Police Officer’s Behaviours Associated with Successful Conflict Resolution

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1. INTRODUCTION

...there are officers who are 'experts at turning parking tickets into riots' as well as officers who can arrest extremely dangerous suspects and 'leave em laughing'. To say we know both types of officers exist, however, is not to say that we know anything systematic about their personal characteristics or methods.1

1.1 Background

Police officers are regularly called upon to deal with conflict situations. These conflicts range from acting as a mediator in a domestic dispute, to restoring order in a pub brawl. Individual officers have considerable discretion in the behaviours they use to resolve these disputes. Officers will thus vary in their approach or policing style, depending upon a number of factors such as personality and experience. It is likely that from the wide range of styles shown by police officers in general, some strategies will prove more successful than others. That is, some police officers will more effectively deal with certain types of conflicts than other officers. The aim of the present research project was to identify the specific police officer behaviours which were successful in reducing the amount of citizen resistance while on patrol.


Previous research has shown that the police-citizen encounter is an interaction or process, the course of which is influenced by the behaviour of both parties. Therefore, police not only react to the behaviour of citizens, but in turn the behavioural tactics they employ affect the way the citizen responds to them. Several studies have isolated effective police behaviours, and demonstrated that certain officer behaviours increase the likelihood of non-cooperation or violence.2

In a conflict situation, effective behaviours are those that calm the situation down and provide a solution to the conflict which is satisfactory to both parties. Conversely, behaviours which are ineffective do not resolve the conflict, and may even lead to an escalation of hostilities. It is reasonable to expect that, taking all police officers, there will be a small proportion who are expert at using behavioural tactics which are highly successful in resolving conflict. At the other end of the scale, there will be a small proportion who use ineffective tactics, and may even make matters worse. There will also be a large group in the middle who are about average.

Researchers and police alike have this general notion that police differ in their effectiveness when dealing with the public. A recent Australian study 3 examined the amount of resistance police encountered while undertaking various taskings. It was found that a small sub-group of officers (4% of the total sample) accounted for 21% of assaults with a weapon, and 15% of assaults experienced by the entire group. This small group of officers was described by the authors as "resistance prone". They did not differ from the other officers in the sample on any of the descriptive variables such as experience or rank. Therefore, the difference must have been due to an individual variable, such as personality or actual behaviour in the field.
The current research project attempted to discover to what extent an officers' behaviour when dealing with the public was related to the amount of resistance they encountered. It attempted to do so by directly observing police on patrol, and collecting data on the behaviours.


Most research on police officers in general, and patrol officers in particular, concentrates on cataloguing and explaining officer behavior...In other words, these studies uniformly stop just short of the question of importance: what consequence does the behavior of the police officer have on the resolution of the incident?

1.2 Measuring conflict resolution behaviours in police officers

Before observations of police and citizen interactions could take place, a system for the coding and recording of behaviours had to be developed. A review of the psychological literature on conflict resolution was undertaken, in order to determine the results of previous studies. This process provided very little insight into specific behaviours which were found to influence the outcome of conflict. What was revealed, however, were general concepts such as "good communication skills" and "ability to defuse the situation" which, when applied to a conflict situation, yielded beneficial results. The current project aimed at refining these broad categories into actual behaviours which would be effective in reducing conflict. A secondary aim was to design an instrument for measuring this taxonomy of behaviours.

Findings from past conflict resolution research contributed to selecting behaviours for inclusion in the taxonomy. As an example, the psychological literature identified concern for the other party as an important step in successfully resolving disputes. The more empathy a person had for the position of the other party, the more likely the conflict would reach a solution which was satisfactory to all concerned. This lead to the behavioural category called "support", which was designed to measure the extent to which officers make statements expressing concern for the citizen. Examples of statements coded into this category were "look mate, you did the right thing" or "you have every right to be upset". There was a
total of ten behavioural categories, into which all verbal and physical behaviour of the officers and members of the public could be coded.


The instrument was pilot tested in several different situations, including a breath testing station, traffic response car, and foot patrol. The primary researcher spent considerable time training in the use of the instrument, to ensure consistent coding of behaviours and accurate entering into the datalogger.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Sample

Subjects were sixteen South Australian patrol officers from two police stations in the Adelaide metropolitan area. Subjects were identified through the use of two appraisal instruments, described below, and were individually approached and asked to participate in the study. No officer declined to participate.

