

Attitudes of police officers toward offenders: implications for future training

Attitudes of
police officers

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Received 2 February 2016

Revised 7 May 2016

20 June 2016

6 August 2016

Accepted 7 August 2016

Abstract

Purpose – Police officers' attitudes toward criminals are critical to the justice system's response to crime. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the attitudes toward offenders (ATOs) among police officers.

Design/methodology/approach – To assess police officers ATOs, the authors adapted the Attitudes Toward Prisoner scale to produce the ATO scale. The scale was completed by 431 male police officers in a Portuguese police institution.

Findings – The results revealed that police officers hold more negative ATOs than correctional officers and graduate students. Moreover, the results revealed significant differences in average ATO scores according to police officers' age, years of service, marital status and education; namely, police officers who were older, married, less educated, and with more years of police service had more positive ATOs. However, the results revealed that these demographic factors had a limited value in predicting attitudes, as none of them emerged as a predictor of ATOs.

Originality/value – Nonetheless, considering the relevance of attitudes in law enforcement procedures, the implications for training police officers are provided, specifically using critical incident technique strategies.

Keywords Attitudes, Offender, Police officers, Punitive

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Human conduct is influenced by cognitive activity. In this sense, an attitude is “a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols” (Hogg and Vaughan, 2005, p. 150). According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993), attitudes are hypothetical constructs that refer to “a psychological tendency that is expressed by a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour” (p. 1). Attitudes are realized as internal processes that command one's behavior. Thus, an attitude expresses itself as a tendency to always act in the same manner, according to the situations in which individuals are placed.

Attitudes result from diverse life experiences. People who perform important roles in our lives influence our attitudes. Parents are the first socialization agents, and the beliefs and values that they transmit are central throughout our development. Additionally, the observation and imitation of another's behavior is an important process that allows us to learn new ways of behaving. Attitudes also emerge from sociocultural contexts, such as religious community or family, or from a specific individual, reflecting his thinking and ideology.

Much research has been conducted to measure the relationship between attitudes and behavior. The prevailing view has been that private thoughts and feelings determine public behaviors (e.g., Myers, 2013). However, in 1969, Allan Wicker, a Social Psychologist, reviewed several studies covering a variety of people, attitudes, and behavior and concluded that attitudes barely predict behaviors. According to Myers (2013), attitudes and behaviors vary because both are subject to many influencing factors and, he suggests, attitudes only



predict actions and behaviors if other influences are minimized, if the attitude is specific to the action, and if the attitude is potent. In sum, a line of research indicates that there is a relationship between beliefs, feelings, and actions, but in many situations, this connection is weak (see e.g., Myers, 2013).

Some research, however, suggests that attitudes, including police attitudes, are linked to their behavior. For instance, Smith and Klein (1984) argue that much of the variation in officers' behavior could be explained by officers' attitudes, values, and beliefs. Further, research supports the idea that police officers' behavior is shaped by their occupational outlook. Worden (1995) reviewed some typologies and synthesized these into five types of officers and a number of attitudinal dimensions in which officers vary: the professional, tough cop, clean-beat crime-fighter, problem-solver, and avoider. That study also suggests that officers differ in their perspectives on the police role, citizens, legal restrictions on their authority (e.g. limitations on search and seizure and on the use of force), and legal institutions (e.g. prosecutors, courts), and that officers' behaviors vary correspondingly. Additionally, officers whose role conceptions differed in these aspects differed also in their approaches to minor disorders and service requests. A review conducted by Robinson and Chandek (2000) identified three sets of variables associated with arrest decisions in cases of domestic violence: demographic characteristics of the victims, offenders and police officers (e.g. gender, length of experience); attitudinal variables (e.g. victim's preference for arrest or officer's perception that the victim will drop charges or is uncooperative); and situational variables (e.g. weapons involved, repeated incidents, presence of additional witnesses). Similarly, Mastrofski *et al.* (1995) found that officers with more positive attitudes toward the community were significantly less likely to arrest suspects than officers with more negative attitudes. Officers classified as having "positive" attitudes toward community policing arrested only 5 percent of the suspects compared to the 17 percent arrested by officers classified as "negative" toward community policing. In a subsequent study, Mastrofski *et al.* (2000) also reported that officers with positive attitudes toward community policing were more likely to grant citizens' requests to control another citizen.

