning the appropriateness of actions and strategies. In police training, this habit encourages officers to assess the validity of intelligence reports, the credibility of behavior predictions, and the potential consequences of proposed interventions. Reflective skepticism can also be applied to self-evaluation and organisational learning, prompting officers and commanders to review their actions post event and identify areas for improvement. Training should incorporate debriefing sessions and reflective practices across all ranks to reinforce this habit, ensuring that lessons learned inform future incident mitigation strategies and develop continuous improvement in policing.

Therefore, applying the Four Habits Model to police training enhances officers' ability to navigate the complex and multifaceted challenges of incidents which, in turn should develop trust between policing and communities, thereby contributing to the effective and fair delivery of policing.

There is a third non-academic, police role specific critical thinking conceptual framework that will now be introduced.

Model 3 - National Decision Model (NDM)

Within UK policing, three decision making models have historically been used. These were the conflict management model; scanning, analysing and responding to and assessing problems; and value-based decision making. All these models had overlapping elements.

These models have been conflated to produce the NDM. There are five strands to this operational model which are all individually supported by a core statement of code of ethics which is elemental to all five strands. This notion of ethics has already been identified above as crucial to critical thinking and professionalism. The five strands are to gather information and intelligence; assess threat and risk and develop a working strategy; consider powers and policy; identify options and contingencies; take action and review what happened. [49] The NDM is not derived from any single academic conceptual framework however elements from several established theories can be identified. The **Code of Ethics,** at the NDM's center, reflects principles similar to ethical decision-making models such as the *Four Component Model of Morality*. [50] This model emphasises ethical sensitivity, reasoning, motivation and implementation, which are embedded in the NDM's approach. Furthermore, situational awareness theory developed by Endsley and how it relates to dynamic decision making is also apparent. [51] The reviewing mechanism has similarities with Kolb's Experiential Learning. [52] So, although not as eloquent as the academic models, the use of the model within policing is practical, relevant and seemingly draws from numerous academic models. In the context of police training, the integration of critical thinking frameworks is pivotal in preparing officers to navigate the complexities and uncertainties inherent in managing incidents. Historically, the bureaucratic organisation and quasi-military hierarchy of the UK police has prioritised managerial control over adaptive problem solving. Consequently, even the integration of critical thinking frameworks that were designed to enhance officer effectiveness, remained constrained by enduring structural impediments that inhibited organisational innovation. To move beyond this, it will be the application of these models, whether academic or role specific, that

facilitates a deeper understanding of the cognitive processes required to make informed, ethical decisions in dynamic environments.

Burch's Learning Stages of Competence model provides a foundational structure for understanding the progression of skill acquisition in police training. [53] Officers move from a state of unconscious incompetence, where they are unaware of their lack of knowledge, through to unconscious competence, where their responses become instinctive and automatic. This progression is crucial in high pressure situations where quick, yet accurate, decision making is essential. The model's linear progression underscores the importance of continuous learning and self-awareness in developing professional competence.

Leicester's Four Habits of Thought, on the other hand, emphasises the importance of reflective practice. [54] By encouraging officers to challenge assumptions, consider context, explore alternatives, and cultivate reflective scepticism, this model promotes a more adaptable approach to decision making. These habits are essential for officers who must navigate the often ambiguous and rapidly changing scenarios characteristic of policing. The ability to think critically and reflectively ensures that decisions are not only based on immediate needs but are also aligned with broader ethical and professional standards.

The NDM complements these academic frameworks by providing a practical, role specific tool that is tailored to the realities of policing. [55] While the NDM may appear to lack the theoretical depth of academic models, its five strands offer a structured approach that is directly applicable to the field. The integration of a core ethical framework within the NDM further reinforces the importance of values-based decision making in policing, ensuring that critical thinking is not only about cognitive processes but also about upholding the ethical standards that underpin professional policing.

How then does Evetts theory of occupational and organisational professionalisms entwine with the models of Burch, Leicester and the NDM? [56] Evetts occupational professionalism emphasises individual autonomy, discretion, and the application of specialised knowledge. [57] This sits with Burch's model,

where progression through the four stages reflects the deepening of expertise and professional judgment essential to occupational professionalism. [58] Officers who achieve unconscious competence demonstrate the pinnacle of decision making sought in occupational professionalism.

On the other hand, organisational professionalism seeks standardisation, managerial control, and adherence to institutional protocols. Leicester's Four Habits Model bridges the gap between officer growth and organisational expectations. [59] The habit of integrity is particularly crucial, seeking alignment between officer's personal values and organisational ethics, reflecting Evetts' organisational professionalism. [60]

The NDM integrates aspects of both occupational and organisational professionalism. [61] It emphasises discretion (occupational professionalism) within a structured process (organisational professionalism), encouraging officers to use the NDM's Code of Ethics as a focal point for reflective practice. The alignment with Burch's competence stages is evident as officers progress from novice to expert decision makers whilst Leicester's habits further reinforce this by fostering continuous learning and ethically driven actions. [62]

So, holistically considering the interweaving of the theory and models displays the fluid interaction between occupational competence, ethical practice, and organisational frameworks – a cornerstone of professionalism. They collectively illustrate how professional identity evolves through continually balancing personal expertise with institutional accountability, underscoring the necessity of reflective and ethical practice in professional policing.

