In our current society, there is ubiquitous attention for both policing and the tasks performed by the police, also referred to as the police function. However, often these two concepts are not sufficiently distinguished from one another. That in itself should not be surprising, because the two are closely related and there is also a certain overlap. Nevertheless, such a distinction is important, not only from an academic point of view, but also to be able to engage in the debate about what we expect from our police now and in the future. Policing is one aspect of social control that is exercised to enforce existing social norms when a potential conflict arises between observed behavior and these norms (Reiner, 1994, in: Button, 2019). Policing therefore always involves an enforcement aspect, and the possibility of using violence is an inherent component (Brodeur, 2003). Weber (1978) placed the monopoly of legitimate use of violence with the state. The police are an important actor in this, but not the only one. Other organizations, both public and private, also have the authority to use force within certain contexts to uphold social norms, which is why we also refer to plural policing (Johnston, 1993; Loader, 2000). The way in which this enforcement takes place can differ from country to country, and even from one organization to organization. Factors that play a role in this include structure and culture (de Maillard et al., 2016), next to the obvious legal limitations that exist.

In order to make policing more concrete, it is possible to approach it taxonomically, distinguishing between different activities aimed at enforcing social norms. The first of these activities is protective. This involves the enforcement of property rights, both material and physical. These property rights can be individual, as seen in capitalist societies, but can also be collective. The second is an enforcement activity, where the goal is to ensure adherence to existing rules. The third activity, closely related to enforcement, focuses on providing advice. People and companies need to be informed about what is permissible and what is not. Finally, the last activity is investigative. This involves both proactively and reactively detecting behavior that violates social norms. Together, these activities serve a deterrent function; the mere presence of policing actors strengthens the enforcement of social norms (Matthys, 2009). The first three activities can be grouped under the umbrella of enforcement: enforcing property rights can viewed as enforcing existing rules, and providing advice serves as a warning that rules must be followed. In this context, a binary distinction is made between enforcement and investigation, both contributing to a deterrent effect.

Unlike policing, the police function is a term that cannot be universally defined (i.e. defined in a non-national way). The tasks that the police perform result from a political process that is shaped over many years and is subject to change (Reiner, 2000). The police function is therefore defined at the national level, usually within a legislative framework. For example, Article 1 of the Police Act in Belgium states that the police are tasked with ' … ensuring compliance and contributing to the protection of individual rights and freedoms, as well as to the democratic development of society'. In the Netherlands, Article 3 of the Police Act states that the police are tasked '… ,subordinate to the competent authority and in accordance with the applicable legal rules, (with) ensuring the effective maintenance of the legal order and providing assistance to those who need it'. In both countries, the police are seen as a pillar of the democratic constitutional state, with a duty to safeguard the legal order (Rosenthal & Muller, 2015). These general principles, however, require more practical elaboration. In the Netherlands, the police describe their own tasks as protecting life, freedom and property, providing assistance, limiting unauthorized and illegal behavior and reinforcing desired behavior and social norms. This description of tasks is broad, extending beyond the activities listed in the taxonomic description of policing. Providing assistance is also emphasized.

Confusion of concepts within the Belgian and Dutch core task debate

As stated above, the concepts of policing and the police function are not always clearly distinguished in the literature. A major source of confusion concerns the core task debate, which, as the name suggests, is primarily related to the police function. This is illustrated with examples from Belgium and the Netherlands, but this debate has been taking place in numerous countries in one form or another. The core task debate seeks to identify which parts of the police function cannot be performed by other actors and should therefore be assigned exclusively to the police (van der Torre et al., 2007; Bruggeman, 2015; Bijleveld et al., 2021). In these debates, references are often made to policing activities in order to define the core tasks of the police . This, however, overlooks the two points that were already established. First, policing activities themselves are also not solely carried out by the police (Loader, 2000). Second, while policing transcends the national level, this is not the case for the police function. In other words, the question of what constitutes the core