This research showing an impact of police officer attitudes on police actions highlights the importance of gaining a better understanding of police officers' attitudes. Because attitudes do seem to shape behavior, assessing police attitudes could produce implications for recruitment, supervision, and training (Gonçalves and Vieira, 2007).

There are many specific attitudes that might influence police actions. One set of attitudes that could impact on criminal justice professionals, including police, are attitudes toward offenders (ATOs). Police officers are the group that has the most contact with offenders (and ex-prisoners) and have an important role in crime prevention and offender's rehabilitation (Ortet-Fabregat and Perez, 1992). Given the nature of their job, extreme attitudes, either positive or negative, might be a problem (Melvin *et al.*, 1985). Nonetheless, and despite a considerable number of studies that have assessed how the public in general and how offenders perceive police officers (e.g. Gau, 2010) and punitive attitudes toward the public (e.g. Klama and Egan, 2011), the research on police officers' perceptions of crime and offenders is scarce. Still, a considerable volume of research have been focused on correctional officers' attitudes toward prisoners (ATPs) (e.g. Hogue, 1993; Kjelsberg *et al.*, 2007; Melvin *et al.*, 1985; Ortet-Fabregat *et al.*, 1993), arguing that positive attitudes held by prison officers are critical in facilitating change prior successful release from prison (Glaser, 1969).

Regarding police officers, previous studies show that they present negative ATPs and ex-prisoners (e.g. Jacobi, 1975). Melvin *et al.* (1985) examined ATPs in six different samples (i.e. reform/rehabilitation groups, prisoners, students, community members, law enforcement officers, and correctional officers) and found that the prisoners had the most positive ATPs while police officers had the most negative attitudes. Moreover, research on attitudes toward sex offenders revealed that police officers tend to show more negative ATPs than other professionals who worked with the same individuals (such as probation

and parole officers, psychologists, correctional officers) (Day *et al.*, 2014; Hogue, 1993; Hogue and Peebles, 1997). One of the major consequences of negative ATOs is the failure of rehabilitation and reintegration back into society (Stirland and Hogue, 2015). Moreover, a negative view of offenders can influence police officer judgments and actions toward them, leading to discretionary decisions (see Wortley, 2003).

The study of police officers' attitudes is also important since attitudes predict individuals' views on punishment (Kjelsberg and Loos, 2008) and judgment of punishment (Hogue and Peebles, 1997). Research on this matter showed that people's perceptions of punishment vary according to a set of variables. Prior studies found associations between demographic characteristics (e.g. Applegate *et al.*, 2000), occupational roles (e.g. Applegate *et al.*, 2000; Leiber *et al.*, 2002; Ortet-Fabregat and Perez, 1992), and educational experience (e.g. Chen and Einat, 2015; Leiber *et al.*, 2002). Nonetheless, other studies point to inconsistent results. For example, some investigations found that older people are more punitive than younger people (e.g. Hough and Moxon, 1985), while others found no association between age and punitive attitudes (e.g. Chen and Einat, 2015; Shafiq *et al.*, 2016). The same situation occurs with educational experience: although some studies have shown a correlation between higher academic status and a decline in the level of punitive attitudes (e.g. Chen and Einat, 2015), other studies found no effect of education level on attitudes (e.g. Lambert, 2005).