Therefore, the incorporation of these models into police training represents a holistic approach to developing critical thinking skills. By bridging academic theories with practical, field specific tools, officers are better equipped to handle the complexities of incident management, ultimately enhancing both their professional competence and the ethical quality of their decision making.

Alignment of critical thinking conceptual frameworks

There are various approaches that could be taken to demonstrate alignment of the above three conceptual frameworks. The method I will adopt is to utilise the NDM as the base. I will link Burch's Four Stages of Competence and Leicester's Four Habits Framework to the relevant five sections of the NDM, demonstrating via tabulation, that these processes are undertaken within the guise of the NDM conceptual framework. [63] I do acknowledge though, that other configurations could be adopted with the expectation that the outcomes would show parity.

National Decision Model	Four Stages of Competence	Four Habits
Gather information & intelligence	Unconscious incompetence Conscious incompetence	Recognising assumptions Taking account of context
Assess threat and risk and develop a working strategy	Unconscious incompetence Conscious incompetence	Recognising assumptions Taking account of context Imagine alternatives
Consider powers and policy	Conscious competence	Imagine alternatives
Identify options and contingencies	Conscious competence	Taking account of context Imagine alternatives Develop reflective scepticism
Take action and review what happened	Unconscious competence	Develop reflective scepticism

Figure 1

Discussion

The following section will evaluate critical thinking within police training.

Evetts occupational and organisational dichotomy introduces tension to the conflict between individual autonomy and administrative control. [64] Occupational professionalism values officers' discretion and situational judgement, allowing for flexible responses to complex scenarios. In contrast, organisational professionalism emphasises standardisation and adherence to protocols, potentially constraining officers' ability to adapt to unique circumstances. Put another way, this tension is between valuing experiential knowledge and implementing measurable performance metrics. Whilst occupational

professionalism relies on officers accumulated experience, organisational professionalism prioritises quantifiable outcomes, potentially overlooking the multi-faceted decision making required in policing. How to balance these seemingly competing positions is key to continued professionalisation of policing. Critical thinking serves as a valuable tool in navigating these differences. By training for and thereby developing analytical skills among officers, policing can bridge the gap between these two forms of professionalism. Critical thinking encourages officers to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and consider multiple perspectives. This approach enables them to navigate the complexities of their work while still adhering to organisational standards. For instance, officers could critically assess when to apply standardised protocols and when situation specific judgement is more appropriate. In addition, critical thinking skills enhance officers' ability to articulate their decision-making processes, thereby improving accountability without sacrificing autonomy. This leads to a more balanced approach where standardised practices inform, rather than dictate, officers' actions. So, integrating the awareness of critical thinking into police training, it should be possible to cultivate a form of professionalism that values both individual expertise and organisational consistency, with the resultant mitigation of the tensions between Evetts occupational and organisational professionalism in policing being achieved. [65] What then will the three degree and one non-degree routes of entry to the UK police mean for critical thinking as a tool for professionalism and how will it affect training and practice? It may be that the need for police training to develop and enhance critical thinking as an enabler of professionalism presents an opportunity. Police trainers will need to balance practical skill building with the cultivation of critical thinking across all pathways of entry to avoid a disparity in the quality of policing. This would involve developing tailored curricula that integrates reflective practice and problem solving into both degree and non-degree programmes with emphasis being placed on the amount of one skill vis-a-vis the other, dependent upon the route of entry. This will require careful curriculum design, ongoing evaluation, and a commitment to continuous professional development across all levels of the policing. The Four Stages of Competence and Four Habits frameworks are not explicitly stated by name within their own contexts during police training. [66] However, I have demonstrated via synthesis that these critical thinking conceptual frameworks are in existence and work in tandem with the NDM. This reveals

the relationship between established conceptual frameworks and practical applications. This relationship suggests that critical thinking is not only present but is an essential component of police training, linking directly to professional practice and the broader professionalisation of policing. Indeed, 'critical thinking is (recognised as) a valued…outcome'. [67] Furthermore, Thomas states 'it is important for a…person to be able to make well-informed judgments, be able to explain their reasoning and be able to solve unknown problems'. [68] This is particularly apt for policing.

Returning to Ennis' domain stance questioned in the critical thinking section above, police training has traditionally relied on structured inputs that concentrate on a specific isolated policing task. [69] The value of this is for officers to learn skill specifics before integrating them into the broader perspectives. However, this straightforward skill acquisition process contrasts with learning environments that promote multi-skill acquisition mimicking real world situations. Further, policing encompasses multiple vocations, not just isolated domains, and the critical thinking skills needed are heterogeneous. For instance, investigating a crime scene requires analytical and logical reasoning. Interviewing witnesses requires evaluation and inconsistency identification. Thinking critically in all of these aspects is the broad skill; however the detail of each critical engagement differs with the task.

