



Police officers' learning in relation to emergency management: A case study



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ABSTRACT

Commanders have an important role in the management of emergencies, as their responsibility is to lead and coordinate the response. This study examines how police officers with command responsibilities learn to carry out emergency response work and manage emergencies. The empirical data was collected through participant observation in the police service before the terrorist attacks on the Government Complex and on the Labor Party youth camp on Utøya Island in Norway on 22 July 2011, thus giving the opportunity firstly to gain direct experience from police officers' work and learning activities and then to analyze how appropriate and sufficient these activities are for actually preparing personnel to manage a major emergency. The response to and management of the terrorist attacks was, on the whole, not as good as it should have been, mainly because of inadequate exercise of command by the police. From a learning point of view, these weaknesses are not surprising. This study shows that the learning activities in the police service are mainly directed toward daily police work and normal emergencies, and do not sufficiently prepare police officers and commanders to manage major novel crises such as the terrorist attacks on 22 July.

1. Introduction

Emergencies threatening the well-being of people, property, environment and/or societal functions occur repeatedly in every society. Managing such incidents is therefore highly prioritized, and much effort is devoted to ensuring advantageous outcomes when emergencies occur. Some studies, however, question the ability of emergency response organizations to learn from failures occurring during emergency responses (e.g. [16,18,35,50]). For instance, Donahue and Robert [18] study of several major emergencies over a decade showed that lessons related to command and leadership, communications, planning, resource management, and public relations were repeatedly identified after responses. As one responder in Donahue & Tuohy's study said: "If we don't learn these lessons, people are going to die again, because we failed to fix the problems that killed people the last time" (p. 22). The emergency response organizations' inability to learn from their failures thus appears to hinder top performance when it is a matter of life and death. This was sadly the case in the response to the terrorist attacks on the Government Complex and on the Labor Party youth camp on Utøya Island in Norway on 22 July 2011. The evaluation by the official "22 July Commission" revealed that a number of deficiencies led to the incident not being handled well enough in

important areas [54].

For decades emergency responses have been organized with strict hierarchical management structures, usually divided into three different levels of command – *tactical*, *operational*, and *strategic* levels.¹ The differences within and between countries with respect to command structure and formalized routines appear to be only minor (see e.g. [3,69,71]). This stability indicates that commanders are an essential element in emergency response performance. In addition, the literature on crisis and emergency management widely acknowledges that commanders' decision-making during a response is important for the outcome (e.g. [1,14,24–26,60,72]). Commanders' competence related to emergency responses, and thus their learning and development of this competence, is consequently a critical factor for emergency response organizations' ability to manage emergencies and respond appropriately.

In this article we examine how police officers learn to carry out emergency response work and manage emergencies. In much of the research on emergency responses a general weakness is the reliance on retrospective case-oriented analyses, because these methods do not include real-time observations of events and activities while an emergency response unfolds (see e.g. [53,58]). Njå & Rake [53] argue for the necessity of researchers to place themselves in emergency

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¹ In Norway, however, these concepts have different meanings in the various blue light departments, which sometimes cause confusion.

personnel's contextual frame and thus gain first-hand knowledge about the response work. We have taken this into account and used a participant observation approach to study learning among police officers. Our data gathering was conducted in the spring (3–5 months) before the terrorist attacks on 22 July 2011. The police district we studied was, however, not involved in the response to the terrorist attacks. Still, the Government-appointed 22 July Commission's evaluation of the incident, and the internal evaluation of the police's response by the evaluation committee appointed by the National Police Directorate (the "Police Committee"), was not limited to the response *per se* but dug deep into the working practices, working climate, structures, and competencies of the police services in Norway in general. This gave us the opportunity firstly to gain direct experience from police officers' work and learning activities ("unbiased" by the deficiencies revealed by the evaluations), and then to analyze how appropriate and sufficient these activities are for actually preparing personnel to manage a major emergency (based on the results of the two evaluations). Before presenting the guiding research questions for this study, we describe the Norwegian emergency response system (to which the police service is central) and the main findings from the 22 July Commission and the Police Committee's evaluation.

1.1. Emergency management in Norway

The Norwegian emergency response system is designed to manage both minor emergencies (i.e. minor and daily events) and major emergencies (i.e. incidents that require a large-scale response). The police service's responsibility in the event of emergencies is, in addition to take care of police-specific tasks, mainly to lead and coordinate the response. This is done through a Local Rescue Sub-center (LRS) at the command center at the local police district's headquarters² (strategic and operational level of command) and an incident commander at the scene of the accident (tactical level of command). One of the two Joint Rescue Coordination Centers (JRCCs) in Norway (each covering about half of the country) has the overall operative responsibility during all search and rescue operations, but only directly lead and coordinate operations at sea, in the air, and on offshore oil and gas installations. Fig. 1 presents the basic functional structure of the Norwegian system.

