Police recruits' wants and needs in police training in Germany

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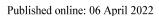
Abstract

Police recruits undertake mandatory training programmes to prepare for conflict situations. To motivate recruits to engage in what is called "police training" ("Polizeitraining" or "Einsatztraining") in Germany, police trainers should design activities that align with what the recruits *want* from training. As such, the current study investigated the wants and subjective training needs of police recruits by asking twenty-seven recruits of a German police force to identify positive and negative aspects of police training, as well as the characteristics of a competent police trainer. The qualitative data was analysed using content analysis. Higher order themes consisted of (a) the relevance of police training; (b) motivating aspects of police training; (c) negative aspects of police training; and (d) characteristics of a competent police trainer. Recruits expressed that police training is an important part of their education, which they perceived as relevant in preparing them for their duty and for upcoming performance tests. Prominent motivating aspects included the perception of competence and being challenged holistically. De-contextualized practice and static repetitions were demotivating factors. The police trainer is perceived to play a prominent role in learning and recruits want police trainers to (a) have sound knowledge of the taught content; (b) effectively deliver the training content; and (c) be mindful of individual differences. By offering insight into the wants and needs of recruits undertaking police training, the current study informs the practice of police trainers and trainer developers.

Keywords Police training · Use of force training · Conflict management training · Coaching practice · Learner motivation

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Introduction

The overarching aim of police training is to develop the requisite skills for officers to safely and effectively cope with the operational demands of regular police work, which can include situations of conflict (Rajakaruna et al. 2017; Nota and Huhta 2019). In Germany, police training ("Polizeitraining" or "Einsatztraining") refers learning settings for police recruits that aim at developing the skills for handling (conflictual) police-citizen interactions and operational situations in a professional manner (Staller and Koerner 2021b). As such, the content of police training in Germany currently comprises of self-defence, arrest, firearms, tactical and communication skills (Isaieva 2019; Staller and Körner 2019; Ellrich and Baier 2016) that are delivered in various learning settings (see Staller et al. 2021, for a current analysis). Police training is part of the practical training recruits receive and is as such a recurring element in the three years higher education programme of German police officers.

Since in Germany the responsibility for the police lies in the hands of the 16 states, the education of police officers differs between the states. However, each state established and operates a specialized institute for the higher education of police, which qualifies officer for the upper career path awarding them with a bachelor's degree (Frevel 2018). The studies are organized in a system of dual university programmes that include academic education, practical training and internships with the police aiming at effectively developing the skills and cognitive structures needed for a professional practice in a democratic society (Hochschule für Polizei und öffentliche Verwaltung Nordrhein-Westfalen 2021; Hessische Hochschule für Polizei und Verwaltung 2016). While in some police academies, education and training are directly linked and offered on the academy premises (e.g. Hesse), other universities appoint the training task to different education partners, which are directly linked to the police force (e.g. North Rhine-Westphalia). The largest part of police recruits' education comprises of theory at the university (e.g. Hesse: 80 weeks, North Rhine-Westphalia: 79 weeks), followed by police internships (e.g. Hesse 30 weeks, North Rhine-Westphalia: 36 weeks) and practical training (e.g. Hesse: 21 weeks, North Rhine-Westphalia: 25 weeks). Depending on the state, police training sessions are incorporated into practical training (e.g. North Rhine-Westphalia) or are part of the education at the university (e.g. Hesse). They are delivered throughout the three years of the studies depending on the respective study period. While there are differences between the states concerning the understanding of what constitutes police training there is a consensus, that skills aiming at resolving potential physical conflict and violent situations are part of these programmes (Staller and Koerner 2021b). As such police training aims at providing the recruits with the skills to effectively manage use of force situations and manage officer safety. These regularly include firearms skills, arrest and self-defence skills and tactical behaviour like approaching a suspect, statically and dynamically entering rooms and buildings. Also, these training settings include communication and de-escalations skills. However, recent analysis indicated that this content is widely underrepresented in police training

sessions (Staller et al. 2019, 2021). As a result, it has been proposed, that police training should widen its scope towards more broadly focusing on social interactions with its dynamics compared to an isolated perspective on forceful options (Staller and Koerner 2021b). While there are debates around the content delivered in police training in Germany, there is also a growing debate about pedagogical issues related to the teaching and delivering of police training (Körner et al. 2018; Koerner and Staller 2021). Currently, observational analysis indicate that needed skills are delivered in an isolated linear fashion within distinct training settings (e.g. firearms training, self-defence training, tactical training) and that scenario-based trainings are used later on to put the isolated elements together (Staller et al. 2021). While such training models have previously been problematized and are related to questions of effective coaching in police training in general (Cushion 2020, 2022; Körner and Staller 2018), current questions concerning the optimization of German police training revolve partly around how police training could be delivered more effectively.

