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Influences on Decision Making in An Garda Síochána

A Qualitative Study on the Influences on Decision Making in An Garda Síochána

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Abstract

Police officers make decisions every day to enforce the law and keep people safe. There are many elements that affect their decisions, such as legislation, organisational factors, and decision making styles i.e. intuitive and analytical. Previous research has been conducted to investigate decision making in policing environments however, there are no studies that concentrate on the Irish Police Force. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify how police officers make decisions in An Garda Síochána. **Method:** Members of An Garda Síochána were recruited via convenience sampling ($N = 9$). Participants ages ranged from 38-58 years ($M = 47.88$, $SD = 5.15$) and their years of service ranged from 18 -38 years ($M = 26.44$, $SD = 5.33$). Semi-structured interviews were carried out with each participant. Questions were related to decision made in a policing environment. The data was analysed in compliance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. **Results:** Four main themes and two subthemes were identified: (i) Intuition and Analytical reasoning, (ii) Ethical Factors (core beliefs and conscientiousness) (iii) Situational factors (iv) Organisational & External Factors. **Conclusions:** Decision Making is a combination of many factors and these factors overlap. Participants appeared to use their intuition initially, next analyse their judgment while encompassing their own ethical beliefs, the behaviour of an individual, and organisational implications.

Keywords: Decision Making; thematic analysis; Police; An Garda Síochána;

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to identify how police officers make decisions within the Irish police force, An Garda Síochána. Decision making has been studied on many occasions from the Armed Forces to Fire Brigades to Police Forces (Shortland, Alison, Thompson, Barrett-Pink, & Swan, 2020a). The choice to examine this area of decision making amongst police officers will offer an insight into how decisions are made in a world that is defined by law and legislation. Many researchers have focused on the behaviour of police officers and the influence on their decision making (Worden & Shepard 1996; Herbert, 1998; Terrill, & Paoline, 2007; Phillips, & Sobol, 2010; Hine, Porter, Westera, Alpert, & Allen, 2018; Shortland, Alison, Thompson, Barrett-Pink, & Swan, 2020a). Findings on the determining factors differ significantly (Engel, Worden, Corsaro, McManus, Reynolds, Cochran, & Cherkauskas, 2019). These studies have identified the following factors, organisational and legal factors, behaviour of an individual involved in the incident, experience, individual characteristics and workload. However, these studies have mainly concentrated on use of force and racial prejudice (Sun, Payne, Wu, 2008). Therefore, several factors and influences should be considered when a police officer must decide what course of action to take.

Making legal judgements are part of a police officer's decision making process. There are many elements that go into making the decision to act (Shortland et al, 2020a). To assist members of An Garda Síochána make rationale and justifiable decisions, they introduced the Garda Decision Making Model in 2019 to all personnel within the organisation (An Garda Síochána, 2022). The model has five steps that must be adhered to. They are "gathering information and intelligence; assess threats and risks; consider operational environment' identify options and contingencies and take action and review". At the core of the model are Constitutional and Human Rights and the Code of Ethics. These steps must consider

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Community and Stakeholders, Legal Powers and Policy, Procedure and Practices. This model is aimed at assisting early decision making nevertheless, to understand the complexity of decision making, we will look at many influential factors involved and two specific styles of decision making also.

Influences on Decision Making

Decision making has been defined by Driver, Brousseau & Hunsaker, (1990) as gathering information and options, then considering them all when making a decision. Decision making is a cognitive process that psychologists have studied in organisations such as emergency front-line workers, army operations etc. (Shortland, Alison, Thompson, Barrett-Pink, & Swan, 2020b). Decision making in the police force can be stressful as Goldstein, (1964) highlighted the issue of learning the law, as, the law can be learnt in training but, realistically, putting the law into practice can be difficult to achieve. Police officers often deal with incidents of less importance such as traffic violations or public order issues. Police officers' dealing with these low-level offences provides them with a chance of stopping a potentially bigger crime occurring (Phillips & Sobol, 2012). To determine how decisions are made in An Garda Síochána, the following factors will be examined: organisational and legal factors, behaviour of an individual involved in an incident, experience, police officer characteristics and workload.

Organisational and Legal Factors

It has been identified that pressure from within an organisation is a factor in decision making as officers can either be commended or disciplined. Although research is limited, there have only been a few studies that identify organisational influence on decision making (Mastrofski, 1981; Alpert, MacDonald, & Dunham, 2005; Terrill and Paoline 2007). This

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may be due to the reluctance of police organisations to allow this type of study to take place (Klinger, 2004). As police officers are accountable for their decisions and actions, organisational factors may lead to pressure to perform and take action, and which may lead to mistakes, and nobody desires to be seen as making a mistake (Myhill, & Johnson, 2016). Therefore, this can result in resistance or self-preservation, they may ‘mind themselves’ which can lead to holding back and staying under the radar (Shortland et al, 2020a).

Studies into decisions made by police suggests that valid legal reasons such as the severity of an offence, if a weapon is present and obvious evidence that the law has been breached or broken (Worden, 1989) will be the fundamental influence on decision and therefore, it might be assumed that legal factors are the most important influence with regard to decisions to arrest or take action. Conversely, Mastrofski (1995) conducted a study in the United States of America comparing beat and community officers. They found that police members within the community policing unit were less likely to use legal factors as the sole reason to arrest or take action; they suggest that community police officers’ may be influenced by other factors and not legal ones alone. This might suggest that police who work closely with the community have built up a tolerance to certain behaviours or characteristics of local people that allows them to use a level of discretion (Novak, Frank, Smith, & Engel, 2002). Novak et al (2002) carried out a similar study and their findings were consistent with Mastrofski (1995). A study by Phillips & Sobol, (2010), examined police decision making when legal requirements are a factor in domestic violence incidents. Using the law when it has been broken may reduce the use of a decision making process. The police officer will determine if all the criteria for taking action are met. Herbert (1998) states that the severity of an offence will mitigate the police officer’s decision as it will empower them to implement the law.