In sum, attitude assessment in police officers is crucial for the adoption of social and political measures or for more accurate procedures and strategies. Additionally, attitudes can play an important role on how agents of the criminal justice system interact with prisoners and/or offenders (Melvin *et al.*, 1985), and how they respond to a specific situation (e.g. Robinson and Chandek, 2000). Having this in mind, the present study aims to analyze the attitudes of male police officers toward offenders to understand whether there are differences according to sociodemographic variables such as age, years of service, marital status, and education, and to examine which of these variables predict police officers' ATOs. The current research also aimed to examine whether there are differences in ATOs between police officers and correctional officers and graduate students.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were selected according to a non-random convenience sampling process. The sample was composed of 431 Caucasian male police officers from the Portuguese Republican National Guard (GNR). The Republican National Guard is a military national force constituted by military members/soldiers organized in a special body of troops. Its main functions are to maintain the peace and public order to ensure obedience to the law, to prevent criminality, to develop criminal investigations, and to supervise and resolve traffic problems, among others.

The participants' average age was 37.31 (SD = 9.48) years, ranging between 20 and 55 years of age. Police officers had an average of 14.26 (SD = 9.08) years of service, varying between approximately 1 and 29 years. Most of the police officers were married ($n = 300$; 69.6 percent) and had a ninth grade education or more ($n = 310$; 71.9 percent).

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a version of the "ATP" scale developed by Melvin *et al.* (1985) that was slightly modified for the purpose of the present study. The ATP is a self-report measure that consists of 36 items assessing ATPs. The items are rated on a five-point scale, ranging from 0 (disagree strongly) to 4 (agree strongly). The sentences include general questions (e.g. "Prisoners are different from most people") and others that are less general, (e.g. "I would never want one of my children dating an ex-prisoner"). In total, 19 statements are negative, and the remaining 17 items are positive. A constant of

36 is subtracted from the total score, giving a potential range of scores from 0 to 144. The higher the total score on the scale, the more positive the subjects' attitude is toward inmates. The instrument presents good psychometric properties. In the original study, the ATP had a split-half reliability ranging between 0.84 and 0.92 in five different samples (i.e. students, correctional officers, police officers, prisoners and persons involved in prison reform or prisoner rehabilitation work). The test-retest reliability was 0.82. The validity was good, and there was no evidence of response distortion. Factorial analyses showed that the scale is one-dimensional, measuring only one construct (Brodsky and Smitherman, 1983) that can be described as tolerance of inmates and of prison, expressed by the total score magnitude.

The scale was translated to and validated in Portuguese by Gonçalves and Vieira (2007). The Portuguese version has 34 items, two less than the original scale, because the original items 16 and 24 were negatively correlated with the total of the scale and were, thus, removed (Gonçalves and Vieira, 2007). Because the scale is one-dimensional, removing these two items was necessary to maintain internal consistency. In this sense, in the Portuguese version, to obtain the total score, a constant of 34 is subtracted from the total score for a potential range of scores from 0 to 136. Cronbach's α was 0.91 for the validation sample (Gonçalves and Vieira, 2007).

In the present study, an adaptation of the "ATP" scale produced the "ATO" scale. Specifically, the word "prisoner" was replaced by "offender" in all items. In the present survey, the internal consistency was 0.92 for the total scale.

Procedure

After obtaining permission from the General Directorate of the Portuguese Police Force to begin gathering data, we contacted 23 different police local sections, namely the precinct commandants, and explained the study to them. Then, the commandants publicized the study among the police officers to identify possible participants. The questionnaires and informed consents were sent by mail to each police station, and the commandant distributed them to the police officers. Almost 900 potential participants were identified and 450 agreed to participate in the study. These participants signed the informed consent and completed the scale individually; the questionnaires were then collected by the first author in each police station. Because the representation of females was too low to enable gender comparisons and because the literature states that views on punishment vary by gender (e.g. Applegate *et al.*, 2002), female participants were removed from the final sample. (note, too, that Melvin *et al.*'s (1985) original sample of police officers was only composed of male individuals.) Thus, 431 male police officers composed the final sample.

All of the ethical procedures established by the Portuguese legislation were followed. Participation in the study was anonymous and voluntary.

Data analysis

All analyses were conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 22). To estimate the effect sizes, we used G*Power Version 3.0.10 for Windows. Descriptive statistics were performed through measures of central and dispersion tendency, thus enabling the description of data related to the participants' demographic characteristics. To examine the differences in terms of demographic variables (i.e. age, years of service, marital status, and education), ANOVAs, and correlation tests (Pearson's and Spearman's) were applied. OLS regression analysis was performed to analyze the predictors of police officers' attitudes.