tasks of the police can vary by country, depending on the national structure, culture and historical context of the police. Ignoring this reflects a broader administrative trend within the Western world: New Public Management (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). This trend downplays national contexts, focusing instead on efficiency (value for money) and business-like methods in the public sector, including the police in the Netherlands (Treur, 1998; Vollaard, 2003; van Dijk et al., 2015: 57). The core task debate is influenced by this trend (van Stokkom et al., 2010) which in turn narrows the scope of the police function to those activities described in the taxonomic definition of policing. An even more restrictive approach emphasizes (reactive) crime control (Terpstra & Salet, 2020). The broader social role of the police, which relies less on enforcing social norms incapsulated in policing activities, is harder to quantify. This role is also often shared with other public and private actors, making it impossible to claim that it should belong exclusively to the police, reducing the value of needing to have a debate about core tasks.

In addition to the excessive focus on the ability to measure the police tasks, driven by New Public Management thinking, the core task debate also goes against the inherent principles of community-oriented policing (Ponsaers, 2011), which in the Netherlands is implemented through area-based policing. Emphasizing enforcement and crime fighting can undermine the essence of the Dutch model (Adang & Mali, 2021), which prioritizes strong contact with citizens and a visible presence in communities.

In several respects, the core task debate has thus obscured the discussion, as it focuses on identifying the essence of police work through what makes the organization exclusive, while simultaneously ignoring national specificities in the public sector by promoting a business-like approach. It is necessary to move beyond this debate and instead ask a more relevant question: what specific contributions does the police make within society in a particular country? Or, what is the essence of police work within a specific national context? In doing so, the claims of exclusivity and universality are eliminated (Ponsaers et al., 2006). Exclusivity disappears because it allows for the possibility that the police can only perform their work when other organizations are also involved, or conversely, that other organizations need the police to perform theirs. Universality disappears because the essence of police work can be defined within each country's context. By removing these claims, we can also explore the essence of police work outside of policing activities, without diminishing the role of the police in the execution of policing.

Use of force as a necessary means, but not as an essence

But what is the essence of police work in the Netherlands? What specific contribution do the police make? One argument, often put forward by the police themselves, is that they are the primary actors who can broadly use force while performing their duties, whereas other actors can only use force in specific contexts. This argument closely ties in with policing: these activities imply a legitimate threat to use force either broadly or within a specific context (Brodeur, 2013). However, in our opinion, this is a secondary relationship that should not form the basis of the essence of police work. It is also difficult to argue that the means the police use – namely the potential use of force – to achieve its goals, contains the essence of the organization. We would go even go so far as to claim that further identification of the police with the use of force could have potentially perverse consequences.

An example of these possible perverse consequences can be seen in the performance of tasks by Dutch special investigative officers (BOAs) working in public spaces. Because they have a fairly broad range of responsibilities, a liveability criterion is applied to provide a framework for a division of responsibilities between them and the police: BOAs should only work in situations where there is no expectation of danger or violence (Abraham & van Soomeren, 2020). To some extent this criterion is debatable, particularly given the unpredictability of violence in areas such as nightlife districts, where BOAs are most certainly used. Nevertheless, it does produce some clarity: the police are tasked with enforcement and handling situations where the use of force may be necessary, while BOAs operate in the preliminary phase. As a result, it is actually the BOA who will have the first contact with citizens, and who has the opportunity to de-escalate, or in other words, calm down a situation and prevent violence. Once the police are called to an incident, their options for de-escalation are more limited. If the attitude of a person or group is already aggressive, the likelihood that they resort to violence significantly increases (Sunde et al., 2023). Moreover, the police are less likely to view de-escalation as a viable option; at the point in which they become involved, the situation has already escalated in a way that the use of force will be deemed necessary in order to restore calm quickly (Keesman & Weenink, 2022). In contract, research involving neighborhood leaders used to de-escalate

potential conflict situations found that when the police was working alongside them in joint conflict resolution, more optimal results were obtained then if the police remained in the background and only intervened at a later stage (Van Bruchem et al., 2023).

