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How Does it End Well?

An Interview Study of Police Officers' Perceptions of De-escalation

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Abstract

Conflict de-escalation in police-citizen encounters is an under-researched topic despite increased focus from the public and the media. This paper aims to increase the understanding of how police officers attempt to de-escalate conflict through detailed accounts of actual conflicts. The study is based on seven qualitative interviews with Norwegian police officers and has a case-control-inspired design. The informants were asked to describe three ordinary encounters: one verbal conflict, one conflict involving threats, and one physical conflict involving force or violence. The interviews put specific focus on the behaviors the informants reported doing. The analysis revealed three ways de-escalation can be performed to manage conflicts. First, the informants emphasize verbal and nonverbal communication in three ways: calming, autonomy-enhancing, and commanding. Secondly, they describe how they reduce physical opportunities in order to de-escalate, by either delimiting physical space or by the use of force. Lastly, the informants also report on ways to prevent a conflict from escalating in the first place. These accounts highlight the informants' understanding of de-escalation and are useful to understand how officers de-escalate conflicts in action. I discuss the relevance of the findings as well as the fruitfulness of the case-control-inspired interview technique.

Keywords
De-escalation, police-citizen encounters, policing, use of force

1. Introduction

Police officers encounter citizens every day, and there is always a risk that an encounter might escalate. To understand why some encounters escalate while others do not, research taking interactional or transactional approaches emphasizes the necessity of understanding dynamics of conflict (e.g., Alpert & Dunham, 2004; Sunde et al., 2023; Terrill, 2003). Such research regards conflicts as character contests in which the parties negotiate over a definition that can be favorable or acceptable for both (Alpert et al., 2020). In some conflicts, such definition may not be reached voluntarily, and violence or force comes into action.

However, most conflicts end well. And despite this, we tend to focus on when things go wrong. Consequently, our knowledge of good police behavior, how police avoid using force, and how conflicts are de-escalated is limited. Only a handful of studies investigate

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how officers understand de-escalation—and even fewer ask them about the behaviors they used, how they were used, and why. Todak and James (2018) vouched for digging deeper into “how and why police officers naturally adopt de-escalation as a strategy for resolving or preventing conflict[s]” (p. 530). This study attempts to address this gap by answering the research question “how do Norwegian police officers understand conflict management and the use of de-escalatory behaviors?”. To do so, I analyze seven informants’ accounts of different conflicts and how they managed them. By conceptualizing the de-escalation behaviors they used, this study contributes to the understanding of how conflicts can end well.

2. De-escalation and the police

De-escalation has received little focus from research in policing and criminology, and there is no commonly accepted definition of de-escalation and various operationalizations are employed (Engel, McManus & Isaza, 2020; Todak & James, 2018). Todak and White’s (2019) informants define it as “bringing calm to a conflict using the least amount of force possible” (p. 1), while Engel, McManus, and Herold (2020) define it as “prevention or management of clients’ violence, aggression, agitation, or similar behaviors, based on a process designed to defuse situations and reduce the likelihood of physical or verbal confrontation between parties” (p. 7).

In her study of de-escalation tactics, Natalie Todak interviewed eight de-escalation experts one-on-one and during a focus group to understand how they defined de-escalation (Todak & White, 2019). The informants reported using five verbal tactics: humanity, listening, compromise, honesty, and empowerment (p. 838). The humanity tactic involved “showing the citizen emotion, treating citizens with dignity and respect, minimizing authoritativeness, condescension, and ‘cop talk,’ and talking to citizens ‘like people’” (Todak, 2017, pp. 115–116). Everyday talk, humor or swear words could “break the ice” (p. 118), particularly in low-risk encounters where the officers and citizens could build some rapport. Todak’s (2017) informants also emphasized how listening could reduce tension. This lets officers figure out what the situation and potential problem is, and provides the necessary information to calm the citizen down. The compromise tactic revolves around rewarding good behavior and allowing wiggle room. The informants noted that being clear about what they needed from the citizen was critical for this to work properly. Lastly, the empowering tactic let citizens feel they were taking part in the decision-making.

Moreover, Todak and James (2018) included the respect, calm, and shoes tactics. The respect tactic revolves around talking to the citizen in a respectful tone of voice, the calm tactic revolves around staying calm and not letting stress take over, while the shoes tactic refers to putting themselves in the citizen’s situation. Over the course of 131 police-citizen encounters, Todak and James (2018) observed these de-escalation tactics in practice. Being unable to observe any forceful encounters, their study is limited in assessing if de-escalation actually works in aggressive conflicts. They were, however, able to investigate what factors predicted employment of de-escalation tactics, and if the citizen was calm at the end of the encounter (regarded as a successful outcome). They conclude that experience is a significant predictor of using an honest tactic and of encounter success. The use of the human and calm tactics significantly predicted successful outcomes, while the effects of other tactics were positive but non-significant (p. 529).