The variables age and years of service were recoded and organized by standard deviation classes, obtaining four classes each: for age, < 27, 27-37, 38-47, and > 47 years old, and for years of service, < 7, 7-14, 15-23, and > 23 years. Marital status was also recoded as dummy variables (0 = no; 1 = yes) to perform the OLS regression and the correlation analysis (married, single, divorced/separated).

Results

ATOs

Police officers obtained an average score of 73.17 (SD = 20.20). As expected, the police officers had more negative ATOs than the Portuguese students and the Portuguese correctional staff (Gonçalves and Vieira, 2007) (cf. Table I). Thus, the data from the police officers were consistent with the results reported in Melvin *et al.*'s (1985) original study, i.e., police officers were the group that had more negative ATOs.

Demographic variables and ATOs

The results concerning demographic variables are presented in Table II. The results revealed significant differences in ATOs according to marital status, $F(3, 425) = 7.594, p < 0.001$, with a small effect size, $\omega = 0.21$. Tukey *post-hoc* tests with Bonferroni correction ($0.05/4 = 0.0125$) only showed statistically significant differences between single and married officers ($p = 0.000$); specifically, single officers presented the lowest scores. In this sense, single officers tend to present more negative ATOs than married police officers. Point-biserial correlation coefficient showed a positive and significant correlation between being married and ATOs, $r_{pb} = 0.178, p < 0.01$, and a significantly negative correlation between being single and ATOs, $r_{pb} = -0.217, p < 0.01$. This means that married police officers tend to present the most

	Correctional officers mean (SD)	Students mean (SD)	Police officers mean (SD)
Melvin <i>et al.</i> (1985)	90.7 (16.33)	90.5 (16.33)	67.0 (16.60)
Gonçalves and Vieira (2007)	86.75 (16.10)	84.6 (13.54)	-
Present study	-	-	73.17 (20.20)

Table I.
Means and standard deviations of ATP

Note: Means and standard deviations of ATP scores for Melvin *et al.*'s original study and for Portuguese studies

	Police officers ($n = 431$) ATO mean (SD)	F
<i>Marital status</i>		
Married	75.56 (19.13)	7.594***
Single	65.90 (21.62)	
Divorced	77.93 (16.32)	
<i>Age</i>		
< 27	66.98 (21.09)	3.963**
27-37	71.71 (21.14)	
38-47	76.49 (19.72)	
> 47	76.32 (17.26)	
<i>Years of service</i>		
< 5	68.80 (20.36)	3.460*
5-14	71.46 (21.82)	
15-23	76.59 (18.64)	
> 23	76.18 (18.46)	
<i>Education</i>		
6th grade	76.04 (17.69)	3.135*
9th grade	74.65 (18.92)	
12th grade or more	70.61 (22.02)	

Table II.
Differences in ATO scores according to demographic variables

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

favorable ATOs, while single police officers have less favorable attitudes. Divorced/separated status was not correlated with ATOs, $r_{pb} = 0.043, p > 0.05$.

The results also revealed significant differences in ATOs according to age group, $F(3, 425) = 3.963, p < 0.01$. However, the effect size was small, $\omega = 0.14$. Additionally, Tukey *post-hoc* comparisons with Bonferroni correction ($0.05/4 = 0.0125$) showed no significant differences between age groups. However, when the average ATO scores were analyzed, the results revealed that younger officers tend to score lower than older officers; that is, younger officers present more negative ATOs. Pearson correlation tests revealed significantly positive correlations between age and attitudes' total score, $r = 0.180, p < 0.05$, meaning that older age is correlated with more positive ATOs.