A critical determinant to training effectiveness is the participants motivation to learn (Tannenbaum and Yukl 1992; Salas and Cannon-Bowers 2001; Mathieu and Martineau 1997; Aguinis and Kraiger 2009; Noe 1986). Trainee motivation can be defined as the direction, effort, interest, and persistence that trainees put forth in learning before, during and after training (Tannenbaum and Yukl 1992). Even if participants possess the capability to acquire and apply training content, they may fail to benefit from training if the volition to learn is compromised (Tsai and Tai 2003). The motivation to learn "is a function of individual characteristics, the work environment, and the training itself" (Salas et al., 2012, p. 84). Therefore, it is a complex construct that is influenced by many variables.

In a meta-analytic review, Colquitt LePine, and Noe (2000) found that the individual characteristics of locus of control, conscientiousness, anxiety, age, cognitive ability, self-efficacy, valence of training and job involvement were predictors of training motivation (Colquitt et al. 2000). Moreover, pre-training motivation is affected by an individual's perception of the reputation of a training programme (Switzer and Nagy 2005), as well as their prior training experiences (Sitzmann et al. 2009). Specific individual experiences can also bolster motivation (Salas et al. 2012). For example, trainees tend to have higher motivations to learn when they can connect the content of training to the demands of their job (Knowles et al. 2005). In the sports coaching literature, an understanding of what is *driving* the trainee to engage in training—i.e. what the trainee *'wants'* to get out of the training programme—is considered a pre-requisite for the design of activities that motivate learners to engage in the training content and, therefore, get the learning that (according to the trainer) the trainee *'needs'* (Abraham et al. 2010). As Abraham et al. (2010) concluded "it obviously helps [for motivation] if wants and needs are closely matched" (p. 53).

In the context of police training, only a few studies have sought to understand the wants of learners (Honess 2020, 2016; Rajakaruna et al. 2017). Rajakaruna et al. (2017) reported that trainees perceived the content of police training (the need) to be irrelevant if officers cannot apply it to the working environment. Honess (2016, 2020) found that trainees viewed that course content in mandatory training settings

(the need) could be made both more interesting and more relevant to the demands of their role (the want). This preliminary work spotlights the disconnect between the wants and the needs of police trainees, which likely affect their motivation for police training. The current study extends this work by capturing police recruits' perception of police training, specifically the motivating and negative aspects of training.

As the deliverer of training content, how the police trainer is perceived also influences motivation (Hawkins 2019). Research on athlete-coach relationships has shown that the competence of the coach is an important source of influence and relates to trainee satisfaction (Turman 2006). Likewise, in teacher-learner settings, instructors perceived as competent are considered more credible, which, in turn, leads to higher learner motivation (Martin et al. 1997). An understanding of what a competent police trainer "looks-like" through the eyes of police recruits can inform the design of stimulating learning environments (Muir et al. 2011; Till et al. 2019) that positively support a motivational training climate (Morgan 2016).

In sum, training effectiveness is the "bottom line" for most organizational training programmes (Noe 1986). Given that police training is mandatory, understanding the wants and needs of learners is important. A failure to align wants and needs may decrease motivation (Honess 2020, 2016), and, in turn, impede skill acquisition (Kanfer 1996). The current study aimed to garner what police recruits want from police training. More specifically, the study focused on identifying the positive and negative motivational factors of police training from the perspective of the trainees, as well as their perception of police trainer competence. Armed with this knowledge, police trainers should be better placed to plan engaging and effective training programmes.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the best method to capture the perceptions of police recruits, as communicating with participants in an interactive way provides the opportunity to clarify interesting and relevant issues raised by the recruits (Hutchinson and Wilson 1992; Barriball and While 1994) and is generally considered as a good fit for the exploration of attitudes, values, beliefs and motives (Smith 1992). In the context of the current study, it is important to acknowledge the caveat that social desirability (Crowne and Marlowe 1960) and impression management (Leary and Kowalski 1990) do pose a threat to the validity of the interviews (Deppermann 2014).