A good de-escalator is characterized by being empathic, having communication skills and the ability to stay calm under stress. Communication skills seem particularly important as it can achieve citizen compliance voluntarily without the use of force (Todak & White, 2019, p. 838; see also Sun, 2003). Todak and White (2019) conclude that de-escalation tactics should

be employed in every police-citizen encounter as a preventive measure to "reduce violence and improve legitimacy" (p. 844). These tactics are a promising start to conceptualize behaviors more precisely, describing a wide array of ways officers can manage conflict, and what the officers themselves think are success factors for de-escalation.

Emsing and colleagues (2020) studied how 20 recently graduated Swedish officers experienced conflicts and conflict management training in school and probationary training. They show that the officers' understanding of conflict was rather general, suggesting a focus on the observable nature of the conflict rather than the underlying mechanisms. Some informants expressed concerns with an over-focus on worst-case scenarios and consequently an under-focus on the mundane. This may condition officers into a crisis mindset that could make them "use force at an earlier stage" (p. 93) instead of de-escalation behaviors. Therefore, it is important to emphasize not just the most forceful encounters but also verbal conflicts of everyday life, which the current study incorporates in the interview guide.

Koerner and Staller (2022) interviewed 29 German officers about their perception of conflicts and conflict management training. They found that violent encounters were regarded as complex, dynamic and ambiguous. Their informants emphasized situational and personal characteristics as important to understanding escalation. They also revealed that most officers felt unprepared for conflict through training. They conclude that future research should provide more qualitative insight into conflict dynamics and conduct micro-level analyses of the interactions between police and citizens. This study does so by examining de-escalation through the lens of microsociology.

3. Microsociology, violence and de-escalation

Inspired by symbolic interactionists like Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969), microsociology views social lives and behaviors through how people make sense of their interactions with others. Blumer (1969) states that people act based on the meaning objects have to them, that interactions occur in a context where these objects are defined, that such meanings emerge from interactions with other people and society, and that meaning is continuously recreated through interpretation processes during interaction with others (see also Carter & Fuller, 2016). Goffman (1956) introduced the notion of facework, which shows how individuals attempt to define a situation in a way that produce favorable impressions of themselves through a series of exchange rituals (Goffman, 1967). Each behavior is an adherence to or rejection of the other's definition and status (Kemper, 2016). Goffman's insights underscores the importance of avoiding rejections, as they may threaten the face of the other, which might escalate a conflict. Within conversation analysis, these notions are often applied when studying verbal communication and behaviors between police and citizens. Raymond and colleagues (2023), for example, analyzed dashcam videos to show how officers can prevent escalation by using accommodative language ("we'll figure it out" and "I get that"), and attempting to "arrive at a mutually ratified […] resolution" (p. 672) without resorting to force, while Buscariolli (2023) showed how spatial maneuvers, such as sitting the citizen down on the hood of the car, constitute a resource officers can draw upon during conflicts.

Collins (2008, 2009, 2019) theorized violence with a micro-sociological view, arguing that even the most motivated offenders are only violent a fraction of the time, ergo violence must be something triggered in the interactional domain. For violence to come into action, certain situational processes that can circumvent what constrains us from using violence must occur (Nassauer, 2022). These constraints—conceptualized as "confrontational tension and fear"—make violence difficult to carry out and hard to perform well. They are visualized as

body "postures and rhythms as well as facial expressions and subjectively experienced in a pounding heart, breathing rate, tunnel vision, and time-distortion" (Collins, 2019, p. 493). As a result, violence is rare, and only comes into action when one party finds "a path around the barrier of CT/F" (Collins, 2019, p. 487), such as outnumbering or a person falling to the ground. People are bad at violence, scared of violence, and instinctually try to avoid violence, and thus, most conflicts end well. Alpert and colleagues (2020) apply an interactionist perspective to police-citizen encounters, arguing that these encounters are authority maintenance rituals where both parties recognize that officers have a higher situational authority. If this authority is challenged, the exchange rituals might escalate and become physical. Such escalation evolves until one party changes their behavior, voluntarily or involuntarily. When micro-sociological and interactionist research seek to explain how violence sometimes comes into action, the behaviors of the actors are key.

Drawing on theoretical concepts from microsociology and interactionism can help explain why citizens sometimes challenge the police, and it provides analytical tools to understand how conflicts are de-escalated. Each action should be seen as an expression of meaning, and understood in tandem with other actions, as attempts to define the encounter. The actors shape conflicts by repeatedly exchanging meaning through verbal and nonverbal communication (Fridell & Binder, 1992). To conclude contests, the parties should strive to find a solution that does not insult the face of the other, but rather facilitate for a way out of the conflict that allows their faces to remain intact. This can be done through the use of respectful language or allowing parties to remain autonomous.