The statistical analysis also showed a significant effect of years of service, $F(3, 425) = 3.460, p < 0.05$, with a small effect size of $\omega = 0.13$. Tukey *post-hoc* tests with Bonferroni correction ($0.05/4 = 0.0125$) revealed no significant differences between groups. Nonetheless, when the averages were analyzed, officers with more years of service presented higher scores than officers with fewer years of service. In this sense, officers with fewer years of service present more negative ATOs, while officers with more years of service present more positive ATOs. Person correlation coefficient also revealed significantly positive correlations between years of service and attitudes' total score, $r = 0.187, p < 0.05$.

In the same manner, the results concerning education also showed a statistically significant effect, $F(2, 426) = 3.135, p < 0.05$, though with a small effect size, $\omega = 0.09$. Tukey *post-hoc* tests with Bonferroni correction ($0.05/3 = 0.017$) revealed no significant differences between groups. Nonetheless, when the averages of the groups were analyzed, we found that individuals with higher levels of education exhibited lower scores than individuals who were less educated. This means that police officers with higher levels of education presented more negative ATOs than less educated ones. Spearman correlation coefficient also showed a significantly negative correlation between education and attitudes' total score, $r_s = -0.113, p < 0.05$.

Predicting ATOs

An OLS regression was conducted to examine the predictive strength of the selected demographic variables (age, years of service, education level, and marital status) and ATOs among police officers. Table III presents the OLS regression model and the predictors of police officers' ATOs.

The OLS regression model was statistically significant, $F(6, 428) = 10002.512, p < 0.001$, but explained only 5.7 percent of the variance ($R^2 = 0.057$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.044$). This is considered a small effect size in this type of research. Moreover, none of the demographic

Table III.
OLS regression
model and
predictors of police
officers' attitudes
toward offenders

Model	B	SE	β	t-test	p	95% CI B	
						L	U
Age	-0.253	0.526	-0.119	-0.482	0.630	-1.286	0.780
Years of service	0.487	0.526	0.219	0.926	0.355	-0.547	1.521
Married	-13.734	11.523	-0.313	-1.192	0.234	-36.383	8.915
Single	-21.082	11.709	-0.461	-1.801	0.072	-44.096	1.933
Divorced/Separated	-10.847	12.669	-0.095	-0.856	0.392	-35.748	14.055
Education	0.426	1.709	0.018	0.249	0.803	-2.933	3.784

Notes: Dependent variable: ATO Total Scale (scale). Independent variables: age (scale); years of service (scale); married (0 = no, 1 = yes); single (0 = no, 1 = yes); divorced/separated (0 = no, 1 = yes); education (0 = 6th grade, 1 = 9th grade, 3 = 12th or more)

variables contributed significantly to the model. Only being single revealed a negative marginally significant effect ($t = -1.801, p < 0.10$). When analyzing the B coefficients, single police officers achieved 21.082 fewer standard score points than non-single police officers, meaning that being single is marginally associated with less favorable ATOs.

Discussion

The results indicated that police officers hold more negative ATOs than university students and graduates and prison guards (Gonçalves and Vieira, 2007), which is in accordance with previous research (e.g. Brodsky and Smitherman, 1983; Chen and Einat, 2015; Melvin *et al.*, 1985). A more negative perception may signify that offenders are viewed as incurably deviant individuals (Melvin *et al.*, 1985). A possible explanation for these results relies on the assumption that working with offenders on a day-to-day basis might lead to more negative attitudes (Kjelsberg *et al.*, 2007). More negative ATOs can be explained by the characteristics and nature of the police profession and by the role that police forces have in society (e.g. to identify and detain crime suspects, to investigate and communicate crimes, and to maintain peace and the feeling of security in the community). These results are consistent with the work-role model that advocates that “punitive attitudes are influenced by the work environment and the type of work performed” (Leiber *et al.*, 2002, p. 304). In this sense, it is expected that police officers’ attitudes would be consistent with their professional role (e.g. Ortet-Fabregat and Perez, 1992).