The sample consisted of four female officers and twelve male officers. All were of the rank of constable. All female officers were single, while six of the male officers were married.

Officers were selected into two groups - those identified by their peers and supervisors as particularly skilled in their dealings with the public, and officers not so identified. Two pencil and paper tests were used to assess group membership. A questionnaire was given to all patrol officers located at the two stations. Officers were asked to list six officers from all those at the station that they perceived to be most skilled at handling conflict. Four officers at each station were identified based on the total number of nominations they received, and placed into the 'skilled' group. An equal number were also selected into an 'average' group on the basis of receiving a nomination of 0 or 1 by their peers. As a secondary measure, supervisors were asked to rate each member of their patrol team on an 8-item questionnaire assessing the officer's skills in dealing with the public. Supervisors rated the skilled officers more highly than the average officers, indicating that supervisor ratings were consistent with peer perceptions.

The selection of subjects was carried out by a secondary researcher. Neither the officers nor the primary researcher was aware of the officers’ group membership.

The female officers, the focus of this paper, were all selected into the skilled group. The analysis will therefore predominantly focus on comparing the four 'skilled males' with the four 'skilled females', as well as looking at general trends in officer behaviour.

2.2 Technique for observing

Observations were conducted during afternoon and night shift, to maximise the chance of observing conflict. The primary researcher accompanied the selected officer, and his/her partner, on general duties patrol. When the officer commenced an interaction with a member of the public, usually through responding to a call over the radio, data collection began. Each verbal statement was instantly coded into one of the behavioural categories and entered into the datalogger, by
depressing the corresponding key on the keypad. They key was depressed for the
duration of the behaviour, then the next behaviour was recorded in a similar
fashion. Physical contact between the police and public was also recorded, and the
data logger had a facility for overlapping the recording of physical behaviour, as it
was often the case that police spoke with a citizen in conjunction with physically
handling him or her. Two separate keys were used to indicate whether the
behaviour belonged to the second officer or the citizen, otherwise the behaviour
was presumed to belong to the target officer for ease of coding.

The entire conversation was thus transformed, as it happened, into a series of
keystrokes which recorded the type of behaviour, who committed the behaviour,
the time the behaviour commenced, and the time the behaviour ceased. This data
was stored into the memory of the data logger and later down-loaded to a PC for
analysis.

Each officer was observed for a minimum of 25 interactions each 5. Coding of
interactions took place over a 5 month period.

2.3 Data logger

The data logger is a hand-held computerised device developed by Sturt Technology,
South Australia. It is about the size of a 'Nintendo Gameboy', and has a 4 line LCD
display. The data logger has an in-built clock, so is capable of recording every
behaviour and the time that behaviour occurred, in sequence. It has 256K of RAM
to temporarily store data, before the data is downloaded to a PC. An internal NiCad
battery provides about 24 hours operation, before needing to be recharged.

Except for two officers who were observed for 20 interactions 2.4 Combating bias

Studies which employ the participant-observation methodology involve a risk of
the researcher influencing the behaviour being observed. Every effort was made to
ensure the integrity of the data in this project.

The primary researcher employed several tactics while on patrol to minimise her
presence. Body language directed attention away from herself, by remaining at a
distance from the interaction, not making eye contact with participants, and never
verbally becoming involved in an encounter. The observer was careful not to give
feedback to the officers about the progress of an interaction, or to make judgements
about their handling of any situation. The data logger which was used to record the
data was unobtrusive enough to be held in one hand and largely go unnoticed.

It was also advantageous that the officers were aware at the outset of the extensive
time period involved in collecting the data. It was unlikely that officers would
adopt an approach of 'being on their best behaviour' for the duration of the study,
seeing as this would involve maintaining their change in behaviour for five months.

Officers were assured strict anonymity and were assigned an identifying number
for recording purposes. Subjects were also assured of the confidentiality of the
data. Officers were briefed regarding the categories used to record the behaviour,
and understood that these were broad enough to exclude much of the detail of the
conversation. The researcher also explained that the individual officer's data
contributed to group aggregates only, and that personal performance was not being
assessed.