4. Methodology

The study is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with standardized follow-up questions. The informants were asked to describe three encounters they have experienced—one verbal conflict, one conflict that involved threats, and one physical conflict that involved violence and/or force. To focus on different lived conflicts was a choice informed by research using case-controls. Notably, Phillips (2003) used such design to study vengeance-based violence and highlight variation on a situational level as opposed to individual and ecological levels. Each conflict functions as a case-control for the other conflicts. I instructed the informants to describe representative and ordinary encounters and to exclude encounters they felt were extraordinary, such as large group fights or incidents of mass or terrorist violence. I also asked them to exclude encounters where they believed psychological disorders and mental illness could be key factors, despite this being quite common in everyday policing (as the informants also noted on several occasions). This was done to keep the encounter characteristics as similar as possible for the case-control design. Since the interactional dynamics of these types of encounters are likely quite different, this also warrants another interpretation and prediction of the citizen's behavior. Following this logic, this would also mean that both the choice of de-escalation behaviors and their effects would differ.

I defined each conflict type in advance, but let the informants somewhat deviate from these definitions, which allowed them to view conflicts through a continuum, rather than either/or categories (Geerinck & Stark, 2003). This was done to recognize a boarder spectrum of conflicts, and to include accounts about conflicts of lower severity as well as conflicts of higher severity. I asked the informants to picture each encounter as a movie and describe what happened, with focus on the temporal order of events, what behaviors they observed, how they interpreted them, and what behaviors they performed themselves. It is important

to recognize that the reported behaviors likely differ from the behaviors they actually performed. This is known as the attitudinal fallacy (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). To account for this, I asked standardized follow-up questions about details I was interested in. These forced-choice survey questions followed each encounter description in the form of checkboxes indicating whether a certain behavior had occurred. Additionally, I asked confirmatory questions, such as "can you explain a bit more in detail how you did it?" and "what behaviors did you perform in response to this?". This approach can provide deeper insight into the culture-action link than just open questions (Vaisey, 2009). Regardless of their accuracy, the accounts are valid ways the informants make sense of de-escalation, and they can help us understand the complex nature of de-escalation in action (Sandberg, 2010).

The open-ended questions let the informants talk freely and allowed me to consider answers that spilled beyond the structure, while the structured questions made the accounts more detailed, and allowed me to capture micro-elements (Brinkmann, 2014). The goal was to coherently present "the standpoint of the actor whose behavior [is being studied] and attempt to use the actor's own categories in capturing the meanings for the actor during social interactions" (Carter & Fuller, 2016, p. 934). The approach produced detailed accounts about what they (recall they) did and why they did it, which unpacked micro-details of de-escalation. For example, informant A7 recalled "we then grabbed him and moved him behind the car, out of sight of the crowd, to calm the situation", while other research uncovered more general descriptions, such as "taking a subject who is […] maybe angry, volatile, intense, and bringing them to a resolution where they get to have a say in it […] to where they actually become in control" (Todak & White, 2019, p. 837). The interview guide can be found in the supplementary material (https://osf.io/uvjcr).

4.1 Data collection

I was granted access to interview seven officers in two units in Oslo Police District, who were recruited by their respective supervisors. I made no demands in terms of age, gender or experience, to sample officers as randomly as possible (this could make the sample vulnerable to bias on the side of the police). I conducted the interviews at the informants' workplaces. Each interview lasted around 90 minutes, and were recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed verbatim on a secure server. Transcriptions were done in Norwegian, coding in English, and quotes were translated to English. The sample consists of four female and three male officers, with an average age of 33 and seven years of experience. Five officers work in patrol[1] and two work as negotiators[2] (note that all negotiators also do plenty of patrol work in their jobs). All Norwegian officers hold a bachelor's degree from the Norwegian Police University College, including one academic course in communication and conflict management (see Phelps et al., 2017). Principles such as conflict resolution through communication and the least use of force possible are key in the Norwegian police (Lie & Lagestad, 2011).

A sample of seven informants has limitations in terms of saturation and generalization. Saturation refers to the point where further collection produces little or no new information, and Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) note that 15 ± 10 interviews typically suffice. For this study, the informants' understanding of de-escalation likely overlaps, which reduces the need for larger data collection. Sufficient saturation was reached, and the coding produced fewer new codes from the later interviews. Second, generalizing conclusions were neither realistic nor sought after. However, such a sample size allows for in-depth analysis that can

1. Informants with ID A3–A7.
2. Informants with ID A1–A2.

produce interesting accounts of how the informants understand and perform de-escalation. The most comparable study used a sample of eight informants and a follow-up focus-group interview (Todak & White, 2019). Two studies interviewing subject-matter experts used sample sizes of five (Bennell et al., 2021) and seven (Bennell et al., 2022) to corroborate narrative reviews on de-escalation, while other recent interview-based studies of police officers have interviewed between 10 and 29 informants (e.g., Dempsey et al., 2023; Duran et al., 2019; Emsing et al., 2020; Henriksen & Kruke, 2020a; Koerner & Staller, 2022; Oxholm & Glaser, 2023).

4.2 Ethics

I conducted a Data Protection Impact Assessment to assess potential risks for the rights and freedoms of the informants. The data collection and management plan followed GDPA guidelines and was approved by the data controller at the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR). The study design was reviewed by the ethics review board of the University of Amsterdam, who found no noteworthy risks. All participants were informed about the scope of the project, the nature of the interviews, and their rights to object or withdraw consent. All informants signed an informed consent form indicating they had read, understood and agreed to the contents of the study, and agreed to have the interview audio-recorded. The interview guide is primarily concerned with interactions and behaviors, not individuals, which reduces identifiability. Review (https://osf.io/ehcbr) and information sheets (https://osf.io/5bqa3) can be found in the supplementary material.