As the main task of police officers is to control offenders’ behaviors and arrest them, they must focus on the negative aspects of the individual (Kjelsberg *et al.*, 2007). However, this explanation requires a more in-depth investigation due to the discrepancy in the scores obtained by police officers on the ATO scale (varying between 8 and 126). This discrepancy might be attributed to differences in job characteristics because, at least in Portugal, police officers can be assigned to several tasks in the police force, some of which are more related to law enforcement, while others are more close to social work. In fact, some police officers perform criminal investigations and arrest suspects, while others have a wider field of action and greater social visibility through activities such as conducting patrol, keeping peace and public order, and acting as traffic regulators. It is possible that attitudes diverge according to the occupational area of each police officer, but perhaps only through in-depth interviews we can fully understand police officers’ attitudes and motivations toward offenders and crime. Additionally, issues related to job dangerousness, the unpredictability of different situations, and the suffering of the victims and families of victims (Conroy and Hess, 1992) can lead to the development of negative ATOs. Offenders can be considered the main party responsible for police officers’ difficulties, whether personal or professional, and are therefore negatively connoted. Such attitudes will also probably influence the way in which agents will respond to these individuals in different situations.

Moreover, the literature states that police officers are allowed to exercise a great deal of discretion in their duties (Lawrence and Hemmens, 2008). That is, police officers have the ability to choose between different courses of action depending on their particular job assignment, and a set of variables can influence the direction of the exercise of police activity. It is expected that police officers’ availability to manage an incident, clarify it, and process it will increase with the infraction severity. Additionally, the offender’s attitude can influence the police officer’s attitude. Police tend to be more empathetic to suspects exhibiting humility, respect for authority and willingness to cooperate. Therefore, although police officers’ ATOs are less favorable, this also depends on a number of factors related to the circumstances of the crime and the characteristics of the offender.

The less punitive attitudes of the correctional officers compared to the police officers may reflect the ambiguity of their work, as it involves either punishment or rehabilitation (Leiber *et al.*, 2002). Other researchers explain these results based on the daily experience and intensive contact between correctional officers and offenders, which may soften

individuals' attitudes toward inmates and offenders (Young *et al.*, 2009). In fact, it may be desirable for correctional officers to sustain less punitive attitudes to encourage inmates' rehabilitation (e.g. Young *et al.*, 2009).

Regarding the demographic variables, the results showed that these variables have a limited value in predicting the ATOs. Within the demographic variables tested, only being single revealed a negative marginal association with attitudes towards offenders. This means that being single increases the probability of holding negative ATOs. A possible explanation for this result is that with marriage, some changes can occur in the individual that imply the assumption of new social and familial roles (e.g. father, husband) and responsibilities, and this could reflect not only a higher tolerance in terms of attitudes but also a higher involvement with the community (Schaie and Willis, 2003). Therefore, the higher tolerance for offenders among married police officers may occur in response to the attachment or social bond resulting from marriage (Sampson *et al.*, 2006). This view reflects the social control perspective, in which the social tie of marriage is important because it creates interdependent systems of obligation, mutual support, and restraint and may lead to the emergence of a new individual self or script (Sampson *et al.*, 2006).

Despite the limited conclusions that can be drawn, when the demographic variables were analyzed individually, some interesting results were found. For instance, older police officers with more years of service held the most positive attitudes. Studies conducted with prison officers also revealed that, in general, older prison officers seem to focus more on the rehabilitative aspects of their work (e.g. Kifer *et al.*, 2003) and hold more favorable attitudes towards offenders than younger officers (e.g. Ricciardelli and Clow, 2016). Accordingly, police officers with more years of service also presented more positive ATOs. Although this variable has been identified in previous studies as a significant predictor of prison staff's orientation toward rehabilitation (Kjelsberg *et al.*, 2007), the results concerning the effect of the amount of previous correctional work experience are inconsistent (e.g. Schaufeli and Peeters, 2000). In fact, attitudes result from life experiences, and interactions with people who have important roles in one's life also influence one's attitudes. Additionally, direct experiences with the attitudinal object are the best predictors of behavior (Hogg and Vaughan, 2005) and allow for attitudinal learning. Furthermore, it seems evident that along the years, attitudes become more cemented and rooted in personality. Throughout life, individuals construct their identity, and they suffer meaningful changes in their lives that could be reflected in their way of thinking and acting. Consequently, older police officers, either through changes that occur in their lives or through their experiences with criminals, may develop a higher tolerance toward offenders' behaviors, even if these behaviors are inadequate or can place the peace and social order at risk. This change in perspective could also be explained by the accumulated experience that is acquired through years of contact with offenders, which might result in more tolerant attitudes toward them. Previous studies have also shown that those who are in more frequent contact with offenders are less likely to typify them as dangerous (e.g. Corrigan *et al.*, 2001), probably because people who know offenders recognize that, like everyone else, they are complex, diverse, and potentially malleable (Hirschfield and Piquero, 2010). However, because our sample is quite homogeneous, this explanation needs further confirmation through a longitudinal and/or qualitative investigation. An alternative explanation is that society transmits various beliefs about crime and offenders, considering them marginal and blaming them for their criminal behaviors. Thus, younger police officers, due to their more limited contact with this population, could develop attitudes that are based on stereotypes and prejudices that they have learned previously, thereby originating a negative and unfavorable view of offenders. In any case, these explanations should be interpreted with caution because in our study, neither age nor years of service emerged as predictors of police officers' attitudes.