The essence of police work in the Dutch community oriented policing perspective

The potential use of force is a necessary tool, but it is not the essence of police work in the Netherlands. Paradoxically, we argue that this falls within the general scope of the police's responsibilities within a community oriented policing model: that of the first responder or first aid worker, and that of the street-level bureaucrat (Lipsky, 2010). The first key aspect of police work in the Netherlands therefore involves providing assistance for wide range of social issues. For years, task specialization was seen as a solution to the many challenges confronted by the police, often overlooking the fact that specialization can create distance between the police and the citizen, and increase the complexity of the organization (Cockcroft & de Maillard, 2019). This is not an argument against specialized services, but rather a call for police to preserve their role as a factotum within society. Article 3 of the Dutch Police Act highlights this by explicitly introducing the provision of assistance as part of the duties of a police officer.

While the Dutch National Police has specialized units, it also relies on officers who can operate across various contexts. A police officer possesses the legitimacy to observe, address and resolve a citizen's problem, with the discretion to handle the issue either formally or informally, balancing organizational goals with social objectives (Halderen & Lasthuizen, 2013). The somewhat vague description of police responsibilities in Dutch legislation is more of a tool than it is an obstacle. A rigidly defined scope, focused solely on law enforcement, would reduce the police in the Netherlands to a mere instrument with no agency of its own –serving only the interests of the ruling political class. By combining the broad task description with discretionary authority, the police maintain their identity as an independent actor that protects the rule of law, rather than simply enforcing the rule by law (Bedner, 2010).

However, this does not mean that we should expect the police solve all social problems. In

the United States, this is precisely part of the problem – police are given powers ranging from addressing truancy to combating terrorism, covering a vast array of responsibilities (Lum et al., 2022). Additionally, the police are fundamentally a security actor, which creates the risk of securitizing social problems – framing all issues through a security lens (Waever, 1995). Therefore, the second key aspect of police work in the Netherlands is triaging and connecting citizens with other social actors. The police act as a hub, ensuring that citizens are directed to the appropriate resources and services (Friedman, 2021). These could include specialized units within the police, but also external actors better equipped to address specific needs.

Certainly, the first key aspect, providing general assistance, is under pressure in the Netherlands. As we've already discussed, other actors -such as the BOAs – often have the first contact with citizens in public spaces . There are also concerns regarding reporting incidents to the police. Technological advancements promised to expand the ways in which police could engage with citizens. In the Netherlands, this was exemplified by the police's 'multichannel strategy' , which aimed to offer citizens the most suitable means of filing reports with the police (Boekhoorn & Tolsma, 2015). In practice, however, this led to a reduction of service option rather than an expansion. This does not mean that technological progress should not be integrated into daily police practice, but there are barriers that hinder its full implementation (Bullock, 2018). Furthermore, there is a risk that more direct contact methods-valued for their personal and immediate nature- may be phased out in favor of more formalized and impersonal means, all in the name of efficiency (Terpstra et al., 2016). This can lead to a more abstract form of communication and police work (Terpstra et al., 2019), hindering the general assistance aspect

More attention is given to the second key aspect: cooperation with other actors. However, there is still a need for further reinforcement. Several recent studies consistently highlight the same issue: while the need for cooperation is widely acknowledged, its practical implementation has encountered setbacks. For example, Salet (2019) discusses the considerable distance between the police and municipalities in addressing nuisance and crime. Jansen and Verbruggen (2022) point out that cooperation in tackling domestic violence still faces many practical obstacles. In an extensive analysis of the various public-private partnerships in the field of financial-economic crime and cybercrime, Staats et al. (2021) identify two main issues: information sharing often doesn't run smoothly, and it is

frequently unclear whether cooperation has actually led to measurable results. And in his inaugural lecture, Bauke Koekkoek (2023) advises public professionals, including the police, not only to understand citizens better, but also to better understand each other, or in other words to cooperate more and to have 'skin in the game'.

