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De-escalation in Everyday Police Operations

Clemens Lorei and Kristina Balaneskovic

Research Article

ABSTRACT

Police action involves conflicts or even the use of force each day. Police officers may encounter conflict situations with citizens during routine patrols. In such situations, the aim of professional police action is to de-escalate and only use force if this can no longer be avoided. Communication is the primary operational resource in de-escalation. De-escalation means any behavior (verbal and non-verbal communication, tactical measures, etc.) that avoids allowing conflicts to degenerate into the use of greater force (waging the conflict with force). In addition, it halts or reverses the development of escalating situations and includes all measures capable of achieving this. Many de-escalation techniques and strategies can be applied to everyday police operations. Nonetheless, little empirical data exists on de-escalation options and training courses for learning and practicing de-escalation techniques. The outcome of an evaluation of de-escalation techniques for police practice is presented in this article, which shows that besides awareness of appropriate measures, additional factors also seem important for ensuring effective de-escalation.

Keywords: *de-escalation, communication, police training, use of force, operational resources*

INTRODUCTION

Police action regularly involves conflicts and the use of force (Lorei, 2016). Such situations are precisely the raison d'être of the police (Lorei, 2016). While the media frequently focuses on the police use of force and firearms in particular (sometimes this is also true for researchers), de-escalating operational actions is seldomly or only exceptionally featured in everyday police life. Police officers far

more often resolve conflicts verbally (Lorei, 2020). The use of weapons is regarded as a last resort. This is usually also reflected in practice, and, at times, the use of weapons is avoided even in situations where it is an option (Pinizzotto et al., 2012). A similar picture emerges concerning the degree of physical force used by the police, which is mostly the same or less than that used by the assailant (Hine et al., 2016; Wolf et al., 2009). In many situations in everyday police life, communication is central and, under German Police Guideline 371, is indeed the most crucial operational resource. The German Police Service Regulation "PDV 100" and the National Consensus Policy on Use of Force (International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2017, p. 3) state that de-escalation is the primary conflict resolution tool.

> De-escalation is behavior (verbal and non-verbal communication, tactical measures) that does not allow conflicts to degenerate into increased use of force (conflict resolution with violence), but avoids them, stops their development, or reverses them, and includes all measures that can achieve this.
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> At the international level, the definition applied by the National Consensus Policy on Use of Force is often used as a guideline (IACP, 2017, p. 2): DE-ESCALATION: *Taking action or communicating verbally or non-verbally during a potential force encounter in an attempt to stabilize the situation and reduce the immediacy of the threat so that more time, options, and resources can be called upon to resolve the situation without the use of force or with a reduction in the force necessary. De-escalation may include the use of techniques such as command presence, advisements, warnings, verbal persuasion, and tactical repositioning.*

The following information concerns de-escalation in everyday police operations as distinct from operations involving special police forces such as negotiation teams (Brisach et al., 2001; Weßel-Therhorn, 2011), crisis intervention teams (Compton et al., 2014; Steadman & Morissette, 2016; Oliva et al., 2010), or tactical communication during major operations (Schenk et al., 2012).

This paper provides the reader with an overview of helpful de-escalation strategies, lists their empirical evidence, and integrates the techniques into a theoretical framework in terms of existing communication models. This is new to the de-escalation literature and goes beyond existing contributions.

Accordingly, the paper begins with the communication conditions making clear which aspects influence communication with the police counterpart, followed by a section on the attitude of a police officer. De-escalation strategies can only

work if the person using them is open-minded. The core of this paper presents a variety of de-escalation strategies and techniques. Strategies based on common aspects are bundled together to make it easier for the reader to follow the explanations. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the effectiveness of de-escalation training using the strategies presented.