Participants

In Germany, cooperation between police agencies and academic researchers is just beginning to be established (Staller 2016; Körner and Staller 2019; Jasch 2019). This posed specific challenges to conducting the current study. First, we had to rely on an established relationship and an existing research access to a state-wide central training institution for the training of police recruits. Even though the federal states

in Germany individually plan, structure and deliver the education and training of police recruits (see Frevel 2018, for more details about the German system), the particular training institution of the current study represents a "typical" training academy for police training. We built this assessment (a) on the fact that it acts as one of four central institutions for police training in the federal state of our study, (b) on the experience of two authors (MS/SK) who regularly are engaged in coach development activities for police trainers in various federal states and institutions and (c) on the experience of one author (MS) as a police trainer for thirteen years in the German system. Second, data collection at the training facility addressed significant and unique challenges, since it had to be integrated into the ongoing training process of police recruits. Due to organizational matters (Roberts 2012), available time resources and operational commitments of police trainers and recruits the time and number of interviewees available for data collection were limited. Specifically, a single day of data collection was granted by the training institute. With three researchers available for the day of data collection (MS/SK/VH), we employed an opportunistic sampling strategy (Palinkas et al. 2015) for the interviews. As such, sample size was determined by practicality and access rather than informational power (Francis et al. 2010; Malterud et al. 2016). Recruits of two current training classes (approx. 25 recruits in each class with six classes on site) were asked by the police trainers, if they want to take part in a study investigating the perspective of recruits on police training on the day of data collection. Following the call for participation, 27 recruits ($n=19$ male; $n=8$ female) took part in the study. On average, the recruits had almost two years police academy training experience ($M=1.92$; $SD=0.61$) and over six months work as a police officer. The study received ethical approval from the German Sport University, Cologne. All participants provided informed consent to take part in the study.

Interview procedures

Each recruit was interviewed by one member of the research team (MS and VH). The interviews took place at a police academy in Germany and lasted between 10 and 29 min. Participants were interviewed during breaks in their normal-duty days. All interviews were conducted in German. The original set of questions were deliberately broad to not lead the response and to allow the full scope of each participant's viewpoint to emerge. Follow-up probes and prompts were used to ensure that a complete description was given. The original broad set of questions is outlined below (translated from German to English):

- How much do you like police training?
- Tell me about the parts of police training that you like in particular?
- Tell me about your feelings and emotions when participating in police training?
- Do you enjoy participating in police training sessions?
- What are your reasons for taking part in police training?
- What do you think about the content of police?

- Tell me if and how you apply the skills acquired in training in contexts outside the training setting?
- In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a competent police trainer?

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a paid and trained research assistant resulting in 135 pages of single-spaced typed data.

Data analysis

As a first phase of analysis and a check for accuracy, members of the research team (MS, VH) listened to the audible interviews as they read over the transcripts, occasionally making corrections and filling in missing words. The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis (Graneheim et al. 2017; Kuckartz 2016). To ensure scientific rigour, themes were systematically developed in a deductive and inductive manner employing the structured content analysis technique (Mayring 2015; Schreier 2014). The deductive analysis was based on the research aims; that is, the positive and negative motivational factors of police training and the characteristics of police trainer competence. The analysis was open to inductively emerging (sub-)themes (Schreier 2014). The second phase of analysis involved the identification of raw data and lower order themes. Raw data themes were derived as new aspects of the topic of interest that emerged as part of a diligent review of the data (Schreier 2012). In a next step, raw data themes were built-up into meaningful lower order themes. This emergent category system was then re-examined and discussed with another member of the research team (SK) leading to modifications of the coding system. The third phase of analysis involved a final round of focused coding using NVivo 11 data analysis software based on the modified coding system. Having used both inductive and deductive analyses to interpret the data into raw, lower and higher order themes, the final phase of analysis involved gaining triangular consensus between the lead (MS) and second researcher (SK) along with two additional researchers (AA and JP) who acted as "critical friends" (Faulkner and Biddle 2002; Kelly et al. 2018). The additional researchers were not involved with the data collection or analysis and were required to confirm, or otherwise, the placement of raw data themes into lower and higher order themes.