A final result is that the more educated police officers held more negative ATOs. These results are not consistent with previous studies that revealed that more educated individuals are less punitive (e.g. Chen and Einat, 2015). As a higher educational degree does not mean that police officers are more specialized or that they have more knowledge about the law and offenders (either because these officers are on average younger, single and with fewer years of service or because the education they received is general and not specialized), perhaps the influence of education on ATOs can be accounted for by a number of other factors (e.g. job involvement, perceptions about crime and criminals, professional experience). In sum, our data fail to provide credence to the belief that increased formal education might liberalize the attitudes of police officers concerning crime and criminals (Leiber *et al.*, 2002). Again, it is important to produce further research on this topic to clarify the relevance of educational status vs the relevance of adequate training when entering the police force.

Practical implications and future training

Police officers, apart from arresting offenders and maintaining the public order, also have a resocialization role in society. Order maintenance should not be an end but a means to rehabilitate offenders. In fact, police officers develop day-to-day interactions with offenders, and because of this, they have the power to enhance or undermine the primary goals of the criminal justice system.

Individuals' attitudes can lead to discriminatory behaviors in their job performance, which can also influence citizens' perceptions of the police. Police officers' behaviors also reflect the way that they conceptualize respect, through norms and their relationships with others. For example, Sherman (1997) found that police officers often increase the risk of promoting violent behaviors through their way of interacting with people. Research suggests that when police officers are less respectful toward suspects and citizens in general, citizens also tend to have less respect for police officers and for the law (Sherman, 1997). In this sense, being conscientious of one's ATOs and one's beliefs, stereotypes and values regarding justice, criminality and offenders' rehabilitation, as well as their role in society, are issues that must be addressed in officers' initial and continuous training.

Although attitudes do not necessarily translate into action (Myers, 2013) and although police attitudes may not predict the specific actions taken by police officers, they are highly likely to influence the officer's assessment and response to a situation (e.g. Robinson and Chandek, 2000). Additionally, hostile attitudes towards offenders and ex-offenders may lead to stigmatization and place them at a disadvantage (Braman, 2007). In this sense, the more negative the ATOs are, the more negative these individuals' reactions will be when they are approached by the police. On the other hand, rehabilitative or restorative responses are more likely to occur when offenders are viewed in a more positive manner, and although positive attitudes toward rehabilitation do not necessarily signal positive ATOs (Hirschfield and Piquero, 2010), positive attitudes toward rehabilitation are linked to beliefs concerning offender redeemability (Maruna and King, 2004). Moreover, Varona (2011), in a study conducted among students, found that more punitive students tend to have less faith in offenders' ability to be rehabilitated. Misis *et al.* (2013) also concluded that holding positive views of inmates was linked with support for treatment, while negative perceptions of inmates were associated with a greater support for punishment.