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Behaviour of an Individual

The offender's behaviour towards a police officer is also another influence on their decisions. Research regarding the behaviour of a suspect has been varied (Novak, Frank, Smith, & Engel, 2002) however, an individual that is disrespectful (Engle, Sobel & Worden, 2000) or inebriated (Engel et al, 2000; Matrofski, 1995) were more than likely to be arrested. Fyfe, Klinger, & Flavin, (1997) found that this is a greater influence for an arrest over a serious injury to a victim. And Worden & Shepard (1996) also found that if an offender is acting disrespectfully towards a police officer it will lead and result in an arrest; however, conversely, Fedar (1999) and Worden and Pollitz (1984) as cited by Phillips, & Varano, (2008) found that behaviour was not a factor in a decision to arrest. A US study conducted by Terrill, & Paoline, (2007), found a number of influences on policing decisions including co-operative or non-cooperative behaviour and empathy, particularly for vulnerable youths or elderly affected their decisions. But when a police officer decides not to take action. e.g. not arrest, they may decide to deal with a situation through other methods such as giving a warning or asking that they desist and move on.

Experience

Experience amongst police officers is also a factor in decision making. Van den Heuvel, Alison, & Power, (2014) found that experienced police officers would seek additional information when there was a level of uncertainty in dangerous and risky situations. However, Brecci (1989) found that officers with little experience were more likely to be impulsive to act and make an arrest than seek additional information. Police officers with more service and experience view an incident as an opportunity to provide a service whereas those with less experience viewed them from an enforcement opportunity. Experience leads to intuitive thinking as intuition is strengthened by past experiences,

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therefore, the more experience and skill a police member has, the more the member will rely on intuition to make decisions (Klein, 2015).

Workload

Workload must be taken into consideration when making decisions as suggested by Klinger (1997). The level of workload will depend on the level of crime rates in a specific area as the more policing matters they have to deal with, the more experience they will gain. However, a study conducted by Sobol, (2010) found that workload and high-risk crime areas did not relate or affect decisions.

Police Officers' Characteristics

Individual factors are made up of many features such as core beliefs, values, and attitudes (Cohen & Swerlik, 1999) and there are many studies that have focused on what type of individuals become members of a police force (Fitch, 2014; Biggam, & Power, 1996; Aamodt, Brewster, & Raynes, 1998). Therefore, the role of personality and its influence must be examined as it plays a vital role in decision making (Matrofski 1995). Police tend to have a high moral code and ethical standard of behaviour and appear to take the right course of action when faced with moral and ethical decisions (Northhouse, 2016 as cited by Jamasali-Abdula, Genuba, & Lovina Jr, 2022). In addition, and conversely, issues such as severity of a crime, the amount of evidence, and victim requests were found to highly influence decision and behaviour of a police officer regardless (Smith, Novak, Frank, & Lowenkamp, 2005).

Styles of Decision Making

A decision is not based on a solitary element but a succession of choices – a chain reaction – (Binder & Scharf, 1980 as cited by Hine et al., 2018). There are a number of

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decision making processes, however the dual process model appears to be the most relevant and current process to research (Brown & Daus, 2015; Hine, Porter, Westera, Alpert, & Allen (2018). To understand this type of decision making, two styles will be explained. These are intuitive and analytical which are within the framework of Naturalistic decision making.

Hine, et al, (2018) looked at Naturalistic decision making as a way to investigate the decision making processes in police officers. A dual process model has highly influenced the decision making research field. This dual process consists of two methods. According to Hine et al (2018), these are the intuitive style and the analytical style of decision making. Intuitive style is described as instinctive, untaught, natural, and quick. It can also be described as a 'gut feeling'. This way of decision making can lead to quick decisions being made; however, it can be linked to biases and lead to mistakes being made nonetheless. Cohen (1981), states that intuitive decision making can produce quick and precise decisions. Intuition depends on the amount of exposure to similar situations which allows the intuition reasoning to become natural. Even though this style of decision making appears to defy policy and procedure, this type of decision is appropriate to the situation at the initial stages, as legal factors will be first and foremost when it comes to taking action. Intuitive decisions are often relied upon by police members (Patton 2003).

The other style of the naturalistic method is analytical, this is having more awareness and being more cognisant of the situation, but it can be a slower and in-efficient process as it involves including all choices and deciding on the most optimal one. In contrast to intuitive decision making, analytical decision making tends to be more accurate and leads to more optimal outcomes (Kahneman, & Lovallo, 1993). However, Allen, (2011) found that this type of decision making does not work well in a situation when a quick decision is required as this

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style can obstruct the overall decision. During urgent or dangerous policing matters, a police officer may not have the time to use analytical decision making and will have to depend on their experience and their 'gut feeling' (Hine et al., 2018). Nonetheless, Brown and Daus, (2015) investigated the relationship between decision making styles and anger within a police force and identified that intuition and analytical thinking have a bilateral effect on decision making.

The Current Study

The aim of this study is to ascertain what influences decision making in a disciplined force which is based on rules and regulations. Policy and procedures will not fit every situation therefore decisions made are based on other factors. Decision making in policing has many influential factors such as knowledge of legislation, training, and past experiences to name a few. These influences may impact the outcome of an incident that requires police intervention. As police officers, they are accountable for all their decisions and are open to scrutiny and investigation. Therefore, decisions made in a policing context require thoughtful consideration due to the consequences they can create. Understanding how decisions are made may assist with enhancing training methods in An Garda Síochána in the future. The matter of police decision making is an important subject to both the organisation and the general public. This study will address the following question: What influences affect decision making in An Garda Síochána. As a starting point, this study will concentrate on influences on decision making in a policing environment. There is a lack of information regarding what influences a police officer's decision, and it appears to be unexplored within Ireland, therefore there is a need to research and analyse what factors determine and influence their decisions

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited by means of personal email seeking participants to partake. As the researcher works within the police organisation, it allowed for convenience sampling. As it is exceedingly difficult to access the entire population, convenience sampling works when participants are geographically close and easy to access (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Inclusion criteria were members of the Irish police force, An Garda Síochána, regardless of rank, location, or duty, such as from Garda rank to Chief Superintendent. Operational members of all ranks, detectives of all ranks, members assigned to office duty and Garda instructors were included. A Garda member with more than five years' service was also a condition. Both male and female members were included. Garda Trainees were excluded from this study as they are still in training and have little or no experience of policing.