Quality assurance

Eight criteria of high-quality qualitative research were considered in the design of the study (Tracy 2010; Tracy and Hinrichs 2017), namely worthy topic, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics and meaningful coherence. As argued in the introduction, exploration of police recruits wants is a *worthy topic*. With regards to *rich rigour*, data collection and analysis procedures were carried out systematically following established guidelines and the process of analysis is described in detail to be transparent about the approach taken. *Sincerity* was observed by utilizing two "critical friends" who challenged the organization of the data. To ensure *credibility*, emergent themes were traced back to the quotations

of the sample of police recruits. Furthermore, direct quotations were used to provide a visual representation of participants experiences and thus offer *resonance*. In terms of *contributing* to the literature, we argue the study has theoretical (e.g. conceptual understanding) and practical (e.g. professional training programmes and applied practice) implications that develop this area of study. Institutional *ethical clearance* was obtained and researchers adhered to situational (e.g. the keeping of reflexive field notes by the lead and second researcher to capture the analysis process and reflect on data worth exposing), relational (e.g. reflection on researcher actions and potential consequences of data analysis) and exiting (e.g. avoiding unjust or unintended consequences of findings presented) obligations. Finally, the study used methods consistent with and comparable to earlier studies of training in performance contexts demonstrating meaningful coherence.

Overview of the results

The themes and the hierarchy that emerged from the analysis are presented in Table 1. The higher order themes included: (a) relevance of police training; (b) motivating and (c) negative aspects of police training; and (d) characteristics of a competent police trainer.

Relevance of police training

All recruits perceive police training as very important in preparation for their role as a police officer. Police recruits unanimously state that they would prefer taking part in police training more often, because of its relevance. A recruit explained that police training is important,

> […] because it is needed later. It simulates the thing you do later.

Compared to other subjects taught at the academy, police training is of particular importance to the recruits due to its direct applicable to their front-line work.

> I think it is very important for the work of policing; especially, in contrast to other subjects we have, e.g., business management or such things. In my opinion, these subjects are important as well, but you don't need them to have them in your timetable for eight or nine months. Instead, I would like to have more police training, which we unfortunately do not have very much, and […] police training I think is very important for the streets.

Police training helps the recruits feel more secure when they work as a police officer in their field training and after graduation. The recruits describe scenario-based training as very helpful in developing the competencies needed as a police officer. Recruits appreciate their exposure to a variety of different situations in police training, and while they acknowledge that situations that they will experience in the criterion environment will differ from the situations in the learning environment they see the benefits of training scenarios:

Table 1 Results of qualitative analysis of interviews displaying hierarchical themes

Raw data theme	Lower order theme	Higher order theme
Taught content is practically relevant (27)	Relevant for regular police duty	Relevance of police training
Police training is more practical-oriented than other subjects during academy training (15)		
Scenario-training helpful in developing duty-related competencies (17)		
Arresting and tactical skills needed/employed during practical training (20)		
Helpful in learning to cope with stress (7)		
Lessons concerning safety of oneself and others (4)		
Motivated by upcoming tests (15)	Relevant for upcoming tests	Motivating aspects of police training
Perception of becoming more competent (17)	Process of learning is motivating	
Process of learning is motivating (4)		
Challenge through combination of physical and cognitive work (14)	Challenging training is motivating	
Training is physically demanding (14)		
Motivating behaviour of coach (14)	Training climate is motivating	
Motivated by teamwork (1)		

Table 1 (continued)

Raw data theme	Lower order theme	Higher order theme
Long periods of idle time (9)	Problems with organization of training sessions	Negative aspects of police training
No variation in training facilities (3)		
Demotivating choreographed self-defence exercises (4)	Demotivating training activities	
Numerous repetitions of simple drills (10)		
Difficulties applying arresting and tactical concepts in practical training due to the lack of knowledge of colleagues (5)	Lack of representativeness in training	
Taught techniques not applicable in the real world (1)		
Low training frequency (18)	Timetabling of police training sessions within academy training curriculum	
Training on only one day per week compared to dispersed training (2)		
Long periods of intermission between training blocks (1)		
Demotivated by early start of training session (3)		
Knowledge of taught content (19)	Competence regarding the taught content (What)	Characteristics of a competent police trainer
Experience on the street (27)		
Good performers themselves (4)		
Knows how to teach (19)	Competence regarding teaching (How)	
Has patience with students (1)		
Responds to students (3)	Competence regarding understanding the learner (Who)	
Knows the student well (2)		
Is open to students' individual solutions (5)		

Numbers in brackets denote number of participants contributing to the raw data theme

> If you find yourself in a situation, it's most likely that you haven't trained for it exactly. You have in a similar way, so you're not so helpless […]

Many recruits mentioned transferring skills acquired in police training into their regular police work; particularly, tactical skills, such as general awareness, movement in buildings, approaching a vehicle and ensuring the weapon hand is not blocked when opening doors:

> For example, now it is like the door will never be opened with the shooting hand. Even when I am off-duty, I now open my car door with my left hand. As I said, it's ingrained.