Micro, meso and macro conditions

In order to strengthen both key aspects, several preconditions must be met at the individual (micro), organizational (meso) and political (macro) level. The micro level is primarily related to the first key aspect: the police must remain the first point of contact for tackling many forms of social problems. This means that daily police work is diverse, demanding and complex. To equip police officers with the tools they need to meet these challenges, high-quality training is critical. However, this does not mean that the training should aim to make police officers knowledgeable about everything. That approach would turn them into a "jack of all trades, master of none". Instead, training should focus not only on specific police skills (e.g. understanding the legislation, knowing how to use a weapon), but also on competences such as incorporating abstract principles in their way of thinking (Bloeyaert & De Kimpe, 2018). To be clear, skills will remain important. For example, an officer must know the relevant legislation when stopping a person and understand the rules governing the legality of the stop. But legality is only one factor in an officer's discretionary decision-making process when determining which actions to take in the moment. To continue the example of police stops, officers must also be aware of how these stops impact police legitimacy in the short and the long term, and how this legitimacy can be strengthened or undermined (Aston et al., 2024). Finally, there is also a link between a police officer's level of education and their sense of self-legitimacy (Hacin & Meško, 2022), which in turn influences their decision-making. There are at least indications that a higher degree of self-legitimacy leads to a greater reliance on non-coercive measures when interacting with citizens (Tankebe & Meško, 2015), though the precise nature of this relationship deserves more research.

An academic bachelor's degree for all police officers, regardless of their position in the organization, seems to be the most suitable approach (Terpstra & Schaap, 2021). Admittedly, the call for an academic bachelor degree somewhat overlooks the current level

of professional bachelor's degrees taught at Dutch Universities of Applied Sciences. A review of the curricula for various degrees in (integrated) safety and security sciences does reveal a blend of theory and practice that aligns with the needs described above. More important than determining which institution should provide such training is ensuring that the training enhances the professionalism of individual officers. Officers should gain insights into alternative ways of exercising social control, learn to communicate and coordinate with other actors addressing social problems, and be able to engage citizens, encouraging their autonomy where possible (Fielding, 2018).

The meso level pertains to the second aspect of police work in the Netherlands: connecting with other social actors and triaging cases to the appropriate services. It is therefore important for the police as an organization to strengthen ties with professionals from related policy domains. Several studies have recognized the importance of this cooperation, but also highlighted persistent challenges. For example, Dozy (2012) emphasizes the need for both domain consensus and coordination when establishing partnerships, while also cautioning against ceremonial conformity. This issue can be addressed by working within participatory networks (Provan & Kenis, 2008), where the police do not take a dominant role. While some asymmetry is always present, a leadership position for the police would risk having other organizations conform to the police's goals. Instead, the police should act as facilitators and directors (Helsloot et al., 2012), a perspective that is closely linked to that of anchored pluralism (Walker & Loader, 2006). Dozy (2012) also discusses how professional and organizational culture can influence cooperation: shared cultures can enhance collaboration between organizations.

However, this will often not be the case. One way for organizations with different cultures to still collaborate is through legitimacy: when legitimacy is present, there is a greater willingness to cooperate (Klijn & Edelenbos, 2013), even across cultural divides. Nonetheless, the complexity remains considerable. A persistent bottleneck is that the goals of the police often do not align with the goals of other actors within the network (Tuteleers, 2012) – at least not if the police adhere strictly to traditional concepts of security provision. In other words, courage and some conceptual intelligence are needed to decide what is best for society. The perspectives of law enforcement, crime prevention and assistance can complement each other, but there are situations where they are mutually exclusive, requiring difficult choices to be made.