Participants ages ranged from 38-58 years ($M = 47.88$, $SD = 5.15$). All participants ($n = 9$) were current members of An Garda Síochána including the ranks of Garda, Sergeant, and Inspector. Participants service within An Garda Síochána was from 18 – 38 years ($M = 26.44$, $SD = 5.33$). The study was open to both male and female members; the sample consisted of 9 participants. 8 were male and 1 was female. Three additional Garda members expressed an interest in participating however, work constraints within the organisation prevented this from happening.

Data Collection

Qualitative research was conducted through semi-structured interviewing by the researcher. This approach requires data to be inspected and decoded as a method of understanding and expanding on empirical research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008 as cited by Bowen, 2009). This method allowed participants to examine and reflect on their experiences

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as the questions posed required participants to think about past situations and experiences in a policing situation. Questions were developed by the researcher which contained broad and specific questions to ascertain the certain influences that impact on the decision making processes that Garda members must undergo such as situational factors, organisational factors, oversight bodies affect etc. The questions were written in an open-ended style which allowed participants to expand and discuss in detail their responses. All questions were utilised however, some were slightly modified to suit the responses. The first question posed was to build up rapport and get an understanding as to why they became members of An Garda Síochána, their rank was already known to the researcher through their Garda uniform (the Garda uniform displays their rank on their epilates). They were asked their length of service and why they joined the organisation. To gain an understanding into their decision making processes, they were asked to answer the questions from a policing viewpoint. This enabled the researcher to explore their attitudes and reasons for making certain decisions, for example ‘Can you tell me what situational factors might affect your decision making?’ Questions also focused on times when decisions had to be made in demanding situations ‘In a policing situation when a decision must be made quickly, how do you make a well-judged decision?’ And a question also focused on change within the organisation and ‘How does the culture of AGS impact on your decision making?’ See appendix A for full interview schedule.

A pilot was conducted with a neutral person (civilian) as the questions and the interview had not been conducted before. This allowed the researcher to ensure that the questions developed were comprehensible and clear. The data received from this pilot interview was not included. All written content from the interviews were transcribed for analysis. It also allowed the researcher to provide an approximate duration of each interview. Interviews took between 11 – 45 minutes.

Study Procedure

Once participants agreed to participate, the participant information document (See Appendix B) and consent form (See Appendix C) was forwarded via email. Interviews were organised by email and phone. The locations were chosen based on the convenience of the participants needs. All interviews took place in an office or classroom environment. At each interview, the participants were provided with the consent form which they were asked to read and indicate that they were consenting to taking part in the study by ticking a box confirming consent. As participants were anonymous, signatures, registration numbers or shoulder numbers were not sought after as these can identify a Garda member also. Following a briefing of the study and what the interview entailed, the interviews commenced. The interview schedule (Appendix A) was used to enable the interviews to run efficiently and to keep the researcher on track. All questions were utilised however, some were adapted to suit the responses provided.

Interviews were recorded using a mobile phone and were transcribed verbatim. The interviews ranged in time from 11 - 45 minutes ($M = 29$), this time does not include the briefing and debriefing stage.

All participants were debriefed post interview stage and were provided with the debriefing document (See Appendix D) also. They were also reminded that they have the right to withdraw at any stage and can view their responses, if required. Participants were also reassured that they will remain anonymous, that there will be no reference to their name, rank, registered number and shoulder numbers or location of work. Confidentiality of both recorded content and verbal was also reiterated.

Ethical Considerations

This study has followed the ethical guidelines provided by the Psychological Society of Ireland and the National College of Ireland. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the National College of Ireland's Psychology Department's Undergraduate Ethics Committee. In addition, permission from An Garda Síochána was sought. This entailed contacting the Garda Research Unit, Garda Headquarters and completing a research protocol document for approval. This study was reviewed and consequently approved by An Garda Síochána.

Informed consent was attained to safeguard participants. The reason and rationale for this research was provided to participants at the beginning and end of the study. Participants were assured that no one except the researcher will see what was said or who said it. Anything discussed in the study either in a formal or informal way is kept strictly confidential. A record of names or locations or any identifiable pieces of information was not collected. Participants were informed that they have to the right to withdraw at any stage. As this is a qualitative analysis, it involved a semi-structured interview with questions surrounding decisions made during the course of a police officer's duty. Some questions may have brought back memories of poor decisions made during the course of their duty therefore details of helplines to the Employee Assistance Service were included in the debriefing sheet. Participants were assured that all recordings and transcripts will be confidential and anonymous.

Data collected and participants will be respected and guaranteed that no information will be accessible to others. The right to privacy was upheld. Individual identity is confidential, the use of pseudonyms has been used when quoted to protect each participant. Each recording was saved using a number as opposed the participant's name. The real identity

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will never be used or saved on any device or document. Each participant was provided with a number/pseudonym that will not be linked to them.