The interactions between police officers and citizens necessitate the availability of psychological and behavioral resources for officers to behave in a satisfactory and appropriate manner. Thus, it is essential to work with police officers on three levels: an internal level, respecting police officers' personal attitudes so that they assume a global positive view of the institution and of their job; a relational level, referring to the acquisition and control of social skills in positive and persuasive communication; and a specific level,

consisting of learning specific techniques in problem solving (Yague, 1994). Together with acquiring legal knowledge, training at these levels is also an essential human and relational component. Police officers' training should include practical issues to change false beliefs and prejudices that can bias their performance. In this sense, police officers must be aware of their attitudes, values and beliefs, debating and questioning their adequacy to gain greater self-control and a critical sense of themselves and their conduct.

Yague (1994) argued that all police officers must have a combination of skills (e.g. analysis, being alert, concentrated attention, perseverance, visual memory, verbal fluency, and physical skills, among others) and personality characteristics (e.g. impulse and emotional control, ability to self-critique, self-confidence, resistance to frustration, empathic ability and interpersonal relationship management, affective neutrality in professional exercise, and objectivity, among others) to execute their job properly.

Thus, it seems important to introduce a critical incident technique analysis (De Waele and Depreeuw, 1985; Flanagan, 1954; Spencer-Oatey, 2013) to police officers' training because it allows for the anticipation and training of real situations, providing individuals with strategies and mechanisms that allow them to cope appropriately with tense situations and to be better prepared for more effective decision making (Gonçalves and Vieira, 2007). Confrontation with reality is the determining factor of success or failure in job performance. Therefore, in addition to the introduction of this technique, it would also be important to proceed to a continuous monitoring of police officers to introduce new strategies that allow for a better performance in interacting with offenders.

Although military training is an important component of a police officer's job, the psychosocial component cannot be neglected. As socializing agents and as individuals who are present in citizens' everyday life, police officers' relational skills should gain more emphasis. To maintain the peace, it is important to train police officers in the use of physical force, but it is also important to note that the use of force is often employed as the only adaptive way to cope with the situation. In this sense, training must involve an officer in situations that occur in his professional practice to analyze the potential impact of that situation on his private and professional life. Knowing the potential impact of each situation and its potential effects allows the police officer to anticipate the consequences of his actions and alerts him to his behaviors and attitudes.

Research has also concluded that police training involves unique experiences, new skills, and potentially important new group influences that have a powerful impact on attitudes (Garner, 2005). In fact, intensive police training can be a potent force in changing attitudes, suggesting that occasional attitudinal monitoring by individuals and policing organizations could be useful. Monitoring and reiterating self-awareness of previously held attitudes and beliefs has been shown to decrease susceptibility to errant attitudinal and behavioral change.

Despite the potential of the present study, it also presents some limitations. First, a comprehensive study of attitudes towards offenders should adopt a broader, more diversified approach (e.g. more self-report instruments to assess attitudes, in-depth interviews). Second, the sample is not representative of all police officers (i.e. the sample is only composed of male individuals, and all the participants are Caucasian). A third limitation of the present study is the lack of consideration of factors that can mediate or moderate the effect of attitudes (e.g. offender characteristics, contextual characteristics, and police officers' personal characteristics). Another limitation is that the present study did not assess the relationship and consistency between police officers' attitudes and behavior. Finally, the ATO was developed for the US population, and although our results are similar to those of Melvin *et al.*, there might be differences in culture and crime policies between the USA and Portugal that make the scale less suitable to measure what it originally intended. Moreover, because the ATO Portuguese version is somewhat different than the original (i.e. the original scale is composed of 36 items and the

Portuguese version is composed of 34 items) and because the version used in this study was modified to fit the population, it is important to stress that some of the discrepancies from previous studies may be due to measurement variability.

Acknowledgement

This study was conducted at Psychology Research Centre (UID/PSI/01662/2013), University of Minho, and supported by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology and the Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education through national funds and co-financed by FEDER through COMPETE2020 under the PT2020 Partnership Agreement (POCI-01-0145-FEDER-007653). The study was also supported by Grant SFRH/BD/66110/2009 from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology awarded to the first author.

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