Finally, the macro level also primarily relates to the second key aspect of coordination, but from the perspective of strengthening these other organizations and not just concentrating on the police: increased investment in security provision is essential. First, this involves the support of the micro and meso factors described above. Ultimately, it is politicians who must decide what the minimum training levels should be for the police. It is also at the meso level where cooperation between organizations can and should be encouraged (van Lakerveld et al., 2019). Equally important however is at the macro level ensuring that financial resources are allocated to related policy areas, such as physical and emotional health and poverty reduction. If these areas do not receive adequate funding, the police will become further isolated, with increased expectations placed on them to take on a broader range of responsibilities. Previous research has already indicated that a reduction in investments in related policy areas is linked to a higher use of force against the police (Aarten et al., 2020). This sets the stage for a dangerous cycle: funds are diverted from other sectors to increase police funding, which leads to a greater accumulation of responsibilities for the police. As a result, the police become further isolated and lack the sufficient expertise to meet all demands. The solution cannot lie in simply increasing police budgets, as this would lead to situations like those in the United States, where, in larger cities 20% to 45% of the budget is allocated to the police (Cobbinga-Dungy et al., 2022). In the U.S., the raises the question whether too many resources are being devoted to the police. Part of the 'defund the police' movement seeks to challenge this allocation and is drawing inspiration from the abolitionist perspectives. This article does not place itself in an abolitionist tradition, but does find the question of resource allocation a legitimate one.

Conclusion: Towards a Neo-Weberian perspective

It is important to note that the failure to meet the three preconditions outlined above can often be traced back to adherence to a New Public Management perspective. In this model, professionalization is primarily about acquiring specific, immediately applicable skills, rather than fostering competences. Collaboration is viewed through a transactional and contractual principal-agent lens, with a clear distinction between the client and contractor, rather than recognizing the need for equal partnership. Although New Public Management also advocates for investments in different policy domains, its focus on efficiency hinders a

more holistic approach. The idea that investments in one policy domain can also yield positive long-term effects in another is often overlooked.

An alternative to this New Public Management mindset can be found in a neo-Weberian perspective (Bouckaert, 2023). This approach revalues the Weberian principles, but also recognizes the need to adapt these principles to modern challenges. The revaluation puts governmental actors more central again, but in a different way. Whereas the traditional Weberian view positions the government as the sole problem solver, the new paradigm sees the government taking on the role as the most important facilitator for solving small and large social problems. This shift also reaffirms the unique status of civil service. Unlike private sector employees, civil servants operate within a different dynamic. New elements in this framework are inspired by New Public Governance principles, which emphasize an outward orientation towards the needs of citizens by aligning the professional culture of civil servants with those needs (Bouckaert, 2023). This way of thinking ties into the earlier discussion on the essence of police work. Within this framework, the police regain a moral dimension and have an exemplary function towards the citizen. Their actions promote greater social cohesion, with their helpful behavior having a pedagogical function for the public (Van den Berg et al., 2012). The hope and expectation is that this approach will positively influence the public's perception of police legitimacy. While procedural legitimacy remains important, this model emphasizes the outcome rather than the process of the police-citizen relationship, encouraging a more holistic view (Schaap & Saarikkomäki, 2022).

The recommended reinforcements at micro, meso and macro levels align with the neo-Weberian perspective. Civil servants, including police officers, operate under a different dynamic than employees in the private sector. There is a growing need for higher educated management and well-trained employees . The distinction between these groups is disappearing, and it is clear that comprehensive training is necessary for every civil servant/police officer. The idea of cooperation as networks is a continuation of the New Public Governance thinking embedded within the neo-Weberian principles. A holistic vision allows us to approach government action broadly, rather than limiting it to actions within a single policy domain. The author is very much aware that every paradigm shift in the public sector is a slow process, and that ideal models are rarely, if ever, achieved. However, there is an undeniable value in viewing the work of the police through a neo-Weberian lens. It is

therefore the author's strong hope that steps will be taken in this direction. The police already play a crucial role in addressing a wide range of social problems in the Netherlands, often implicitly, and recognizing this as the essence of police work can create maximum space for strengthening the previously outlined preconditions. This benefits the police, the individual citizen, and society as a whole.

Note

This article is a translation of a previous publication in the Dutch academic journal 'Tijdschrift voor Veiligheid'. It therefore uses the Dutch situation and occasionally Belgium as a comparison to make a number of points. However, the central argumentation relates to community policing, and therefore has broader implications. One part has been removed from this translation. In it, a language difficulty was explained where the English concept 'policing' is translated in Dutch as 'de politiefunctie' (literally: the police function) and 'police function' as 'politietaken' (literally: the police tasks). Though a source of confusion in Dutch academic literature, it is less relevant for an international context.

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