INITIAL COMMUNICATION CONDITIONS

It is commonly known that *one cannot not communicate* (Watzlawick et al., 1969). Hence, any contact between citizens and police officers involves communication. Operations may differ regarding the time between first contact with the interaction partner and action involving the use of force. Nonetheless, there are attacks on police officers that occur suddenly (Schmalzl, 2005) and which presumably involve little to no interaction or communication. In most police operations, however, a conflict that also involves communication unfolds. This is shown by the study conducted by Abdul-Rahman et al. (2020), in which the use of force by the police is examined from the perspective of those affected. The study revealed that in day-to-day police operations (not major events), the escalation period in more than half the cases exceeded two minutes. Only every tenth case reported that the police began using force directly at the first moment of interaction between the police and the person(s) affected. This shows that the use of force by police officers or an attack on them is often preceded by a certain period. Hence, it can be assumed that there has been time for interaction in the run-up to the use of force by either party and if this is the case, there is also room for de-escalation measures. It is asserted that when a situation entailing a police operation arises, any communication with persons targeted by the operation or those merely involved also includes de-escalation. Similar to the statement that "one cannot not communicate", it is postulated that communicative acts of de-escalation or escalation will occur in all situations. Hence, police officers do not begin to apply de-escalation measures at some point during an operation but do so implicitly and out of necessity as early as the moment of first contact. This is not trivial but of crucial importance. De-escalation does not start after interaction has led to a deadlock in which dealings with each other are highly emotional and involve little rationality and where the conflict parties would rather plunge each other into the abyss than back off an inch from their position (Glasl, 1980). Hence, de-escalation is a continuous process. Police action thus requires proactive and preventive communication to stop critical situations from arising.

As the authority maintenance theory explains, social control in a police interaction is a unique setting regarding various parameters (Alpert & Dunham, 2004). Compared to other daily interactions, interactions between police officers

and citizens primarily aim to maintain police authority (Alpert & Dunham, 2004). Also, no other situation has clearly defined roles and rules regarding the use of force. This unbalance of authority makes it difficult, especially for citizens, to maintain face (Alpert & Dunham, 2004). Therefore, de-escalation is crucial for everyday police work. De-escalation is something that is often misunderstood by police officers and is perceived as passive endurance and as weakening the police officer's own position (Schmalzl, 2011). Critics of the de-escalation approach are concerned that police officers will be exposed to greater risks and warn of an increase in violent crime against police officers (Engel et al., 2020). However, de-escalation should not be confused with passivity (Schmalzl, 1996). Instead, a presentation of strength or even the controlled use of force can also de-escalate the situation and prevent even worse acts of massive violence (Kubera & Fuchs, 2011; Pfeiffer, 2014; Temme, 2011). De-escalation techniques are not always and not intrinsically de-escalatory in nature (Pfeiffer, 2014). Their effect depends on the context. Accordingly, Brenneisen and Mescher (2011, p. 3) state that *"the involvement of too many or too few police officers in police operations is contrary to the aim of de-escalation"*. Hence, the deployment of extensively equipped units and the show of force can just as much lead to escalation as keeping a too-low profile. This does not only apply to major situations but is also true for everyday operations.

ATTITUDE

Personal attitude plays a decisive role in de-escalation. Richter (2006) regards the attitude towards the interaction partner as the basis of all de-escalation measures. Where little importance is attached to communication as an operational resource and other operational methods are preferred, or where there is the concern that de-escalation would create risk, communicative strategies are used less often and with less patience – Tränkle (2020) describes further considerations in the choice of resource. The intention and willingness to find solutions that do not involve the use of force is a prerequisite for de-escalation (Temme, 2011). A more citizen-oriented approach, which emphasizes the communicative aspects of police work, involves a lower risk of violence, whereas police officers with an authoritarian attitude experience violence more frequently during police operations (Ellrich & Baier, 2015). Respect is based on reciprocity and requires that persons are viewed as human beings and accepted as such, regardless of what they have done. This does not mean that their behavior should be tolerated or excused, but that the person as such should be treated humanely and with respect. If a person expects to be shown politeness and respect, they must treat others the same way. According to Temme (2011), politeness is the "lifeline" of de-escalation communication. Hücker (2017) regards a polite greeting as a positive first step in