A recording device (mobile phone) was used to collect data, as this study is a semi-structured interview. Recordings are kept secure in a password protected file on my personal laptop. Files are encrypted and stored securely. No files are kept on usb keys. Any written notes have been transcribed onto a word document and added to the encrypted files with the recordings. No video was used for the collection of data for this study.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis approach to analysing the qualitative data was adopted. Thematic analysis concentrates on not only the common themes, but their variations and any inconsistencies that may present themselves (Attride-Stirling, 2001). It relies on the researcher to identify patterns which forms themes for analysis (Bowen, 2009). Once all interviews were transcribed word for word, which allowed the researcher gain initial familiarity with the content, the researcher read the interview transcripts over and over again in order to gain further familiarity with the data and this allowed for patterns to develop. Following this, coding process began. This was carried out by the researcher by taking notes and searching for a common thread that binds the interviews together. Common phrases and words were circled and grouped together. Once this element was completed, codes were arranged into themes. Each theme was connected to the research question. Data saturation is required in qualitative research in order to support and justify the findings (Lowe, Norris, Farris, & Babbage, 2018). Thematic saturation occurs when no other observations or themes are found (Green and Thorogood, 2004 as cited by Lowe, et al, 2018).

Results

During the analysis of the interview transcripts, four key themes and two sub themes were identified: (i) Intuition, Analytical Reasoning and Legal Factors (ii) Ethical Factors (core beliefs and conscientiousness) (iii) Situational Factors (iv) Organisational & External Factors. See Appendix E for an illustrative map of these themes.

Theme 1: Intuition, Analytical Reasoning and Legal Factors

Legal factors are central in decision making in policing situations. As with all decisions made within a police organisation, there are legal factors that must be incorporated into a final decision and decisions based on legislation allows for confidence to follow through in the decision made “I base it on the facts that are in front of me...policies and procedures (...) and the legislation that covers it.” (P6). All participants expressed that legislation is first and foremost the most crucial factor when it comes to decision making “you are completely influenced by legislation, by protocol”. (P1)

However, a common feature throughout the interviews was the natural instinct to do the right thing. The instinctive nature of policing was the overarching theme throughout this study. A high number of those interviewed suggested that the element of that ‘gut feeling’ they sense when it comes to policing decision making, appears to be one of the determining factors that influence them. This gut feeling or intuition is based on their years of experience and knowledge gained in An Garda Síochána.

It's probably a combination of everything. I would have served in a lot of specialist sections over the years. So again, that has probably shaped the way I deal with

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policing situations. But certainly my own personality and my own intuition would, you know would guide me a lot of the time. (P8)

This level of experience provides confidence in their decision making, when asked about any processes they might utilise, participant one stated:

I would say you would base it upon experience. Not all two situations are the same. But the more experienced you are, the quicker you are to make a decision because you've been in a similar type scenario before and you can actually envisage the result of your decision. When you're making your decision, you can see court outcomes flash in front of ya. You can see charge sheets, you can see DPP's (Director of Public prosecutions) directions.

The intuitive factor is a strong indicator that it is highly influential in decisions made. "You're trusting your instincts (...) you utilise that which is not in the books (...) and try and make the best decisions you can at that moment in time". (P6). Some Garda members feel that this intuition is built in "I'm quite intuitive and be quite empathic by nature. So, I kind of...I can pick up on a vibe, I think I use that.... it's almost like an internal compass to guide me". (P8)

It appears that intuition alone is not the causative factor in a decision. It seems that intuitive decisions and analytical decisions overlap, there are intertwined as once a decision is intuitively based, the decision is then analysed.

I use my gut to guide me but I certainly would now look at environmental factors and then certainly consult with other stakeholders and you know, draw on the expertise of

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people within my team. And then people that I would consider to be very experienced and very knowledgeable in particular areas. (P8)

Both intuition and analytical reasoning are utilised initially during a policing matter. And most participants voiced that this method is from the outset of most situations “I go with my gut, initially, and then I will seek the views and observations of people that I trust within my team...I will go and seek their views also”. (P7)

Through their experience of policing, their knowledge has expanded and the realisation that reflection of a decision is needed in order to learn from that decision “You rely on your years of experience to make a decision (...) of course you've got to analyse it afterwards”. (P3) “You’re relying on your own experience of similar situations. How they turned out, did you reflect on them, would you have done anything different previously”. (P6)

Theme 2: Ethical Factors

Ethical guidelines have a fundamental function within a police organisation. In saying that, ethical decisions and behaviours are down to the individual, as values and beliefs are subjective, and personal. Ethics is not only an inner belief, but it is also about how these beliefs and values translate into ethical behaviour (Fitch, 2014). Two subthemes were found within the main theme of Ethical factors. These are Core Beliefs and Conscientiousness.

Sub theme 1: Core Beliefs

For rules and regulations to work effectively they must be supported by values and beliefs that are similar to those that must enforce them. The role a Garda member embraces and their approach towards decision making appear to correlate with their core beliefs and

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values regarding their occupation. Values or core beliefs are pre-existing, therefore, they shape a person and may influence the decision making processes. There is a sense that Garda members have a strong motivation to help people. The motivation to become members of An Garda Síochána and making decisions as a Garda comes from the belief in ‘doing the right thing,’ and to ‘help people.’ This is a strong common feature throughout this study. “I think it's just part of my own personality (...) It's innate”. (P8) When asked why they became a member of An Garda Síochána, participant 6 stated “joining the organisation is basically to serve the people as best I possible could and I saw that the police this was a good place to do that”. Motivation and core beliefs incorporate the individual views that led to participants becoming Gardaí and in turn lead them to make ethical decisions

Doing the right thing for the right reason, before our decision making model and our code of ethics and everything like that, there's still a fundamental need (...) the core thing is do the right thing for the right reasons. (P7)

Beliefs are embedded in each and every one of us, they are core of who we are and decisions made can stem from our core beliefs “I believe it's the way I was taught right from wrong from when I was two, three and four years of age all the way up along”. (P5)

The strong ethical belief systems in the participants interviewed is plain to see. The participant's moral values are echoed throughout the study. These values continue to resonate through from the start of their career to today and they are heavily influenced by peers and colleagues. Their relationships within the organisation are often described as ‘family,’ and there is a sense mentoring and support that encourages ethical choices.