Even though most police recruits emphasize the importance of the police training content for their regular duty and report transferring the skills learnt in their practical training, the motivation to think about, reflect on or engage in police training skills outside the training setting seemed to be limited, and strategic. For many recruits, the mandatory testing of police training skills was reported as the primary motivator to re-engage with training content. A police recruit put it the following way:

> When I'm in police training, I'm there and then I try to do my best. Well, before the exam you think about it and go through it again and discuss it with your partner what to focus on and what not to focus on. But you don't think about the training content [outside of training] actually.

In summary, police recruits do recognize the relevance of police training to their regular duties as police officers. However, extrinsic motivators, such as upcoming performance tests, seem to be needed to deliberately re-engage trainees with the training content outside of the scheduled sessions.

Motivating aspects of police training

Recruits reported being motivated by the challenge of police training. The challenges of police training are fundamentally different to other modules of the training academy curriculum. Whereas other subjects are primarily taught in classroom settings and focus on cognitive skill, police training adds practical training formats that are physically demanding:

> Yes, it's just a good balance between siting all day in the class room, where theoretical stuff is taught, and finally being able to do something physically, too

The more holistic approach of police training to currently test body and mind is enjoyed by the recruits:

> We have a lot of sport and that's just fun. I don't like going to the gym, but I like working out in combination with other things. If, for example, you participate in a training session, where you also have to use your brain, it is much more enjoyable than just working out in the gym.

The process of learning also emerged as a motivating aspect of police training. Foremost, was the feeling of increased competence afforded by police training. As part of their experience of the learning process, problem-based learning opportunities were especially valued by recruits:

> I especially like the practical part. When we play through the scenarios and do the best we can. And afterwards we say to ourselves: Ok, this and that did not work out. But they [the trainers] let you solve the scenarios by yourself first, so that you might also see the mistakes yourself.

Recruits also identified the role of the police trainer in creating a training climate that was motivating by use of their coaching behaviours. Noteworthy was the appreciation of the balance and blend of problem solving and problem setting employed by the trainer:

> I actually think the mix is quite good that we get shown a lot and then in the end we can try to apply what we have learned or just trying our own things.

In sum, recruits identified several motivating aspects of police training. Specifically, the holistic problem-based challenge created by police trainers was appreciated by recruits, as was the perception of increased competence afforded by the training activities.

Negative aspects of police training

On a macro level, recruits admonish the block structure of police training. Over the course of the year, there are blocks with training days one day a week that are followed by periods of several months without police training. The recruits stated a preference for regular distributed police training practice:

> It's just a pity that we only have police training a few weeks and only once a week, because you take a lot with you, but you forget it after a certain time and every semester the instructors say "Uh, we did that last year". [laughs] And then you think yes, but with the field training and all the exams, then you really forget it partly and you don't get any written material on the subject.

Within the training day, recruits reported substantial time "off task", because of waiting for other recruits to complete a conflict scenario or shooting practice. As such, active learning time was reduced:

> [I don't like,] when I have a break. Well, that's when you have to wait a long time. But maybe I'm a little too impatient there, too. But I can only say that you notice it again and again. […] Well, I'll give you an example. [In scenario-training] you just have to go into a house, search it and you have one position, your partner has the other position. That's how you do it through the whole scenario. One has one task, the other has the other task. Stick to your task is what they always say, and then it is the case that in the next scenario perhaps it happens the same way or you switch once. So, in principle you have only completed one task once on this day.

With regards to the design of the training activities, the recruits identified isolated and simple tasks as demotivating. A young police recruit stated about technical training in the context of self-defence:

> [I don't like it], right at the beginning these isolated self-defense techniques in the Dojo […], I found that quite terrible. I think a lot of people have already said that.

According to the recruits, these isolated drills lack practical applicability. A recruit explicitly wishes for the contextualization of isolated techniques:

> I don't even know why I didn't enjoy it so much. But it's like you're standing there with your baton and then hitting a cushion or a stack of tires. These exercises are very dry, without any practical applicability, not at all. It would be cool if you could use it somehow in a situation, in a scenario for example.

Similarly, self-defence exercises, described as "choreography", were viewed as not readily transferable to the real-world context:

> In the first semester I still had an older coach who did self-defense with us and I didn't find what was taught applicable, it was like choreography that you can't actually use.