dealing with a situation. This can prevent violence. Respect has the same effect. Not interrupting the other person is one aspect of this. Acknowledging a different perspective on the situation is also an expression of respect. This does not mean giving in and adopting this perspective but acknowledging it and integrating it into the communication. The behavior described is based on attitudes. Conversely, a negative attitude also entails the risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy (see Merton, 1968), which Hermanutz (2015) was able to show in his study on violence against police officers. If the willingness to use violence is assumed on the part of the interaction partner, the resulting behavior may contribute in no small measure to the escalation of violence. An extreme form of the anti-de-escalation attitude is embodied by the "hardline police officer" (Tränkle, 2015). The "hardline police officer" and the way the shift team feels about them – dislike, but also recognition of the "resoluteness" with which they are prepared to take decisive action (Tränkle, 2015) – clearly indicate that attitudes and organizational culture also play an essential role in de-escalation. In this connection, Zaiser and Staller (2015) and Zaiser et al. (2021) go as far as to call for a change in thinking on the part of police officers. They should not regard their interaction partner as an adversary, but as a fellow citizen, sometimes someone who needs help and/or is experiencing a crisis. They should abandon the warrior mindset and think of themselves as guardians instead.

DE-ESCALATION STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

No explicit distinction between strategies and techniques is made in this article. Instead, the terms are used synonymously. Furthermore, the strategies to be presented have been grouped according to common aspects to make it easier for the reader to keep track of the multitude of techniques.

Accordingly, the overview begins with preparation for the situation, followed by relationship building with the police counterpart. Furthermore, strategies are presented which are intended to promote the cooperation of the counterpart before techniques are introduced which pursue the goal of working out solutions to the situation. Finally, the presentation concludes with rather unusual ways of de-escalation. The boundaries of the categories are to be understood as fluid, and strategies can certainly be assigned to several aspects.

Preparation for the situation

Hücker (2017) describes the anticipation of conflict and risk as the prerequisite for de-escalation during police operations. Preparing for the situation and the interaction partner's emotions and reactions is part of preparing for de-escalation. Going through the situation in one's mind can create a decisive

advantage because, even in emotionally charged situations, this makes solutions more readily available to police officers. This also makes it possible to formulate goals that facilitate targeted de-escalation action. It is then possible to consciously plan one's actions, concentrate on the essentials, pursue the actual objective, and not become distracted. This also requires provocation to be dealt with professionally. Mental preparation, consultation with colleagues, setting goals, and sub-goals can be regarded as part of Potzner's five-step decision-making model (2021). Regarding the use of firearms by the police, one myth is that the decision is always made within a fraction of a second and that officers can hardly prepare for it because no situations are alike (the so-called split-second syndrome, Fyfe, 1986). In a critique of this approach, Fyfe (1986) pointed out that the decision to pull the trigger was often based on other, previous decisions. Furthermore, research on natural decision-making behavior shows the same results. Consequently, the entire chronicle (Fyfe, 1986) must be considered when analyzing police-related decisions, such as the use of force.

Stress management is essential for situations that can easily escalate or have already escalated. Schmidt (2007) regards reducing the level of agitation as the first goal of achieving de-escalation during police operations. This must apply to both sides (Pfeiffer, 2014; Price & Baker, 2012; Richmond et al., 2012; Richter, 2006; Todak & James, 2018; White et al., 2019). Controlling one's emotions is also essential in such situations (Ayhan & Hicdurmaz, 2020; Hücker, 2017; Richmond et al., 2012; Todak & White, 2019). The police officer must be (relatively) relaxed and thus radiate calm in tense and stressful situations. Speaking to the interaction partner calmly and unperturbedly, giving them time and space for emotional relief (e.g., by letting them shout), and taking the time to interact with them has a calming effect. Since aggression is commonly associated with massive physical agitation, measures aimed at relaxation also have a de-escalatory effect. Dutschmann (2003) describes a type of aggression in which agitation typically features. Reducing agitation is thus a central aspect of de-escalation. Relaxation techniques that quickly take effect, such as breathing relaxation, can help reduce officers' stress levels while having a relaxing effect on the interaction partner. Relaxing the situation, eliminating additional stress factors, and permitting breaks bring calmness (Pontzer, 2021; Zaiser et al., 2021). Helping the interaction partner to manage their anger is equally useful. In this context, patience is also an important factor. Being patient with the interaction partner, taking time, and trying several times again can be crucial (Mangold, 2011; Richmond et al., 2012; Tränkle, 2020; White et al., 2019).