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I had the best [supervisor] I'd say in the city centre when I was a probationer. And the people that were under his tutelage have all done incredibly well, (...) it was his care and attention to detail. We just felt that we were just minded, but also pushed on almost like you'd be scolded if you did something wrong. And if he gave out, it was like your Dad given out to you. That's the way I took it. And just I've taken that going forward. (P8)

Echoing this statement, some participants stated that they learnt their behaviours and ethics from their tutor Sergeants when first joining the organisation. "A lot of your decision making and how you operate is from your initial peers in the organisation and who you work with, and they certainly influence and mould you for your future decision making in An Garda Síochána". (P7) Participant 2 had the similar view "You can meet people that are incredibly enthusiastic, motivated, and that have huge integrity. Or you can meet people that are a bit blasé about the career (...) that can affect you. It can be quite damaging at the start your career".

When asked if their method of making decision was self-learned or taught, most participants stated that it was self-learned through experience and the influence of skilful, experienced tutors early on in their career was an influencing factor also "He taught me the fundamentals of how to police, I learnt everything from him". (P4)

Sub Theme 2: Conscientiousness

"You have to always focus on the right thing to do and you're also trying to protect the rest of society". (P3)

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The consequences of an action are always considered, even down to the outcome for the individual that they are dealing with. The consequences and the process of deciding on what action to proceed with is taken extremely seriously. They are always thinking ahead, they attempt to foresee the future outcome of a decision prior to making it. All options are weighed up, consequences are considered, and the desired result is continually taken into consideration. “You have to think about the overall effect of the action. And what are the consequences of that action”. (P1) The consequences of all people involved are taken into consideration “What are the consequences of me taking this action going to be for this person in the long term. And if it was something say, out of character (...) you're thinking of them, not of yourself”. (P5) A characteristic that supported this theme was the participants overall need to consider the outcome for the individual “You look at the situation, you're looking at the consequences on the individuals, you're looking at the consequences on society.... you're always thinking of the knock-on consequences”. (P3)

Theme 3: Situational Factors

Although intuition, analytical reasoning and ethical factors are very influential in decision making, a Garda member must consider the situation and environmental factors involved also. When asked about situational factors and how they affect a decision, participants spoke about how the legal issue would be considered primarily then the behaviour of an individual was a focal element of a decision “If a suspect had a demeanour, of which wasn't to your liking, you may treat him or her different (...) unfortunately, that's human nature”. (P1) They are continuously and actively assessing both the person they are dealing with and the surroundings that they find themselves in. A person's attitude and behaviour appear to play a role in a Garda's reaction to a situation “You have to take account of the demeanour of the person that you're dealing with, (...) their knowledge or lack of

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knowledge. So, they're all factors". (P7). Another participant commented that "Being disrespectful...you're more likely to be emotionally affected by that. So that triggers double trigger emotions within you so you're most likely to probably react negatively". (P9)

With that being said, being able to adapt to a certain situation regarding behaviour appears to be fundamental.

Behaviour would affect your decision making and a lot of the time, you'd know exactly what to do in a certain situation (...) you should deal with everyone the same, you use different language as well in relation to who you're dealing with. People will understand differently. Sometimes you need to spell it out. (P5)

It could be argued that personal biases might be a factor here also, but participants are aware that this could affect a decision therefore the need to be objective is also factored in.

If you allow somebody to press your buttons, and then you start making a decision that's inappropriate. If you haven't got that resolve or resilience (...) because you have to have that resilience to just not react to the behaviour of others and just, try and make the appropriate decision you can. (P3)

Most participants considered the characteristics of the individual and the effect it will have on that person. The individual's state of mind is also incorporated into the desired decision, "You don't know what that person is going through at the moment.... everyone has something on their mind, you don't know what the person is dealing with in their own heads and you're taking that into account". (P4)

Theme 4: Organisational & External Factors

There are a high number of influences and pressures that effect decision making in a policing organisation. The Policing Authority was established as an “independent statutory body to oversee the performance of An Garda Síochána in relation to policing service” in Ireland in 2017 (Policing Authority, 2022). Therefore, all participants in this study were asked their views on how changes within the organisation have affected their decision making. Accountability for police decisions by oversight bodies are focusing on ethical underlying principles for decisions and members are more aware now than ever before. The issue of accountability and consequences of their actions was expressed throughout the interviews. Concerns surrounding the additional accountability were discussed throughout, concerns regarding the ramifications it may have on them and how their decision was influenced by worry.

Because you have the bigger picture in mind in relation to making the appropriate decisions so it's not the right thing, it is the hard thing, that's why your decision making is based on rationale because you have to take in all the elements of proportionality and legality, necessity, human rights, and all these things are playing on your mind as you make the decision. (P3)

Being able to stand over their decisions and provide rationales were reiterated throughout. This level of emphasis on accountability could appear to be seen as self-preservation which is a basic instinct within not only Garda members but all people. Some participants felt that the introduction of oversight bodies has led to a different approach to their decision making as some members are feeling a level of fear. This trepidation or apprehension has crept in on most participants due to the level of scrutiny they find

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themselves under. The apprehension of making decisions due to fear of enquiry may have an impact on the use intuition as members may start to second guess themselves. Holding back on decisions while having this internal struggle may impede on their duty as they do not feel trusted to carry out their job any longer.

The oversight bodies make you question some of your actions, (...) because now you're double guessing. Oversight is good but not at the level that it's at the moment because we're actually taking away the competence of the guards to make the decisions because they're fearful of getting the decision wrong. That in itself is not a good culture to have, you're disempowering members of An Garda Síochána, who, like me, for years have made the best decision we possibly could at that moment of time, however, with oversight now, and rightly so..., we have to have oversight, (it) leads guards to not make the right decision because they're more fearful of the question rather than actually doing. (P3)

One participant feels that the additional accountability relating to oversight is part of life as a Garda, even if slightly conflicted

You know, in this day and age when embracing change and all that, it's no big deal. You can't stop it.... you can't stop progress and what changes nowadays are not always for the better.... (you) just have to roll with it and try and make it work as best you can within the constraints. (P5)

The introduction of many oversight bodies within the organisation has led some Garda members to feel scrutinised and continually defending their actions. Excessive

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monitoring of decisions seems to have affected the Garda member's way of thinking and acting. Responses from interviews appear to demonstrate a level fear and apprehension felt amongst some Garda members. "There's a fear mentality in decision making now and that is ultimately to our detriment". (P2) Their decisions must be justified, always but the idea that they would not have been appears to have caused a level of offence and indignation.