4.3 Coding system and analysis

The analysis is an inductively driven thematic analysis. After transcribing the interviews, the data was imported into ATLAS.ti for coding, inspired by the stepwise-deductive induction (SDI) approach. SDI is well suited to highlight the accounts of de-escalation behaviors, and to construct concepts from the data. The initial coding phase followed the principles of empirically close coding aimed at "extracting the essence in the empirical material, reducing the volume of the material, and […] enabling the generation of ideas on the basis of details within the empirical data" (Tjora, 2018, p. 28). The codes reflect what the informants say, rather than the overarching themes or topic they talk about, resulting in precise and detailed codes that give a clear overview of the informants' opinions. This bottom-up approach allowed me to be interpretive but data-driven in the analysis. Such coding often produces hundreds of codes, and Tjora (2018) points out that between 200 and 800 codes should be expected from 10–30 interviews.

Then, I grouped all codes. I labeled codes that revolved around similar topics, such as labeling *He was 37 years old* with *Age*, and grouped together codes that were relevant to the research question and had some thematic similarities. For example, all codes labeled *Age* and *Build* were grouped in *CitizenCharacteristics*. According to Tjora (2017), between three and five code groups are sufficient for a paper. I ended up with eight code groups of different empirical themes that the informants believed affect conflicts, and three were especially relevant for this paper: *CitizenBehaviors* and *OfficerBehaviors* include the codes for behaviors the informants reported doing, and observing citizens doing respectively. *DeEscalation* includes the informants' answers to how and why things de-escalated, or what could have hypothetically made the encounter not escalate. The other code groups were *CitizenCharacteristics*, *OfficerCharacteristics*, *SituationalFactors*, *InformationUsed*, and *Escalation*.

5. Findings

To answer the research question, I identified three themes: communicative de-escalation, physical de-escalation, and preventive de-escalation. Each theme reflects actions that the informants described performing, how they did it, and why. I begin with presenting accounts of how the informants used verbal communication combined with nonverbal gestures to de-escalate conflicts. I identified three different ways: calming, where the focus is on constructing a calm setting; autonomy-enhancing, where the focus is on empowering the citizen; and commanding, where the focus is on ordering the citizen to end their conflict behaviors. Then, I present physical de-escalation. The informants emphasized how their bodies could be used (more or less) coercively to de-escalate conflicts. In the analysis, I distinguish between the reduction of physical opportunity and use of force. Lastly, the informants also talked about conflict prevention. This suggests that de-escalation also has preventive elements that can be employed before conflicts arise.

5.2 Talking down? Communication and de-escalation

> Informant A3: You can be very de-escalatory in the way you communicate.

The first finding is the importance of officer communication with citizens, which all informants highlighted. In the following, I present accounts of three different communicative modes of de-escalation. Importantly, each mode has both verbal and nonverbal elements, very often combined. While for example Todak and White (2019) conceptualize a similar concept as verbal de-escalation, I argue for the importance of acknowledging the nonverbal aspects. I differentiate between a calming mode, an autonomy-enhancing mode, and a commanding mode. These should be seen as archetypical behavioral modes that officers can use more or less simultaneously, or as standalone ways to manage conflicts.

5.1.1 Calming communication

> Informant A1: In this case it's almost all verbal [he can't see me] … he hears my voice, I focus on my voice, the tone, how calm I am, the words I use.

> Informant A2: I emphasize simple communication, repetitive communication, tone of voice, de-escalatory […] so I can convey safety perhaps? I attempt to show some kind of warmth, a safety in that he knows what's going on.

> Informant A6: I was very aware not raise my voice. […] I'd rather repeat what I said several times. […] It would be unprofessional to shout into a guy's car just like that.

The calming communication revolves around keeping the tone of voice relaxed, conveying warmth as opposed to confrontation, and expressing body language that indicates safety rather than danger. The intention of employing the calming tactic is to express calmness rather than mirror the citizen's loud, abusive, or rude speech. Repeating the message several times was something both A2 and A6 emphasized as important. This is interesting—and especially A6's account shows this. In this encounter, she was fining a citizen during a traffic stop, who subsequently showed forms of bad attitude and accused her of corruption. This could easily be interpreted as an insult or as face-threatening act (Goffman, 1956). Rather than mirroring the citizen, however, informant A6 opted into repeating her calming communication by explaining calmly why he was getting cited (he was using his phone while driving) and calmly denying that she or the police is corrupt as the citizen claimed.

H: What specific techniques or behaviors?

Informant A1: Visible hands. Show that I am not dangerous, that I want the best for [the citizen], eye contact and a calm voice.

H: …and you've already said a few things about how you tried to de-escalate…From this check-box list, what did you use?