Self-confidence is crucial throughout such situations. Schmidt (2007) regards maintaining self-confidence as the third goal in achieving de-escalation during police operations. In his anti-violence training, Heyder (2016) even builds on the issue of self-esteem. He takes the view that undermining self-esteem often

triggers aggression. Therefore, it is necessary to deal sensitively with the interaction partner's self-esteem to avoid violence. In conflicts, the "loss of face" by any conflict partner must be avoided (Hücker, 2017; Price & Baker, 2012). The interaction partner must be given the opportunity to "save face". The other person's status should be upheld and respected. Embarrassing them in front of other people is to be avoided. The interaction partner's self-esteem must not be offended. This also applies when conflict parties are potentially willing to back down on the issue but fear that this will entail a loss of status, respect, or authority, i.e., the loss of face with others or themselves. Measures that include face-saving can have an appropriate de-escalatory effect (Hücker, 2017; Pfeiffer, 2014). This may make it necessary to avoid arguments in front of others and accept compromises to uphold the honor, status, etc., of the interaction partner or other persons of importance to them. Being polite and showing respect also serves to uphold self-confidence. Mutual respect is fundamental in de-escalation situations (Ayhan & Hicdurmaz, 2020; Richter, 2006; Todak & James, 2018; Todak & White, 2019; Tränkle, 2020; Zaiser et al., 2021). It is a matter of being polite and showing respect, responding to the interaction partner's questions, not interrupting them, and actively showing an interest in their situation. Indicating interest in the interaction partner and their situation accompanied by appropriate non-verbal communication can have a de-escalatory effect. This also requires a conscious decision in favor of a communicative solution and a preference for a solution that does not involve the use of force. Interest is also indicated by asking questions, asking the other person to explain themselves, and responding to questions the interaction partner asks.

The key objective of de-escalation is to ensure that all those involved in the police operation emerge unscathed. The critics of the de-escalation approach are always concerned that de-escalation will adversely affect the security of police officers (White et al., 2021). However, there is no contradiction between de-escalation and self-protection. The contrary is the case. Self-protection and the security of third parties are to be ensured since they form the basis of interaction. Self-protection and personal security are key factors for facilitating de-escalation (Ayhan & Hicdurmaz, 2020; Oliva et al., 2010; Richmond et al., 2012; White et al., 2019). Self-protection also involves maintaining eye contact, radiating self-confidence, and switching to physical methods at the right time (Price & Baker, 2012; Richter, 2006). In this connection, various tactical measures can also contribute to de-escalation. Swapping interaction partners may prove helpful when communication has reached a dead-end. Altogether, optimization of the communication channels is to be ensured. Where the parties have to shout at one another, only fragments of what the other person is saying are understood; where communication is only possible with the acceptance of risk, a strain will be put on communication and de-escalation. Buying time is also important. Sometimes it is possible to use the interaction partner's group structure to bring about cooperation

or to let the group sort out their conflicts. The deployment of reinforcements and support units by the police control center can be conducive to de-escalation (Pontzer, 2021).

Relationship building

Working on relationships is central to de-escalation (Price & Baker, 2012). According to the fundamental communication theories developed by Watzlawick et al. (2011) and Schulz von Thun (1981), the relationship level always plays a decisive role in addition to the factual level. If there is interference in the communication process at the relationship level, "factual" communication is barely possible. A good relationship with the interaction partner thus provides the necessary basis for de-escalation. Only then can information be exchanged constructively. Thus, acceptance of the police as an interaction partner must be created before communication begins (Schenk et al., 2012). This only works if the concerned actors have become acquainted through communicative means before the critical communication event. This is nothing other than building a relationship based on which appropriate information can be exchanged in a credible way. Working on relationships includes, for example, police officers introducing themselves by stating their names and the name of their police station, asking the interaction partner their name and details of the situation, listening attentively and actively, explaining the procedure, showing respect, being polite, engaging in small talk and adjusting to the interaction partner in terms of non-verbal communication (so-called mirroring). A relationship with the interaction partner can also be established by showing approval of some of their characteristics (Richmond et al., 2012). Pointing out commonalities and similarities with the interaction partner can also help build a communicative relationship. Maintaining eye contact, engaging in some small talk at the beginning, and generally keeping the conversation flowing by asking questions.