If we are causing stress and causing more oversight, we're actually creating a fear environment and then a guilt environment and a shame environment, which actually starts to impact on their ability to make the appropriate decisions at that moment in time. (P3)

In contrast to statements being made by some participants, oversight has also been welcomed by others and members have become attuned to the changes within the organisation. They are also highly aware of their presence and see the reason for them being aligned with their own personal beliefs therefore, they are not seen as a major factor in their decision making.

Obviously, we do need oversight and independent oversight. I accept that but I do think the majority of people in the organisation are honest, they've huge integrity and people gravitate towards this career for a reason. It's because they're public minded and they want to serve the public. (P2).

In addition to the oversight bodies, the Garda Decision Making Model was introduced in 2019 to all personnel within the organisation. Therefore, the use of the Model was mentioned by many of the participants in this study. This model is an analytical process that

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provides members with a guide on how to formulate a justified decision. However, Allen (2011) conducted a study into the dual process of decision making within an English police force and found that police officers used intuition even though they were provided with all the information and training that expected the obedience of using analytical decision making. In saying that, some participants expressed the belief that they would have used a similar process of decision making with or without this model “I've seen the introduction of the Garda decision making model and I suppose this formula is a given structure to the guys for making decisions. But it's nothing new to the decision making process”. (P9) When asked about the impact of the model Participant 9 also stated “It forces you to provide a rationale for your decision before you make decisions, it forces you to think about your decisions and provide reasons to what you're doing. And it forces you to record the process”. Another commented “I think culturally wise, whilst ya can see that the decision making model is good (...) but that's a process, people are humans, (...) the emotions play big time on their decisions”. (P3)

On the contrary, there are some participants that welcome oversight and decision making models. Despite this added level of accountability, most participants were appreciative of the oversight bodies as it ensures that the rationale for decisions made is twofold. Based on this, some Garda members in this study seem to encourage the additional level of accountability

For me, the oversight bodies haven't impacted on me at all because that's the way I would have done my business always (...) I like things done by the book, and according to policy and taking all the legal frameworks into mind as well. (P8)

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This model was also deemed the chosen method for some during the course of their duty as one participant interviewed suggested that they use nothing else when it comes to decisions. “The decision making model for me is the ‘go to’ policy in terms of, do the right thing for the right reasons as laid out in the code of ethics”. It provides security and confirmation that they are abiding by policy and doing what is right for the public and the organisation “It is a protection for me, it's a protection for the people working under me and indeed the protection for the public and how we serve them”. (P2). This statement echoes the statement of the above participants also.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore the determining factors that influence decision making in An Garda Síochána and to understand the reasons behind their decisions in a policing situation. Following a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, the following four themes were found: (i) Intuition, Analytical Reasoning and Legal Factors (ii) Ethical Factors (iii) Situational Factors (iv) Organisational & External Factors. In this study, it is suggested that there are a number of influential factors to consider when understanding decisions made within a police organisation. Many of these factors overlap and there cannot be one fundamental answer to this research question. Organisational, situational, and ethical factors in addition to decision making styles determine the influences on decision making. Many participants discussed the intuitive nature of their job which was gained through many years of experience and the familiarity gained with attending to similar incidences. Along with the intuitive decision making, analytical reasoning was incorporated into decisions made. A few participants explained the need to analyse their decisions through reflective thought and the process of weighing up all the options available to them. For all participants, the influence of ethical beliefs and the inner feeling of doing the right thing for the right reason resonated throughout the entire study. Many participants' decisions are impacted by the organisational and external factors. This appeared mostly to be a negative effect as some participants experienced a level of trepidation when it comes to decisions due to the level of scrutiny they may encounter.

This study did produce results which corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous work in this field. Themes of intuitive and analytical decisions appear to go hand in hand when it comes to decisions made in a policing environment. They seem to be intertwined as once a decision is intuitively based, the decision is then analysed, which

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reverberates with the findings of Brown and Daus, 2015. Intuitive decisions are often based on prolonged exposure to certain situations therefore along with the build-up of policing experience. Garda members tend to carry out their policing duties intuitively; this finding is in line with previous research conducted by Pinizzotto, Davis, & Miller III, 2004; Dresser, 2019. Intuitive decision making demonstrates the use of innate and unconscious decision making. Again, in line with the literature as Hine et al (2018) demonstrates. However, results from that study also found that the combination of intuitive and analytical decision making is utilised overall even though there are separate decision making styles, they can be used together and appear to work together very well (Allen, 2011: Hine et al, 2018). Therefore, the Garda Decision Making Model, even though it could be deemed as an analytical approach, the use of intuition or the gut feeling is still a decision making style applied.

Few studies were found in the literature on the issue of ethics and ethical decision making within a police organisation, nonetheless, it is clear that the results of this study indicated that various decisions are based on ethical reasoning. And linked in with the ethical factors appears to stem from core beliefs and conscientiousness. Nevertheless, the finding that core beliefs are an influencing factor is in harmony with limited previous research. Mills, A. (2003) demonstrates that the background, upbringing, and personal individualism influence their decisions in policing situations. Central to the entire discipline of An Garda Síochána is the concept of ethics and this outcome echoes that ethos. Police officers tend to have a high moral code and ethical standard of behaviour and appear to take the right course of action when faced with moral and ethical decisions (Northhouse, 2016 as cited by Jamasali-Abdula, Genuba, & Lovina Jr, 2022).