Informant A2: [indicates gestures from the list] Visible hands, I emphasized that he could see my face […] and hand gestures, indicating what he should do, where he needs to go, what he should do…

H: So, explanatory hand gestures?

Informant A2: Yes, and perhaps calming hand gestures too.

Notably, the focus on calming body language was most explicit in the negotiators' accounts, who seemed aware of how it can be an advantage, while the accounts of the patrol officers typically revolved around having a non-escalatory body language—to be no more escalatory than necessary. This can be a result of two things: real-world conflict selection biases (the negotiators frequently get called out to longer, more complex encounters while patrol officers encounter quicker, more linear conflicts), or because they are trained in greater depth in this area. By showing their hands and face, they try to reduce their situational authority and to convey safety, in order to be perceived as non-threatening or at least less threatening. A1 noted that they are very aware of how their body language can be used to their advantage. According to her, this insight is grounded in research as well as practical experience from the field.

Informant A2: Actively caring about how the other person defines the situation, how they have their truth, and how the situation is and is perceived by him. And to recognize that.

H: How did you try to de-escalate specifically?

Informant A3: You question what's [going on] … I think one of the most important things we can do, to *not escalate*, is to ask "but what's really going on here?" That shows interest for their situation. So, when you ask, repeatedly […]. And then being curious […] Curious, understanding.

Informant A7: I tried to put myself in his situation… not to make me his friend or anything, but… use some words that can make us meet—like "I understand this is [frustrating]".

Another part of the calming tactic is active listening skills. The informants reported that, whenever possible, they try to let citizens vent out, show their frustration, and explain their side of the story, and by reciprocating this with active listening, the officers can show the citizen that their concerns are legitimate, and that the officer cares about their situational understanding. While the informants in this study talked about active listening rather generally, Todak (2017) was able to show that this can involve looking at the citizen, nodding, and making affirming vocal cues to indicate to the citizen that the officer is taking them seriously and respects them. If officers do not achieve this, informant A2 believes this may signal that "[…] his perception is incorrect, and not important". Such an exchange is likely then perceived as disrespectful. Despite the fact that the officers have an inherent situational authority, active listening can help level the playing field and de-escalate a conflict. When

this is successful, the informants believe it can achieve the citizen's compliance without having to resort to more forceful measures.

When employing the calming tactic, officers use verbal and nonverbal behaviors to reframe the situation and reinforce barriers that inhibit violence. Instead of verbal confrontation and threatening body language, the informants use a calm tone of voice and emphasize expressing nonthreatening body language. The negotiators also explained how showing their face and hands was part of this. Additionally, the informants emphasized active listening, indicating that one cares about the other party's definition. These elements are important to avoid damaging positive face needs, and to facilitate for exchanges that can be favorable for both (Goffman, 1956). As per Collins (2019), the officers make verbal and nonverbal efforts to keep the barrier to violence intact by saying "We are peaceful, what about you? [...] with voice, face, and body postures that are strong and calm" (p. 490). Informant A2 emphasizes how it is important to convey "realness, and taking the other person's perspective, to keep all the mechanisms that prevents the person from going into reptile brain". The notion of the reptile brain is intriguing and is used to describe what happens when citizens become irrational and act primitively—what Collins (2013) termed a tunnel of violence. In order to avoid repetitive violent behaviors, pulling their opponent out of this tunnel remains a key task for the de-escalator.

Informant A4 noted that officers could contribute to an escalation if they themselves become irritated instead of remaining calm, and informant A5 noted how it was important to find the correct stress level. While the informants mostly viewed escalation as a result of citizen behaviors, they were aware that they could negatively affect the encounter if they let their emotions run. Several other informants also described emotional labor as important, to avoid entering in their own tunnel of violence and to avoid cluttering their judgment. Nix and colleagues (2019) point out that officer annoyance is correlated to conflict escalation, and others have shown how stress affects the use of force (Nieuwenhuys et al., 2012), communication skills (Arble et al., 2019), and readiness to deal with conflicts (Koerner & Staller, 2022).

> Informant A5: I hold onto him while talking calmly to him, and convey that I understand his reaction, this has really been my message all along, but he also needs to calm down, relax.

The calming tactic seems important and effective at the start of encounters, before citizens go too far into the tunnel of violence. Research has shown that whenever officers enter an encounter forcefully, this increases the overall level of force, and that there are only limited opportunities to scale it back once it starts (Tillyer, 2022). Whenever possible, the officers can employ the calming tactic to reframe the situation into something safe and predictable for the citizen (and thus, themselves). However, as informant A5 shows, it is not just initially this can work—it may also go hand-in-hand with other de-escalatory behaviors. Despite the citizen in question being resistant to some extent, calm language and tone of voice can still be used to reconstruct the exchange into a less conflictual frame, also while being employed together with more coercive de-escalation behaviors.

5.1.2 Autonomy-enhancing communication

The next tactic the data revealed was autonomy-enhancing communication. While overlapping in some respects with the calming tactic, this way of communicating is aimed at orienting the citizens about the reality of a situation, and then offering them a role in the decision-making.