Aggressive behavior can also be prevented if there is greater inhibition to displaying such behavior. Schmidt (2007) considers this as the fourth goal towards achieving de-escalation during police interventions. The focus is generally on pointing out consequences (threatening the use of force, punishment, etc.). Eliciting empathy for the potential victim can also have an inhibiting effect. If the victim can be perceived as a human being and not as an instrument of state authority, this can raise the threshold for the use of force. Moreover, various police campaigns aimed at reducing attacks on police officers are based on this idea. Drawing attention to the personal/human aspect prevents violence since it counteracts the dehumanization effect in line with the principles of neutralization theory. Indeed, using bodycams is also intended to increase the level of inhibition.

For one thing, the police officer's interaction partner is reminded of the consequences of their actions and the greater probability of being punished due to the video recordings. For another, the self-perception associated with the camera may have a regulatory effect (Kißling, 2021).

Showing empathy towards the police officer's interaction partner is also an effective de-escalation strategy (Price & Baker, 2012; White et al., 2019). The needs and wishes of the interaction partner should be identified (Richmond et al., 2012). Showing understanding, or even sympathy, for the emotions of the interaction partner and comforting them can have a de-escalatory effect. Seeing things from the interaction partner's point of view can form the central basis of a de-escalation talk (Ayhan & Hicdurmaz, 2020; Pontzer, 2021; Todak & James, 2018; Todak & White, 2019). In addition to showing understanding of the interaction partner's situation, saying how much they are affected by the situation can also have a de-escalatory effect.

If Bandura's (1997) theory of social learning (learning through imitation) is followed, police officers have an important function as role models. The way they handle aggression can have negative and positive consequences. If they appear excited and aggressive, this may lead to the same behavior on the part of the interaction partner. Conversely, if the police officer displays aggression avoidance behavior and remains calm, this may have an exemplary effect on the interaction partner. Thus, police officers should handle situations calmly and not let themselves get worked up by provocation. Police officers often find themselves at the receiving end of provocation. Studies have shown that providing explanations and reasons is the best way police officers can react to provocation (Hermanutz, 2014; Hermutz & Spöcker, 2007). In a certain respect, this is in keeping with the type of communication used for creating transparency. Not responding to a provocation, making witty replies, or even showing arrogance proved to be inadequate behavior (Hermanutz, 2014; Hermanutz & Spöcker, 2012). The right way for police officers to react to provocation is not to become provocative and not to let themselves be drawn into this "little game".

Promote cooperation

Active listening is one of the most effective techniques considering all the aforementioned factors. The use of listening as a de-escalation technique is widespread and very effective (Ayhan & Hicdurmaz, 2020; Mangold, 2011; Oliva et al., 2010; Price & Baker, 2012; Richmond et al., 2012; Richter, 2006; Spielfogel & McMillen, 2017; Todak & James, 2018; Todak & White, 2019; White et al., 2019; Zaiser et al., 2021; Zaiser & Staller, 2015). Active listening involves listening to the interaction partner, asking them questions, repeating what was said in their own

words, indicating attention, and responding to statements made by the other person (cf. Hallenberger, 2014b). In a survey that evaluated the contact of citizens with the police, Hermanutz (1995) established that the behavior of the police officers performing a police check was crucial to how the respective citizen assessed it. The assessment outcome mainly depended on the extent to which the police officer's interaction partner could communicate his concern to the police in sufficient detail. According to a study by Hermanutz and Spöcker (2012), citizens also rated being allowed to justify themselves positively. Hence, the interaction partner must be given the feeling that cognizance is taken of their concerns, points of view, and interests and that these are considered. To make this possible, listening is important. At the same time, it is also possible to gain awareness of the reasons, aims, or triggers for certain behaviors, for example, potentially aggressive actions. This is a fundamental prerequisite for successful de-escalation (Pfeiffer, 2014).

It is known that non-verbal communication plays an important role in all forms of interaction. The same can be said for de-escalation (Price & Baker, 2012; Richmond et al., 2012; Richter, 2006; Spielfogel & McMillen, 2017). Keeping a distance from mentally ill persons so as not to scare them is of great importance (Richmond et al., 2012; White et al., 2019). This is also expedient regarding passive protection and increasing reaction time (Pontzer, 2021), which in this context is to be regarded as more of a form of self-protection. Efforts not to take an intimidating or dominant social role can have a de-escalatory effect; this is particularly important when dealing with frightened people (including persons in a state of mental distress). Non-verbal signs, facial expressions, posture, etc., also indicate respect, empathy, and interest. Avoiding sending out signals that give the impression of being a victim and showing signs of inattention and negligence can deter aggressive interaction partners from attacking police officers (Pinizzotto & Davis, 1999).