Ennis though also recognises there is a continuum scale where ability of transference of critical thinking skill has varying degrees of success. [70] Managing police incidents via learned skills does not remove the officer's ability to simultaneously direct colleagues to protect a crime scene whilst gathering evidence via technology for future investigations and interviews. The skilled officer does not undertake their multiple vocations in isolation, rather, they apply learned behaviour and developed skill to encompass all avenues of policing. One such avenue of transference of critical thinking skills could be the utilisation of scenario-based training that covers multiple policing realms to address the challenges of moving critical thinking skills between and across domains, as this could assist officers to develop more flexibility in the deployment of critical thinking. If officers are made aware when undertaking training that their use of the NDM develops them to think critically in those situations, and that criticality of thinking can be applied throughout their policing, then the professional practice ethos that is

embedded in the NDM is one step closer to being achieved. Therefore, not dismissing the views of Ennis, rather, building on his continuum scale, I suggest utilising critical thinking skills developed during training enhances transferability of skills to all avenues of policing. Building further on this, the critical thinking skills developed are not merely an operational necessity but are also central to the ongoing process of police professionalisation. By emphasising these skills, policing can move beyond the narrow confines of traditional professional traits, instead fostering a more dynamic, adaptable, and ethically grounded professional identity. This approach not only enhances the professional status of policing but also strengthens its legitimacy in the eyes of the public, which is crucial for maintaining public trust and cooperation.

How then may the notion of critical thinking within police training be recognised and adopted into professionalism across all ranks within policing? I believe that Neyroud has already created the opportunity for this acceptance, albeit it will take time to embed. [71] With the requirement for three of the four routes of entry for new officers to already hold or qualify at degree level, exposure to the professionalism debate will be undertaken. For the non-degree officers, in-house training will be instrumental in introducing professionalism to this cohort. Central to this will be the 'conceptualisation of professionalism' that Lumsden has recognised as having 'a limited (trait)' approach. Lumsden goes further and states that 'the trait based approach to professions has been largely discredited'. However, Lumsden, drawing from Thursfield's work concludes that 'we cannot entirely discount trait-based explanations of professions as this status is the outcome of negotiations which must draw upon existing conceptualisations'. [72] I believe that police professionalisation is not attempting to mimic the traditional professions. Rather, their professionalisation seeks to standardise policing within a national competence framework and has been developed by policy driven legislative reform. By leveraging both academic frameworks and practical models like the NDM, the police service can cultivate a professional ethos that is both intellectually rigorous and practically effective.

Conclusion

The integration of degree level education for the majority of new police officers represents a significant step toward bridging the gap between concepts of occupational and organisational professionalism. This higher education level input is where the paradigm of critical thinking is developed, thereby fostering a form of professionalism that balances individual expertise with organisational consistency and alleviating the tensions between Evetts' two forms of professionalism. [73] This shift towards higher education is not merely about academic attainment but also about embedding a culture of critical thinking and continuous professional development within the police service. Blakemore and Simpson highlight the importance of fostering a culture of lifelong learning to counteract the perceived anti-intellectualism within policing. Their argument suggests that through education, officers are not only equipped with practical skills but also with the intellectual tools necessary for reflective practice, ethical decision making, and professional growth. [74]

The return of a non-degree entry route, however, raises concerns about a possible regression to a less intellectually rigorous form of policing. This could challenge the progress made towards professionalisation and the adoption of critical thinking as a core component of police training and practice. The reintroduction of this route may lead to a bifurcated police service, where those entering through degree pathways are seen as more intellectually equipped and professionally aligned with contemporary policing challenges, while those entering through non-degree routes may be perceived as less prepared to engage with the complexities of modern policing. In addition, this dual pathway could exacerbate existing tensions between the ideals of occupational and organisational professionalism. The degree educated officers may align more closely with occupational professionalism, characterised by a commitment to ethics, critical thinking, and reflective practice, while non-degree officers may lean towards organisational professionalism, focusing more on procedural adherence and operational efficiency. This divergence could hinder the development of a unified professional identity within the police service, potentially impacting both the internal cohesion of the service and its external legitimacy.

Alternatively, the coexistence of these diverse entry routes could lead to a more heterogeneous police service in terms of critical thinking. The variety of perspectives and problem-solving approaches to policing brought about by the diversity of entry could be seen as a strength. Although, disparities in how officers' approach complex situations, potentially leading to inconsistencies in service delivery, will need careful management. In practice, the implications of these pathways on professionalism will hinge on how effectively they equip officers to meet the demands of contemporary policing. The success of this multiroute entry system will largely depend on how well critical thinking is integrated into ongoing professional development and in-service training. Standardised programs focusing on critical analysis, evidence-based decision making, and reflective practice all undertaken via scenario-based training will assist in bridging any gaps created by the different entry pathways.

Therefore, the educationalisation of policing can evolve in a way that enhances its professional standing and meets the expectations of the society it serves.

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