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The theme of being influenced by situational factors such as the individual's behaviour aligns with a study conducted by Stroshine, Alpert & Dunham, (2008) who demonstrated that police officers do consider disrespectful behaviour in their decisions. The findings from this study also align with previous research demonstrating the influence of behaviour a person has on a police decision. Being disrespectful and rude will more than likely lead to action being taken (Engle, Sobel & Worden, 2000; Worden & Shepard 1996). Many participants expressed that an individual's attitude can affect their decisions, however they are very aware of the antecedents to an individual's behaviour and that will be considered also. In saying that, all participants communicated that this factor is not the one and only reason to react nonetheless, it does have an effect. In contrast, Fedar (1999) and Worden and Pollitz (1984) as cited by Phillips, & Varano, (2008), did not find a relationship between the behaviour of an individual and the decision to take action. The issue of workload being a factor was never suggested during the interviews, which correlates with findings by Sobol, (2010).

The final theme concerning organisational and external factors was in line with literature (Mastrofski, 1981; Alpert, MacDonald, & Dunham, 2005; Terrill and Paoline 2007). However, there are few studies that dictate that police officers are influenced by organisational factors. This study discovered that the majority of participants are highly influenced by the organisation but also the external oversight bodies. This additional oversight has led the participants interviewed to further think about their actions to the point where self-doubt has crept in. It could be assumed that the perceived scrutiny may be hindering future actions. The participants in this study had many years of service and experience and yet seem apprehensive and a level of trust appears to be lost.

Strengths and Limitations

One main strength of this study was the accessibility to current Garda members with many years' service and levels of experience both operationally and non-operational. The qualitative method allowed the researcher to gain a more in-depth understanding of decisions, it allowed the researcher to ask the reasons why an action was taken which allowed for open discussions and further probing. The qualitative method has been conducted in previous studies to comprehend and seek an in-depth insight into policing culture (Maple, & Keibell, 2021; Loftus, 2009; Chan, 2001). In previous studies, vignettes were used to determine factors that influence police decisions; however, this method of research does not allow for true responses to actual real-life events.

There were several limitations of this study. With a small sample size, caution must be applied as they may not represent the views and opinions of all members of An Garda Síochána. The researcher was unable to access a broader population due to operational demands and availability. This study may have benefited by conducting a mixed-method approach by using the general decision-making styles questionnaire. Scott and Bruce (1995) looked at the influence on decision making within a large population that included military personnel where they focused on the five decision making styles- intuition, rational, dependent, avoidant, and spontaneous. This quantitative method along with the qualitative approach may have further enhanced the findings.

Implications and Future Research

The current findings highlight the importance of qualitative research within the field of decision making within a police organisation. This method allowed participants to elaborate on their responses which in turn, allowed the researcher to provide a thorough

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result. More research into police decision making and perhaps their behaviour needs be conducted in order to ensure that there is consistency throughout regardless of situation, beliefs, or organisational demands. In order to understand decisions made in a policing context, further research could focus on a wider audience within the organisation.

Education and Training is another factor to consider. Engel et al., 2019 states that extraordinarily little research has been conducted to examine the effect of education on policing decisions. The research that has been conducted is conflicted with mixed results. Therefore, this may be an area that could be investigated in further research. To enhance this research, a mixed method approach should be considered to provide a more specific insight into how decisions are made and why. Also, the consideration of behaviour and personalities may be beneficial to highlight the differences in decision making.

Conclusion

This study has contributed to the literature focusing on decision making within police organisations which provides an understanding into the rationale and justification behind decision made using the thematic qualitative research method. Four themes and two subthemes were identified (i) Intuition and Analytical reasoning, (ii) Ethical Factors, (core beliefs and conscientiousness (iii) Situational factors (iv) Organisational & External Factors. Legal issues aside, Garda members appear to use their initial gut feeling when dealing with police matters. They will then analyse their decisions while considering their own core values and ethical judgements. They consider the behaviour of an individual while attempting to see the consequences that may lie ahead for that individual and finally, the organisational inference relating to organisational and external oversight which influences how they carry out their duty.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Schedule

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Questions/Interview schedule

When answering these questions, please keep in mind that this is a study into decision making when dealing with policing matters.

1. How many years' service do you have? And tell me why you became a member of An Garda Síochána
2. During your career in An Garda Síochána, how does decision making differ now from when you started out?
3. Can you tell me what situational factors might affect your decision making
4. Following on from the last question, does a suspect behaviour affect your decision making and how?
5. Think of a time when you had to make an unpopular decision during the course of your duty, tell me what led you to make that decision – (depending on answer relates to DMM, ask how they use it)
6. In a policing situation when a decision has to be made quickly, how do you make a well-judged decision?
7. In the course of your duty, when faced with a choice between taking action or not taking action, what do you consider when making your choice?
8. As a Garda member, do you have a process that you normally use when you are making decisions? (wait for answer) Was this process self-learned or taught?

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9. Do you usually make better decisions alone or in a group? Why do you think this is?
When do you decide it is the time to ask for help?
10. Tell me about a time when you had to make a decision without all the information you felt you needed. What was your final decision based upon?
11. As we all know, decisions are sometimes made by Senior Management, do you feel that you are able to influence a directed decision, (wait for answer) if so, how?
12. The culture in An Garda Síochána, like other organisations changes, do you feel that AGS culture has impacted on your decisions throughout your duty?

Appendix B
Participant Information Sheet: Guidelines

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This form outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

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My name is Valerie Byrne and I am a final year student in the BA in Psychology Programme at National College of Ireland. As part of our degree we must carry out an independent research project. You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before deciding whether to take part, please take the time to read this document, which explains why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. If you have any questions about the information provided, please do not hesitate to contact me using the details at the end of this sheet.