The inability to understand attempts at communication by the police or being overtaxed by these can also lead to frustration on the part of the police officer's interaction partner. Communication must therefore be appropriate to the target group. The information must be comprehensible (Schmidt, 2007). The use of official language in such situations is more of a hindrance. Moreover, it should not be expected that the police officer's interaction partner will have a detailed knowledge of the law. Therefore, the appropriate register must be chosen. The level, sentence structure, and information quantity must be adapted to the interaction partner to avoid overtaxing them and give them time to understand and act on what they have heard (Ayhan & Hicdurmaz, 2020; Richmond et al., 2012; Todak & James, 2018; Todak & White, 2019; White et al., 2019).

Working out solutions

Aggression theories can serve as the basis for de-escalation (Ayhan & Hicdurmaz, 2020; Roberton et al., 2012). If the purpose of de-escalation is to avoid aggression, appropriate approaches can be derived directly from aggression theories (Allen et al., 2018; Nolting, 2005). De-escalation thus hinders aggression and violence from arising and curbing the intensification of this behavior and reversing its development. Distracting attention from the cause of the aggression may help in such situations. Based on the revised frustration–aggression hypothesis, avoiding frustration and provocation should have a de-escalatory effect. This makes transparency and the explanation of measures necessary in police operations because the police regularly require the interaction partner to act in a way that they would not do voluntarily. Perceived fairness in such conflicts is fundamental, even if the interaction partner is being considered for an administrative offense or a violation of the law (Tyler & Folger, 1980). Tyler and Folger conclude that fair treatment by the police can lessen the impression that this encounter with the police could result in negative consequences, for example, punishment. Fair means that the reasons for any measures are explained transparently and understandably. On the other hand, a sense of unfairness arises when ostensibly fewer objective reasons are given for police measures, thus making them appear arbitrary and hostile. The transparency of police measures can thus be regarded as one of the central de-escalation strategies (Pfeiffer, 2014; Zaiser & Staller, 2015). Tactical communication also pursues this approach (Kubera & Fuchs, 2011; Neutzler & Schenk, 2011; Schenk et al., 2012). Schmalzl (2012) goes as far as to describe this as the ideal approach to de-escalation. Exactly that type of transparency is meant by Temme (2011) when he refers to "predictable action" as a de-escalation measure. He believes transparency exists when measures are announced, implemented, and explained. It is a matter of providing explanations and reasons. Questions asked by the interaction partner should be answered, and the behavior expected of them should be made clear. The actions of the police should be explained to the interaction partner without making threats (Richmond et al., 2012; Todak & James, 2018).

Aggression is sometimes also used as an instrument. In such cases, the threat of using force is only a means to an end. Where it is possible to describe alternative means of achieving objectives that make the use of force unnecessary, the chances of avoiding the use of force increase. The desired behavior should also be clearly communicated. Objectivity is essential. This includes using words that are free of value judgments, avoiding accusations and the apportioning of blame but rather taking a solutions-oriented approach (i.e., focus on "what can we do?" and not on "why did you?"), and reacting to provocation professionally.

Criticism also creates frustration. However, if negative feedback is necessary, only criticizing a person's behavior and not the individual may prove helpful (Hallenberger, 2014a; Werdes, 2014). Where frustration on the part of the police officer's interaction partner cannot be avoided, support can at least be offered to lessen this frustration. Pointing out solutions and indicating how to obtain help can have an appeasing effect. Acceptance can result in solutions when they are presented as an offer. After eliciting solutions from the interaction partner by asking them questions, they can be offered a selection of alternative solutions, thus involving them in the decision-making process and giving them a choice (Price & Baker, 2012; Richmond et al., 2012; Zaiser & Staller, 2015). Allowing compromise also creates acceptance (Todak & James, 2018; Todak & White, 2019; Tränkle, 2020; White et al., 2019). Measures are usually more likely to be accepted if the different parties are involved in developing such measures, are given a choice, or are even allowed to suggest solutions themselves. Conversely, resistance to a decision or measure in the sense of reactance (Brehm, 1966; especially for police officers, Pfeiffer, 2012) may arise if a party is not given the freedom to decide on or choose alternatives. Similarly, Schmidt (2007) regards allowing the interaction partner to maintain a feeling of control as the aim of police de-escalation measures. This means that the interaction partner thinks that they are still in control of or has influence over the situation. If the interaction partner feels at the mercy of others and, in this case, the police in particular, this will encourage them to behave to maintain control, if necessary, with violence. Meta communication can sometimes help identify, address, and contain escalation build-up. Talking about communication and explaining the communicative situation can be a de-escalation approach.