> H: From the checkbox list, you mentioned trying to show understanding, verbal commands maybe?
>
> Informant A7: Yes. We use… no legal commands, right, but these… You try to explain the "offers" as well as possible. And sell him the easiest solution.

> Informant A4: I find it very helpful to just explain what we are doing and why. And I feel that… It almost always works calming.

A2 notes that if she was "not showing any interest in the citizen's definition", things could have escalated. Furthermore, it allows the officers to explain what the citizen needs to do in order to proceed without force. In the informants' view, this has, a de-escalatory effect, as A3 emphasized: "we tried to calm him down by explaining what is going on". The informants emphasized that when they provided a way out, this allowed the citizen to partially keep their autonomy and as such, partially define the situation. A2's account illustrates what officers could do in order to convince citizens to take the way out. She notes "[I try] to shape his landscape, where he should feel it is safe[est], best, good. In the sense to [make him] choose a way", juxtaposing herself on the one side with armed police on the other. This is a way to make her seem like the more tempting way out, as opposed to facing armed police. In her view, this allowed the citizen to not lose face when he eventually complied, and the situation de-escalated.

A predefined way out can facilitate de-escalation by making the citizens feel they can choose it without losing face. The informants emphasized that when they provided this way out, it allowed the citizen to partially keep their autonomy and, as such, definition of the situation. Whereas the calming communication seems to rely on the officer's performance, autonomy-enhancing puts more emphasis and responsibility on the citizen. Such a tactic can put the "[…] 'power back on that person' to feel like they have some control" (Todak & White, 2019, p. 840), making the citizen take part in the crucial decision-making; through this, the citizen is made responsible for the outcome. This can be important in more heated situations where the calming tactic has not proven effective. Goffman (1956) differentiates between positive- and negative-face needs—and whereas the calming tactic tends to the positive-face needs (the need for being treated well), the autonomy-enhancing tactic targets the negative-face needs (the need for autonomy).

Interestingly, the notion of autonomous citizens contrasts the reptile brain. Assuming that a citizen is capable of taking responsible and autonomous decisions requires that they are rational and not in a tunnel of violence. Therefore, officers must assess whether or not the citizen can be trusted with such responsibility or whether the feeling of increased autonomy might pull them out of said reptile brain. A1 and A2 noted that they, as negotiators, try to perform such assessments before entering an encounter to analyze whether the citizen is a person in crisis or in conflict. Such assessments are done because "the irrationality of one's opponent tends to skew the traditional rules of play, since someone who is irrational is unpredictable and might do quite literally anything. Officers faced with 'irrational' citizens are aware that their usual tactics will be less effective and perhaps less safe" (Todak, 2017, p. 67).

Informant A7 noted that it was important not to give too much trust to conflictual citizens, as that trust can be abused either by rational people or by a citizen in the tunnel of violence. This shows how complex encounters are to maneuver, often in a short time window. As the daily life of police officers are increasingly characterized by dealing with citizens in mental or personal crises (as confirmed by the informants as well as prior research, e.g., Rossler & Terrill, 2017) this dynamic is a normal occurrence and warrants different tools than citizens in conflict.

5.1.3 Commanding communication

The informants emphasized that verbal commands were sometimes necessary to de-escalate, often after attempting the previously mentioned tactics. If a citizen neither calms down nor chooses to take a way out, a behavioral ultimatum can be posed in a direct way, such as through a threat of force.

> Informant A2: [We] give a command, ideally first, and behind that is a behavioral pattern, both with… ehm… compliance to the command, and if it is ignored…

A2 infers that if this is ignored it may escalate further into physical force. The way the informants reported using this tactic varied, but revolved around the same general message: "do as I say, and do it now – or else". For example, when A6 was confronted by a juvenile with a large stick, she opted into employing threatening and commanding communication after repeatedly trying the calming tactic. She was clear and offered a behavioral ultimatum: "drop the stick or I will pepper spray you". This shows the level of urgency in a situation when the commanding tactic comes into action. In the Norwegian police' force pyramid model, verbal command is the last step of the force continuum before physical force, the last non-physical way to de-escalate (Henriksen & Kruke, 2020b). Therefore, it seems important to be particularly clear and decisive when using commanding communication, just as A6 was.

Another encounter described by A6 shows how officers are flexible when such commands may not always work, and how it can be a risky approach under certain circumstances:

> Informant A6: On some people it works well, they immediately submit when a clear voice commands them what to do. And then there are some who are not scared by that at all, right, or are bounced out of balance by it, right…and this guy was not, at all, and then I think "well okay, it's not like that on the fifth time you shout it will work, it either works really well immediately or it doesn't work at all". So I thought we had to try something different, when it doesn't work we try something different.

In this specific encounter, the repeated shout commands had no effect, and the citizen was not scared by the threat of force at all. A6 shows that different tactics can be drawn upon flexibly—both within individuals and within officer pairs. In many ways, this reflects a good-cop, bad-cop dynamic where one shouts and the other tries to calm. In this specific encounter, force in the form of arrest techniques was eventually used to de-escalate.