The purpose of this project is to:

The aim of this study is to identify how police officers make decisions when deciding upon making an arrest or using discretion. Making legal judgements are part of a police officer's decision making process. There are many elements that go into making the decision to arrest, such as severity of the crime, workload on a particular police officers, organisational factors, local management styles, experience, if the area they are assigned to is a high crime rate as opposed to a low crime rate. Most studies examined in the above literature review have focused on individual decision making, there appears to be no research regarding the social aspects to decisions made with police forces. This is a gap which has been identified by the researcher.

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What will taking part in the study involve?

If you decide to take part in this research, you will be asked to complete three (3) demographic questions. These questions will be Age, Gender & Years of Service in An Garda Síochána. You will then be asked to take part in an interview with the researcher. You will be asked a number of questions to ascertain the reasoning behind decisions made in the course of your duty which will be the means by which data will be collected. The interview will be recorded, anything said in the interviews will be anonymous and they will not be identifiable. All recordings or notes will not be made available to management. If you prefer to hold the interview over a video call, this can be arranged also. You will be asked to sign a consent form prior to commencing participation to show that you agree to take part in the study and to allow the interview to be recorded. Please be assured that all data collected will be confidential and not made available to any other members of An Garda Síochána, any members of the management team. The data will not be copied, broadcast or disseminated to any outer parties. Data and participants will be respected and guaranteed that no information will be accessible to others. The right to privacy will be upheld. Your answers will be written on the questionnaire paper. There are twelve (12) questions in all and it should take a maximum of 45-60 minutes to complete.

Who will take part?

Garda Trainees will be excluded from this study as they are still in training and have little or no experience of policing. The study will be open to all members of An Garda Síochána regardless of rank, location, or duty, such as from Probationer Garda to Chief Superintendent whether they are operational members of all ranks, detectives of all ranks, or members assigned to office duty of all rank. Both male and female members will be included

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Do I have to take part?

Participation in this research is voluntary you do not have to take part, and a decision not to take part will have no consequences for you. If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw from participation at any time. You can withdraw your data from the study after the interview has been completed, up to the point that the results have been written up for submission. This is envisaged to be the final week of the month of January 2022.

What are the possible risks and benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits to you for taking part in this research. However, the information gathered will contribute to research that helps us to understand the influences on Decision Making during the course of Garda members duty as a member of An Garda Síochána.

Will taking part be confidential and what will happen to my data?

All data will be treated in the strictest confidence. The interviews will take place one-to-one in a location that is convenient to you and provides sufficient privacy. All interviews will be recorded using a Dictaphone or mobile phone, and these interviews will then be transcribed for analysis. Audio recordings will be destroyed once the data has been transcribed. Any information in the interview transcript that could identify the participant or any other individual (e.g. names, locations) will be anonymised. Each participant will be assigned a unique ID code, and their data will be stored under this ID code, separate from their name or other identifying information. Only the researcher and academic supervisor will have access to the data collected. As this is a qualitative study, direct quotes from interviews may be included in the presentation of the results. But these quotes will be anonymised and will not contain any information that could identify the participant or any other individual.

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Responses will be stored securely in a password protected/encrypted file on the researcher's computer. Only the researcher and their supervisor will have access to the data. Data will be retained for 5 years in accordance with the NCI data retention policy.

Paper records such as signed consent forms, will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of this study will be presented in my final dissertation, which will be submitted to National College of Ireland. You are encouraged to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the study and the methods that I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me; please contact me at any time at the address/phone numbers listed above.

Who should you contact for further information?

Name: Valerie Byrne.

Contact Details: 0867363650 or 050435462. Email: byrnval11@gmail.com

Supervisor

Name: Dr Amanda Kracen

Contact Details: Amanda.kracen@ncirl.ie

Appendix C Informed Consent

Influences on Decision Making in An Garda Síochána

- I agree on a voluntary basis to participate in the above mentioned study.
- I agree to participate with the knowledge that I can withdraw at any stage during the interview without any penalties incurred.
- The study has been clearly outlined and explained to me in writing and verbally, and I have been given the opportunity to raise any concerns or queries in relation to the study.
- I understand that participation involves a semi-structured interview that will last 45-60 minutes in duration.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded and that once this information is transcribed that the audio files will be erased.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially and that any information regarding names, places and other people will be changed and will not be identifiable.
- I understand that extracts from my interview may be quoted in a final year project and that it may or may not be published. These quotes will not contain any information (e.g., names, locations) that could identify me.
- I understand that the researcher is obliged to report to the relevant authorities any information that I relay that be potential risk to me or another party. They may do this with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and interview transcripts will be retained in secure storage for 5 years, in accordance with the NCI policy.
- I understand that under Freedom of Information of legislation, I can access my information at any time by contacting the researcher.
- I understand that both the researcher and academic supervisor are available for me to speak with if required.

Tick here

Signature of researcher

 Date:

 Date

Appendix D – Debriefing sheet

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I greatly appreciate you taking time to enable me to conduct this project. You have just taken part in an interview, in which the aim was to explore how police officers make decisions when deciding upon taking action. During data analysis, the viewpoints obtained from each interview will be explored and compared, in an attempt to find some broader themes on the topic.

Research has been conducted in other countries such as the United States and Britain, not much research has been conducted in Ireland. I am hoping that the current study will highlight some insight into the decisions made by police officer in the course of duty.

If you would like to know what results are produced from the research, you can email me at:

x18144641@student.ncirl.ie.

Please ensure that you can also email me to organise access to your individual data under Freedom of Information legislation, should you wish to view it. Your data can be viewed at any time within five years after your interview has taken place (c. November 2026), as outlined by the National College of Ireland's policy. You also have the right to withdraw the data derived from your interview before 1st February 2022, with no repercussions.

You are encouraged to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the study and the methods that I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me; please contact me at any time at the email address/phone numbers below.

Again, thank you.

Valerie Byrne

x18144641@student.ncirl.ie
0867363650

Appendix E

Thematic Map