Each police district has a command center for directing the district's police officers, where a Commander of Operations (CO) has the responsibility for coordinating all of the operations within the police district. The CO, together with his or her assistant operators, coordinates the activities of the police officers in the field, both during "normal" police work and during emergencies. In minor emergencies, the command center's personnel alone coordinate and manage the response (i.e. taking care of both operational and strategic command). When major emergencies occur, the Staff are mobilized (to strengthen the operational level of command) and the local Chief of Police is called in (to take care of strategic command). In addition, representatives from local agencies, such as the fire brigade, the medical authorities, the Pilot Service, the Port Authority, the armed forces, the Air Traffic Service, civil defense, the teleservices, and voluntary organizations, can be called in to provide expertise to the local Chief of Police in his or her strategic decision-making. A typical example of a major emergency is the terrorist attacks on 22 July 2011, but transport accidents, missing persons in the mountains, fires in industrial plants, and such like fall into the same category.

In major emergencies the Staff are functionally organized around seven objectives/tasks: *personnel* (administrating response personnel and financial issues), *intelligence* (gathering and assessing information, carrying out criminal investigations, dealing with the evacuated and their family members), *operation* (planning and coordinating operative tasks), *logistics* (managing resources), *information* (passing on inter-

nal information and giving information to the media), *juridic* (dealing with juridical issues), and *situation specific* (taking care of other tasks if the predefined six functions are not sufficient in a specific incident). The Chief of Staff manages and coordinates the Staff's work, takes over the responsibility of the operational command from the CO, and is the link to the local Chief of Police. The various staff functions are manned according to the scale and contents of the response. In a minor response one police officer takes care of several or all of the functions, while in a large-scale response each function must be organized by a number of officers. Hence, the idea is that, by enhancing the number of personnel and focusing their attention on specific tasks, this should be a gliding transition from the normal management structure (which manages minor and daily events) to a large-scale response organization able to manage major emergencies. However, at the same time, the National Police Directorate [48] emphasizes the importance of making a clear decision about when to change from normal management structure to exercise of command through the Staff. In other words, this is a change to centralized coordination and reinforcement of command and control (for a discussion of centralised coordination in large-scale emergency situations, see [31]). The emergency response system is thus based on a military model focusing on chaos, command, and control, as opposite to a problem solving model emphasizing continuity, coordination, and cooperation (cf. [19,20]).

At the scene of the accident an on-scene rescue management organization is established; here, a designated police officer acts as Incident Commander (IC) and has the responsibility for operative direction and coordination on the scene (i.e. taking care of tactical command).³ Normally the IC will be assisted by another police officer in charge of public order, a fire officer in charge of fire control and rescue work, and a medical officer in charge of medical treatment. However, the IC is only in direct command of other police officers, so cooperation between the involved emergency response organizations' leaders is crucial for the management of the operative response on-scene. The majority of the police districts in Norway do not have predefined ICs on duty but appoint the most suitable police officer to act as IC according to the kind of incident/emergency that occurs and the special competence needed. The IC is thus appointed by the CO at the command center, and sometimes commanding responsibility on-scene is transferred during operations (depending on who arrives first at the accident scene and/or changes in situational-specific requirements according to the development of the emergency). Nevertheless, for a police officer to be able to act as IC, the minimum requirement is to have completed a basic IC training course (the content of which will be described later). During the response the CO is in direct command of the IC, but in practice the IC and CO should cooperate closely to successfully manage the incident [48].

The terrorist attacks on 22 July 2011 put the Norwegian emergency response system to one of its biggest tests in modern times. Seventy-seven people were killed, about 300 were injured (many of them seriously), thousands became affected in one way or another, and the material damage was extensive [54]. Regarding the acute phase, the 22 July Commission concluded that the health and rescue services managed to take care of the injured people and next-of-kin in a satisfactory manner, but a more rapid and effective police operation was a realistic possibility. According to the Police Committee, the reasons for the failures that occurred during the response were mainly weaknesses related to alerting, situation reports, planning, training, manning, mass mobilization, and the information and communication technology used, while the 22 July Commission found the failures to primarily result from the following:

³ If two or more accidents/incidents occur simultaneously at different geographical locations within the police district, the response at each of these accident scenes will be led and coordinated by separate ICs. The different responses and ICs, then, will be coordinated by the CO.

² In Norway there are altogether 27 police districts.

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