2.5 Reliability
It was necessary to ascertain the reliability of the data to ensure that the primary observer was objective in the recording of behaviours, and that the procedure could be replicated and was not subject to bias. A second observer supplied by the National Police Research Unit was trained in the use of the datalogger and the behavioural categories, and accompanied the primary researcher on patrol for approximately 10% of the total number of interactions. The two observers used the procedure outlined above to both record the interaction. A computer program was written to analyse the two sets of data for agreement. A quantitative assessment of reliability revealed it to be of an acceptable standard.

3. RESULTS

Results will be discussed in two sections. Firstly, the overall frequency count of behaviours will be examined, to provide a general picture of how police spend their time on patrol. The differences between male and female officers in the number of times they use particular tactics will be observed. Secondly, the relationship between officer tactics and citizen behaviours will be explored, by examining the causal links between behaviours. This sequential analysis will indicate how male and female officers, through their behavioural tactics, influence the course of the interaction differently.

3.1 Frequency of behaviours

All interactions

Preliminary analyses were undertaken to determine how frequently particular behaviours occurred. The results indicated that the most frequent behaviour engaged in was information exchange, which involved a rapid exchange of questions and answers between the officers and citizens. This is not surprising, as the major goal of police of arrival at the scene is to establish what has happened. Officers do this by asking questions, which takes control of the situation by casting the citizen into the role of information provider.

Officers also spent a significant proportion of the interaction making statements which were aimed at directly controlling the situation. Both the target officer and his or her partner frequently directed the behaviour of the citizen. The citizen, on the other hand, contributed to the interaction by making defensive statements, which denied their role as offender or made justifications for their behaviour. Therefore, members of the public generally answered questions asked of them by police, but also frequently defended their actions.

To a lesser extent, officers were engaged in other behaviours which either rejected the citizen's account, or supported the citizen in a display of empathy. Coercive behaviours, such as threats and verbal abuse, occurred infrequently compared with the relative frequency of all other behaviours. Physical behaviour, while not appearing to occur very often, had an extensive duration. Unlike verbal behaviours, which rapidly stop-started, physical behaviour was more enduring and therefore did not feature in the frequency statistics. Approximately 11% of interactions contained physical behaviour on the part of one or both of the officers.

Males versus females

Comparing the frequency of behaviours which occurred when the lead officer was either male or female (both of which were identified as 'skilled'), significant
differences appeared. Female officers in this role were more supportive towards citizens, engaging in more information exchange and support behaviours. Males preferred the tactics of controlling statements, threats, and physical acts. Examining the frequency of the citizen's behaviour, male officers tended to elicit more defensive statements and verbal abuse from the citizens than did female officers.

3.2 Sequential analysis

Frequency data alone cannot reveal the causal links between behaviours. If an officer frequently uses threats and is also involved in a higher than average number of physical confrontations, one cannot conclude that one caused the other. The next stage in the analysis was to examine the sequences of behaviours, seeing as the behaviours were stored in the order that they happened. Remembering that the police-citizen encounter is an interactive process, the actions of both the citizen and officer will influence the course of the interaction.

A computer program based on a statistical procedure called lag sequential analysis was written, which could identify sequences of behaviour contained in the data. This program allowed the researcher to nominate a behaviour of interest (a 'criterion behaviour'), and then determine what other behaviours were likely to surround this criterion behaviour. For example, let's take a threat by an officer. The program then computed the behaviours which were more than likely by chance to occur immediately before the threat, or immediately after the threat. In this manner, behavioural sequences could be established which provided insight to research questions such as "what happened next?" or "what caused this to happen?".

All interactions

Before examining gender differences, it may be useful to consider briefly the patterns of behaviour which described the interactions generally. The results showed that some officer tactics lead to a positive sequence of behaviour which was likely to minimise resistance from the public.

For example, if an officer followed questioning the citizen by supportive statements, this was associated with a heightened probability of further information exchange behaviour, during which the citizen cooperated in providing information. Once an officer made a statement in support for the citizen, the sequence of information exchange and further supportive statements was likely.