Communication is the primary way the informants reported dealing with conflicts. Every informant emphasized its importance, and even in the most severe conflicts described, the informants told me about attempting to use communication as de-escalation. The analysis revealed three different ways to do so: calming communication, where the officers try to stop the citizens entering a tunnel of violence by reconstructing the conflict into something safe and predictable; autonomy-enhancing communication, which offers the citizen a way out

and gives them a certain responsibility; and commanding communication, which is used to issue clear ultimatums that stand between de-escalation and more severe force. In line with the findings of Todak and James (2018), it seems that the officers match the rhythm, emotions and body language of the citizens to a large degree—and as such, also match their communication tactic.

5.2 Holding down? The role of the body in de-escalation

The second finding is that de-escalation also has a physical component. If verbal communication was deemed insufficient or unsuccessful to de-escalate the situation, the informants reported two physical ways of de-escalating conflicts. In most of the interviews, this was limited to reducing physical opportunity of movement. This resembles a situational crime prevention-approach in which the potential offender's (perception of their) opportunity is altered in a way that makes him or her decide not to offend (Clarke, 1995). In de-escalation, it is done by delimiting the physical space or by removing the physical opportunity for conflict behaviors, so they cannot be performed, by for example grabbing of the arms. Furthermore, some informants reported using physical force. This may not always be considered as de-escalation—instead, it could be regarded as something to be employed when de-escalation falls short or that results from a failed de-escalation. Yet, the informants accounts indicate that physical force, such as takedowns, can be very de-escalatory.

5.2.1 Reducing physical opportunity

> Informant A4: […] we both grab an arm each once we get there. Just to get control right away […] so we're not exposing ourselves to anything. We just… It's not a hard grip, we just control him, really, and then we start to talk to him. So if you're at a distance, and he starts going off, then it's hard to gain control, you might have to use spray or the baton. If you get in early and just control it, like two people is enough to do that, if nothing else just hang onto him until he tires out.

Informant A4 described how the officers in one encounter approached a citizen they immediately controlled by grabbing his arms. This behavior, which A4 defined as somewhere "in between symbolic and physical presence", was well-suited to de-escalate this situation, where they had information about a person being a nuisance in public space. When delimiting the space and opportunity of the citizen, it was easy to physically keep him in place while facilitating an easy route to more force if he did not comply. A4 then described how, after this control was in place, he immediately engaged verbally. The informant turned to the calming and autonomy-enhancing tactics. As opposed to employing a commanding tactic, he explained to the citizen what they were doing and why, as well as potential outcomes: "calm down and the conflict ends, or don't and we may escalate". The combination of physically delimiting the space and communication worked well in this encounter. A4 largely attributed this to the fact that the citizen calmed down quickly after being controlled. The choice of de-escalation behaviors was based on the pre-situation information about the person, his behavior and his size—and A4 feared that if they allowed him too much physical space, he might have challenged them physically.

A7 recollected an encounter where their car played a key role in reducing the opportunity. After arriving at the scene, they were tasked to book an already handcuffed person for robbery. Upon informing the citizen about the suspicion, conflict behaviors ensued immediately and the citizen started to resist. In A7's view, the reason this did not escalate further was

"taking away [his] initiative", through "getting him quickly into our car". While this encounter escalated somewhat more than the one A4 described, a similar approach was taken. This shows that when the physical space can be manipulated in way that does not allow for continued conflict behaviors, the conflicts end or are displaced into a space owned by the police, which maximizes their control over the citizen in a rather mundane way (Buscariolli, 2023).

Reducing opportunities revolves less around saving face and more around situational control, authority, and dominating the physical space. When the authority is resisted against, the officers are legally allowed to ignore or challenge their opponent's face in order to regain control. Their behavior clearly indicates that they momentarily decline their opponent's status and situational definition (Kemper, 2016). This is what makes the police-citizen encounter an especially interesting context to study (Alpert et al., 2020). In line with the findings of Todak (2017), such physical control can "sometimes […] be used in ways that avoid more serious forms of force or citizen violence" (p. 151) so that it ends well for all parties.

5.2.2 Use of force as de-escalation

The informants described how they sometimes had to resort to using physical force in a traditional sense to de-escalate conflicts. Despite being a statistically rare phenomenon, all informants recalled a forceful conflict. The informants stressed that using as little force as possible was important, and that the force should stop once resistance ceased and the conflict was over. And even though it can be argued that once force comes into action, the encounter has not ended well, I argue that it must still be viewed under the umbrella term of de-escalation.

> Informant A3: I see a clenched fist… [my colleague] gets his hand up to protect his head, I jump in [to the back of the police van], [my colleague] manages to move away. And then I… pardon my language… smash his face, just smash it into the side of the car ehm… to control him. And then he starts to spit.

> Informant A4: […] we try to give him the option himself [to come out], and then we… warn him of the consequences if he does not comply, and then we go in and grab him, which is… pretty calm, and then it escalates up to… I feel we climb the 'ladder' pretty naturally. While I hold him, he tries to wiggle himself free, and eh… we hold him pretty tightly, and as we lift him, he uses that [momentum] to kick toward a colleague. We end up getting him down, one on each arm, one on his legs, one holding his upper body. We end up body-cuffing him to regain control, right. It doesn't de-escalate for a very long time.