Overall, recruits were critical of timetabling of police training sessions within the wider academy curriculum and aspects of police training delivery. Notably, recruits want more regular sessions that make better use of training time by designing sessions that increase time on task and include learning activities that are representative of real-world operational and conflictual scenarios.

Characteristics of a competent police trainer

Recruits reported wanting police trainers to demonstrate competence with regards to: (a) the taught content (*what* is being trained); (b) teaching (*how* the content is being delivered); and (c) understanding the learner (*who* is being trained).

Recruits want the police trainer to have deep-level knowledge of the content being delivered, which has been acquired by context-specific experience of policing "the streets":

> If he has experience, practical experience, if he has definitely been outside on the streets, I find it very helpful if he throws his own scenarios into the study group and tells us what he has experienced, what he has done well and what he has done wrong. You learn from it and you're already very interested in it.

Furthermore, the police trainer should be able to effectively model the skills being taught:

> [The police trainer] does not only know theoretically how it is being done, but he also shows it to you practically. As I said earlier, he demonstrates it to you so you can see, ok, he is good, he can solve this situation.

Recruits reported wanting to be sure that the taught content works in the field. As a test of police trainer competence, some recruits compare the taught content to their early field training experiences.

> [The coach is competent], if he conveys what he conveys in a credible way. We have already been in field internships and you take something with you, even if they do it differently there. But then you […] compare the situation you had during your field training with those we're doing now. And you notice relatively quickly whether the coach is competent or not.

Besides being competent in the specific content of police training, recruits reported wanting police trainers to be competent teachers:

> The police trainer must also be able to deliver the content. There are often coaches who know the content, but cannot convey the knowledge.

One recruit remarked that a marker of an effective teaching was one:

> […] who can give me the knowledge that I can use later.

Another recruit stated patience as an important factor for police trainers:

> When police training takes rarely place in the semester, then you forget things and then the coaches think, ok, I may have already explained this to them in the last and penultimate semester and now I just explain it again. Sometimes there is no other way, so patience is also an important factor.

Finally, recruits want the police trainers to understand the learners. It is important for recruits that the police trainer is capable of identifying within a group each individual's strengths and weaknesses, and to adapt:

> […] that they observe a lot, perceive a lot, somehow the people just don't only see the whole course, but also really get to know the people a little bit and emphasize their strengths and weaknesses and focus specifically on that.

Specifically, the recruits recognized that some trainees struggle with police training and do not feel very competent when it comes to use of physical force. The police trainer needs to act accordingly:

> It is important, that the coaches are socially competent. I would say, that police training isn't everyone's favourite activity. I would say, some people find it difficult. [It is important that the coach says] ok good, I'm going to take a look at you, that you might be able to do it better. But I have to say, here it absolutely works like that, I've never had any bad experiences like being left alone.

The recruits also recognized the value of police trainers being open to different solutions to technical or tactical problems that emerge when different learners are confronted with a scenario:

> If I solve a situation differently than they advise me to solve it, that they then say, well, that can work this way. [They] often do not insist on their opinion, but nevertheless also give an enormous number of action alternatives. [They]

do not say, yes, this is the optimal solution, like you go in there and immediately take the weapon from the suspect. They say you have to pay attention to the weapon, you can do this, do that, or move away from the weapon or anything else, they give you action alternatives and I think it's enormously important that they keep leeway there, yes, that you don't just end up with a strategy that doesn't work somehow.

Finally, recruits pointed out the benefits of relatively young police training coaches whose perspective is more aligned to that of the recruits and who are more motivated to coach than relatively older trainers:

I think there are also many coaches who now have very little experience outside on the streets and still do it very well. You also have to say that you profit as a student especially at a young age from a young trainer who has not been stuck in a fixed path, […] who is also a bit hungry and ambitious, so that's a bonus to have someone younger, who perhaps also understands how you feel as a student, because their studies were not so distant.

Taken together, the interviewed police recruits described a variety of characteristics of competent police trainers. Recruits want police trainers to be competent in three main areas, specifically (a) the content of their training sessions, (b) teaching and instructing in a way that recruits develop their skills and (c) understanding the individual learner.

Discussion

The current study was designed to capture what police recruits want from police training. Identifying what police recruits perceive to be the positive and negative aspects of police training, as well as their views on the characteristics of a competent police trainer, provides insight into what affects this samples' motivation to train.