Finding unusual ways

In conflicts and escalation situations, the conflict parties often develop cognitive tunnel vision and "run aground". The conflict parties often focus on individual elements and aspects and sometimes hardly take notice of anything else. It is also difficult to listen. Entering into a conversation with the other person seems impossible. An element of surprise, such as offering a cigarette, sitting down, etc., can be a valuable means of breaking out of this vicious circle (Pfeiffer, 2014). Such an unexpected reaction tears the other person away from the matter they are exclusively focusing on and, for example, distracts their attention from stimuli that engender violence, thus forcing them to rethink their approach. Such an approach can be the remedy for deadlock situations in particular. Humor, which must not be sarcastic or insulting, can have a similar effect. In addition to humor's ability to distract, it can also be used to manage stress and control emotions due to its physically relaxing effects.

A real case of a rocker running riot (Lorei, 2020):

A police patrol is called to an altercation in a bar involving criminal damage. It is reported that the very aggressive offender is still on the premises. On their arrival at the scene, the suspected offender – evidently a rocker – moves towards the police patrol and shouts at them. *"You're here already, you can shoot me dead right now, come on, shoot me dead already!"* Taking care of self-protection, one of the police officers asks the raging man in a calm voice what has happened to him, what was making him so angry, and says that he would listen to him. The aggressor continues to move towards the police officer and once again says that the police should shoot him dead. The police officer who was shouted at remains calm, looks the rocker in the eyes, and repeats his request: *"Please tell me what is making you so angry. What is annoying you so much? I am certainly not going to shoot you in the head, I'm going to listen to you."* After that, the rocker, who until then was raging, stands quietly, looks at the police officer, and is visibly surprised. He briefly looks aside at the other police officer, who is hiding his pepper spray in his hand. When the rocker looks at the police officer again, the police officer very calmly repeats his question: *"Well, tell me what or who has annoyed you so much that you are so angry?"* Thereupon the rocker says: *"You've certainly got guts, cop. Coming here, so relaxed. Up to now, I've always had problems and brawled with you cops. When you arrive, it's always my fault, and I always get arrested. No cop has ever listened to me, and there was me wanting to lay into you. But I have never come across someone like you."*

As a conversation about the incident unfolds, a solution can be agreed on. The rocker, who is known to the police in connection with several previous incidents of the same nature, agreed to accompany the police officers to the police station to make a statement.

DE-ESCALATION TRAINING

De-escalation training must impart knowledge and skills. Knowledge and mastery of de-escalation techniques are undoubtedly one of the aims, and possibly the most important, of such training courses. However, successfully handling police operations using communicative means also requires an appropriate attitude. Therefore, the attitude must also be a learning objective of such training courses. In addition, the training courses must ensure that the participants are convinced of

the strategies' effectiveness (White et al., 2021). Even though the strategies are considered essential, doubts remain as to their effectiveness, and sometimes there are concerns that de-escalation could adversely affect the security of police officers (White et al., 2021). Moreover, it seems important that police officers understand the police's role in a free and democratic country and have good tactical abilities (covering behavior, distance-keeping) as well as the skills required to engage in operational debriefing in a communicative manner (Bennell et al., 2021).

Compared to training on the use of force (ranging from physical force to the use of firearms), explicit de-escalation training is provided less often (Abanonu, 2018; Dayley, 2016; Deveau, 2021; Giacomantonio et al., 2019). This contradicts the reality of everyday police life, in which communication and de-escalation occur far more often than the use of force. Deveau (2021) cites statistics for Canada, which reveal that 98% of all police emergencies involve de-escalation and only 2% the use of force. However, the imbalance between basic and follow-on training can lead to solutions involving the use of force being preferred in practice (Dayley, 2016). This can also be seen in the analysis conducted by Lee et al. (2010), who found a positive correlation between the amount of training provided and the use of force.