INFORMATION ® SUPPORT ® INFORMATION EXCHANGE EXCHANGE

"What did he look like?" "I wish everyone was "What else?" "Tall, long hair, wearing as observant as you" "Jeans, black shoes" a brown jumper"

Other officer tactics resulted in increased probability of violence, by steering the interaction away from information exchange and towards more coercive behaviours. For example, when an officer made a controlling statement, the chance of information exchange behaviour was reduced, and behaviours such as further controlling statements and the citizen displaying both verbal and physical abuse, were more likely. A rejecting statement by the officer was also likely to reduce information exchange, and lead to a pattern of further rejecting statements and citizen defensive behaviour. Similarly, when the officer threatened a citizen this often lead to further threats being issued. This resulted in a heightened probability of verbal and physical abuse from the citizen.
Sequences of behaviour were also initiated by citizen actions. For example, when a citizen refused to cooperate with the officer, it was more likely that verbal abuse and physical conflict would result.

**REFUSE ® VERBAL ABUSE ® PHYSICAL** "There's no way I'm "Haven't you got any Officer grabs the citizen getting in the car"real work to do, you bastard?"and assists him into car

Males versus females

Analysis revealed that female officers used slightly different tactics when dealing with the public than their male counterparts of equivalent skill level.

Probably the most significant difference was the ability of the females to get the interaction "back on track" after a behaviour which threatened to divert the interaction down a more coercive path. That is, females were more likely than males to follow behaviours such as threats and rejecting statements with questions. This resulted in the citizen answering the question, allowing further questions to be asked in this mutual exchange of information.

Female Officers - Likely Scenario

**REJECT ® INFORMATION EXCHANGE**

"Don't give me that rubbish."Try telling me again,"He pushed my girl friend He just told me he saw youwhat made you hit him?"against the wall" do it"

Female officers were also more likely than males to persist with a series of supportive statements, interspersed during the exchange of information process. Males were also found to engage in this sequence of behaviour, but to a lesser extent than females. Once a female officer showed empathy for the citizen and made a statement supporting them, this 'set the tone' for future positive statements towards the citizen.

Females used more rejecting statements than their male counterparts, and also were more likely to repeat rejecting statements. This could indicate that this was a preferred tactic for dealing with citizens. Alternatively, it may have resulted from members of the public having a tendency to distort the truth to females officers in an attempt to influence them. Perhaps offenders would 'try one on' with female officers, resulting in them getting caught out.

Males were a lot more likely than females to repeat a threat, whereas females sometimes asked questions directly after the threat, as well as repeating the threat (refer to scenarios over the page). Male officers were more likely to elicit verbal abuse or defensive behaviour from the citizen after giving a threat. This could be due to male officer threats being in reality more threatening than females, or perceived as more threatening my members of the public. Either way, the result was an escalation of conflict.

Male Officers - Likely Scenario

**THREAT ® THREAT ® VERBAL ABUSE**

"Look mate, if you don't "You'll be in the cells "Get lost. I'd like to start telling the truth, before you know it" see you try" I'll lock you up"

Female officers - Likely Scenario
THREAT ® INFORMATION EXCHANGE

"If you refuse to answer, "So tell me again, "Must have been you will be arrested" what time did you go there? around 10 o'clock"

More verbal abuse was directed towards male officers, and its probability of occurrence was increased when male officers rejected a citizen's account of events, threatened the citizen, or physically handled the citizen. In contrast, abusive language was likely to be directed towards the female officers in response to her attempts to control the situation by making a statement which directed their behaviour. Once verbal abuse began, the likelihood of further abusive statements was greatly increased.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this research project demonstrated that police-citizen encounters were able to be studied as an interactive process, and that police officers influenced the response they received from citizens through the behavioural tactics they used.

Male officers were found to be more coercive than their female counterparts, preferring tactics such as threats, controlling statements, and physical behaviours. This approach lead to males experiencing higher levels of citizen resistance while on patrol.

Female officers, in contrast, were more adept at steering an interaction away from conflict by directing questions at citizens, placing them in the position of information provider and hence exerting control over the interaction. Females were also more supportive of citizens than male officers, often giving positive feedback to the person they were conversing with. This in turn lead to the citizen cooperating with further questions, again resulting in empathy from the officer. Additionally, female officers preferred a rejecting tactic, which repudiated the citizen's account of events. Either the females used this tactic in preference to other coercive tactics, such as threats, or members of the public more often lied to female officers, causing them to reject their statements.

These findings call into question the myth that female police officers are a risk to their male colleagues because they 'can't handle conflict'. It would appear from the data that females have well developed strategies for avoiding conflict, and elicit a more positive response from the people they speak with on patrol.