Positive and negative aspects in police training

All recruits claimed to be motivated to participate in police training. In their view, they learn the skills that are necessary for their job as a police officer. Therefore, there was an acknowledgement that the content of the training sessions is relevant to them. Congruently, they perceive that the police training coach has an important role to play in preparing them for the job.

While generally recruits view that what they learn in police training reflects the skills needed for policing, there are some doubts when it comes to specific technical skills, especially in the self-defence context. The recruits were critical of the de-contextualization of the learning environment and the technical drilling (many repetitions of the same movement in linear, predictable contexts). Such views match those of more experienced officers. Experience of a range of situational factors that might arise in practice was perceived as a key learning design principle affording the development of the adaptive skills needed for their

daily work (Rajakaruna et al. 2017). Recruits in the current study point out having problems in identifying the relevance of isolated, clean, and sterile technical training for their working environment. This aspect has also been brought up in several studies aiming at investigating the effectiveness of self-defence training in the police training context (Renden et al. 2015; Jager et al. 2013). In order to further clarify the differences between real word duty and police training, future studies need to capture and understand the relatedness of the constraints at play in the criterion environment (Balagué et al. 2019).

Interestingly, the same critique was not directed at shooting practice, which also seems to be drill-based in a sterile setting (Staller et al. 2017a, b). During their recruit training, young officers spend blocks of time out in the field working alongside an experienced police officer (field training) before coming back into the academy training setting. During these periods, no recruit experienced a situation requiring the use of firearms for conflict resolution, whereas physical force and restraint techniques had to be applied regularly. As such, the recruits had accumulated a repertoire of experiences that fundamentally differed from the sterile and linear learning activities experienced in self-defence training. Since these recruits did not experience use of firearms in a real incident, it is possible that participants did not critique the firearms training because they did not have any experiences to use as a point of reference. This interpretation is supported by results of Rajakaruna et al. (2017) who conducted focus group interviews with experienced police officers with the goal of ensuring validity of police training. Experienced officers advocated for more communication and de-escalation skill to be incorporated in police training, since these situations reflect their working reality over many years. Since the recruits in the current study did not have this vast amount of experience on duty, it can be assumed that their conception of reality (Heil et al. 2017) differed from more experienced officers. As such, the current results reflect the wants of recruits with limited understanding of the preparation needed for front-line police work and who may be overconfident in their judgement at the beginning of their learning journey (Sanchez and Dunning 2018).

There is a sense from the interviews that the recruits want to be challenged holistically. Police training activities that are not intellectually stimulating, such as isolated, repetitive, motoric drills, are not wanted by the recruits. Put differently, participants want more representatively designed tasks that mimic the constraints and information variables that are prevalent in real-world incidents (Staller et al. 2017a, b) and allow the learners to attune their skills to the specific information sources that are prevalent in real incidents (Pinder et al. 2011). This explains their positive attitude towards scenario training, where police trainers are used to role-play various types of encounters ranging from violent offenders to domestic disputes and individuals in psychological crisis (Nota and Huhta 2019).

Because of the representativeness of scenario training, it is considered as the gold standard of police training (Nota and Huhta 2019; Murray 2004; Lindgren 2012; Andersen et al. 2016). The challenge then for police trainers is to design practice tasks across the sub-disciplines of police training (self-defence and arrest, shooting communication, etc.) that are representative. Even though, initial attempts have been made to provide a framework for designing such environments (Staller et al. 2017a,

b; Körner and Staller 2018), future work needs to investigate the effectiveness of representatively designed learning tasks in police training.

Representative training activities are likely to challenge the learner; however, the recruits express a want for learning tasks to be 'pitched' at the right level. The importance of appropriately challenging individuals has been argued with respect to skill acquisition (Guadagnoli and Lee 2004; Guadagnoli et al. 2012) and motivation (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2014). In order to be challenged, some recruits indicated that they like solving different scenarios on their own. However, it can be assumed that this is only true for problems whose challenge point is at an appropriate level. If the challenge is too high or too low the task could be demotivating (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2014), as evidenced by accounts of students, disliking being thrown in at the deep-end in the beginning.

The recruits were particularly critical of training components that created long wait times between tasks, such as shooting and scenario training. Extended periods of inactivity without direction to reflect on performance of the skills significantly reduces the efficiency of training. Moreover, long waiting times reduce the motivation for participating in police training. Viable solutions might be to include students in the design and delivery of training tasks, creating the feeling of autonomy and ownership of the training (Hastie et al. 2011; Staller et al. 2018). Delegating responsibility to police recruits has been shown to be an effective and efficient method in the context of skill development within scenario training (Sjöberg et al. 2016; Rantatalo et al. 2018). For firearms training, recruits active involvement in checking and maintaining safety on the firearms range (Schwering et al. 2019) might help to deepen understanding while minimizing risk.