There are generally hardly any evaluations of training measures for police officers (Giacomantonio et al., 2019). This is particularly true for de-escalation training. The situation is further complicated in that de-escalation training varies significantly in terms of content, scope, objectives, implementation, and pedagogics (Leach et al., 2019; Pontzer, 2021). The lack of research on police action and training contrasts with the fact that police operations are repeatedly the subject of discussion. The use of force by police officers and violence against police officers, in particular, are subjected to public scrutiny.

By simulating police operations, Giacomantonio et al. (2019) evaluated Canadian "verbal judo" training. The training participants were very satisfied with the training. They were convinced they could apply the skills acquired and stated they were very motivated to use these skills in future operations. In a retention test, most training participants also showed very good learning achievements. An experiment involving behavioral observation also established that the training participants also showed very good learning achievements. However, various types of behavior remained the same and seemed resistant to change. This can mainly be attributed to the habits formed over years compared to the short duration of the training. Altogether, it could not be proven that the use of force – in this case, in simulation exercises – became less frequent or only occurred after a certain delay.

Goh (2021) showed that de-escalation training had a massive impact on police work. The number of operations in which the police used force declined. This

produced a significant effect compared to introducing non-lethal resources or body cameras (Goh, 2021). In this connection, the impact of such training seems not to be limited to the training participants themselves but can be seen throughout the police station (Goh, 2021). Goh could not identify any unfavorable effects, for example, an increase in violent crime, as critics sometimes suspect (cf. Engel et al., 2020). However, Goh (2021) does suspect that, independently of the effect of training, the changes in organizational policy and culture regarding the use of de-escalation measures may also have had an effect.

In their highly acclaimed study, Engel et al. (2020) assessed 64 evaluations of de-escalation training programs from 40 years of research. Most focused on de-escalation in patient care settings or involving mentally ill persons. Although the identified effects tended to be positive, de-escalation training could always be faulted for its methodological shortcomings. Ultimately, hardly anything of significance for the use of de-escalation measures in police operations could be found. Most positive effects reported related to knowledge, attitude, and self-confidence. Less assessment took place at the behavioral level. According to their statements, as well as the observation of simulation exercises, the trainees applied the techniques learned in practice. However, the impact on the number of relevant incidents and their outcome when these techniques were applied in real life were inconsistent. Building on this, Engel et al. (2022) evaluated de-escalation training in a police department. They identified a significant and distinct reduction in the use of force (-28.1%) and the number of injured police officers (-36.0%) and citizens (-26.3%) after the training course. In addition, various potentially confounding factors were verified.

CONCLUSION

There is certainly no such thing as a strategy that *ensures* avoidance of the use of force *at all times,* with *everyone*, and in *every situation.* Suppose time is taken to listen to the other conflict party. In that case, it might be possible to find out what tactics, techniques, and approaches may provide the opportunity to defuse and de-escalate a heated conflict through communication. Having an appropriate attitude regarding such a possible solution is also of significance. As shown, the presented strategies are based on existing communication models, which explain their mode of action. Importance must be attached to resolving such situations without the use of force. In addition, police officers must be familiar with a variety of strategies and techniques that can be flexibly applied. Self-protection must not be neglected. Then there is a greater chance that a situation will end without force and in a way acceptable to the police. Appropriately designed training courses are

likely to reduce the use of force in police work, especially when combined with additional measures at the organizational level.

About the author:

Prof. Dr. Clemens Lorei is a professor of psychology and operational training at Hessische Hochschule für öffentliches Management und Sicherheit. He has been active in research for more than 20 years and is an expert on police self-protection, de-escalation, self-control, and police use of firearms. In addition, Prof. Dr. Clemens Lorei works internationally with police and military forces on research projects.

About the author:

Kristina Balaneskovic, M.A. is a sociologist and research associate at Hessische Hochschule für öffentliches Management und Sicherheit. Her work focuses on research into violence, e.g., domestic violence, hooligan violence, violence against first responders, or the use of firearms by the police. In addition to her scientific work, she also supports the training of police officers in sociology, psychology, and operational training.

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