Finally, recruits expressed a subjective need for more regular, less blocked delivery of police training to stave off perceived declines in competence. The want for more and regular training time seems to be recurrent issue in the police training context, when performance in the field was not perceived as sufficient (Jager et al. 2013; Renden et al. 2015). Research on the optimization of police training within the time constraints of the training curriculum is needed to support skill transfer and reduce a decline in office competence following prolonged periods of no police training (Körner and Staller 2018; Staller and Zaiser 2015).

Characteristics of competent police trainers

Concerning the characteristics of a competent police trainer, recruits want (a) competence regarding the taught content, (b) effective delivery of the training content and (c) consideration of individual learners. All recruits stated that "real-world experience" is a crucial characteristic for a police trainer. It seems that experience on the street is seen by recruits as proof that the police trainer has a deep understanding of the content. This is consistent with the idea that in the law enforcement domain perceived competence is often related to the years of experience, as well as the unit in which an officer served (Behr 2017). However, reducing competence of a coach to experience and affiliation to a specific job misses the true nature of competence (Abraham and Collins 2011; Staller and Koerner 2021a). For example, it has

been shown that years of experience on the streets does not correlate with operational competence (Schmalzl 2008).

When it comes to the delivery of the training content, police recruits want the coach to have a deep understanding of *how* to teach. Several recruits value a sense of humour with the coach. While humour can be helpful in sport coaching settings (Aggerholm and Ronglan 2012; Ronglan and Aggerholm 2014), its value may become even more prominent in police training, where the seriousness of the content (death, injury, violence, etc.) is balanced through the use of humour. This balancing act and its relieving effect has been documented in the law enforcement domain (Spence and Millott 2014; Holdaway 1988; Charman 2013).

Finally, some participants stated the want for individualized consideration by the coach. This aspect of being approachable and caring has recently been shown to be a contributing factor to the credibility of police trainers, positively influencing learning and development of learners in the police sector (Hawkins 2019). However, compared to the subject matter knowledge contributing to the "street credibility" of the coach, an understanding of the learner seems not as important for the recruits. This is consistent with notions that social oriented coaches—without explicitly displaying competence in the taught content—are rated less competent compared to those only focusing on displaying competent behaviour (Sutcliffe et al. 2019). Interestingly, technical expertise was downplayed as an indicator of high levels of competence by special forces members (Lindberg and Rantatalo 2014), indicating an overestimation of the police specific content knowledge compared to the other knowledge domains.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge that the perception of police training presented in this study is limited to the training programme for young police officers adopted by a single German state. These views require validation. Furthermore, the views presented are of a sample of young police recruits with limited field experience. Incorporation of the views of experienced police officers would provide a more complete evaluation of the wants and needs of participants in academy settings and the appropriateness of police training delivery. It is possible that the perceived relevance of and motivation for police training changes depending on the experiences of real-world incidents (Rajakaruna et al. 2017). Finally, it is important to emphasize the point that the results reflect the *wants* of young recruits, which are not necessarily congruent with what recruits actually *need* to prepare for front-line duty. There is a need to know what is needed.

Conclusion

The current study investigated the wants and subjective needs of recruits concerning the mandatory training format of police training. The lines of questioning were on the positive and negative aspects of police training and the characteristics of a

competent coach. The recruits clearly expressed that police training is an important part of their training and were motivated to take part in this training. In general, recruits perceive police training as relevant in preparing them for their duty, however, the immediate relevance of the content is viewed with upcoming institutional tests of police training skills in mind. A prominent motivating aspect was the perception of becoming more competent and being challenged holistically. De-contextualized practice and static repetitions were perceived as demotivating factors. The police training coach is perceived to play a prominent role in learning. Recruits want police trainers to have competence regarding the taught content, to effectively delivery the training content and to consider the individuality learners. Taken together, the current study provides further insight in the wants and subjective needs of the learners in police training. Thus, it provides police trainers with important information about how to motivate learners by tailoring the design of training programmes to the wants and needs of young police recruits. However, there is a *need* for further research investigating specific aspects of pedagogical practices in police training, as well as the perspective of experts and trainers on what police recruits need from police training.

Declarations

Conflict of interest We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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