> Informant A5: I see that he goes dark in the eyes. So I am really close, so I grab him, so that's force, right. I feel I am getting the upper hand, although I am not an expert, I do some MMA, I have some knowledge about that, and I am also bigger than him, so I grab… without getting too technical here, hehe, but I grab under his arms, both my arms under his and around his waist, so that he has very little wiggle room, really. […] He tries to grab my baton, he kicks my partner, ehm… It ends up, after a while, right, that he… we have to force him to the ground to handcuff him.

A4 and his colleagues had tried to talk a citizen out of a holding cell by explaining and offering him a way out, yet the citizen chose to resist physically, which activated force. A5 observed a citizen's gaze "going dark" after his dog was restrained and proceeded to grab him, yet the citizen also kept resisting, while A3's encounter with a drunk driver ended up

with a violent fight involving hits, kicks, and spitting. Most informants report using several de-escalation behaviors before resorting to physical force, and their force must be understood not just as a split-second decision but as a result of back-and-forth exchanges, where they presented a solution that the citizens in question refused to adhere to.

Physical de-escalation, and especially the use of force as de-escalation, might seem like contradictory concepts. Todak's (2017) study discusses this paradox, and her informants noted that they "did not see their decisions [to use force] as failures to de-escalate but as what was necessary in the moment when the citizen took the final action" (p. 158); recall the notion of de-escalation as a way to manage conflict "with the least amount of force possible" (Todak & White, 2019, p. 1), not necessarily without force. The same should be said for the informants in this study, who emphasized that physical force was sometimes necessary but also that it should be limited to a minimum, that it should be proportionate to the resistance, and that it should be scaled back or ended once the citizen scales back or ends their conflictual behavior (Lie & Lagestad, 2011). Physical force should thus not be written off as "just" escalated police behavior or seen as "failed" de-escalation but be considered de-escalatory when used following the principles the informants describe.

The informants also see potential challenges with this approach, and physical de-escalation is seen as a potentially escalatory element. When asking informant A7 about an encounter with an unruly drunk man that he eventually ended up driving away (but not booking), he explained that starting out too harshly could have escalated the situation.

> H: What do you think could have made this encounter escalate further?
>
> Informant A7: If we had started out "higher", by that I mean if we had been stronger verbally, and been faster with the physical stuff, right. Gone straight over, grabbed him, moved out of the road, and given him some "adult education". Then I think it could have escalated further.

Based on such accounts, the informants prove alert to the fact that being too forceful, too early, can challenge people's face either too strongly or too quickly, and without due cause, this might be perceived as illegitimate and be counterproductive. As noted by Alpert and Dunham (2004), reciprocity is a goal in these encounters, and force that is seen as illegitimate might trigger more resistance and drive the conflict toward a less than ideal ending.

5.3 Never winding up? De-escalating conflicts before they come into action

The third finding is that the informants also talked about conflict prevention. A2 noted that most of what they do is trying to avoid primitive behaviors, and A1 corroborated that it was their job to keep the person as rational as possible. To A1, an important part of conflict management is through building a relation with the person—a luxury that might not always possible in conflicts that arise on the spot.

> Informant A3: It is recognizable when escalates and when it doesn't escalate. And then it's up to us… the interplay between us and them, if we manage to prevent the escalation, but very often we do get a warning that now… It might explode, either if it's the background of the person's history that we know, or the body language right… That it's… We don't often get surprised when we need to get rough.

Terrill and colleagues (2023) argue that "officers cannot de-escalate if a suspect never presents any sort of resistance, at least in relation to examining de-escalation through the lens of force and resistance" (p. 18). While this is true, conceptually speaking, this does not mean officers cannot use de-escalation behaviors despite the citizen not presenting any sort of resistance. In fact, Todak's (2017) informants noted that while the "intended purpose of de-escalation is to calm a citizen who is already escalated, [...] the strategy could be used preventively—the same tactics can be used to build a rapport with a citizen and prevent them from becoming escalated" (pp. 151–152). Taken together, findings show that a preventive phase before contact is established or during the contact phase, is part of the conflict management paradigm to the informants.

These findings show that police uses many tools to make conflicts end well. It can be done through being cautious of their tone of voice, by explaining the conflict parties what was expected of them, or other times by resorting to commands or physical use of the body. In most encounters, more than one type of behavior comes into action, and they are often combined all the way upwards the force continuum—as shown by informant A5, for example, explaining how he had to escalate his commands into force, but still actively employed a calming communication tactic. While previous research (e.g., Klinger, 1995) has shown that high levels of force are almost always preceded by lower levels of force, it is perhaps more precise to regard escalation and force as additive behavioral sequences, rather than a linear process where one form is replaced by a more severe form. However, the different behaviors also had a clear temporal order in regard to when they came into action. Typically, efforts to make it end well start with a preventive phase in which the officers check the history of the citizen or build some kind of social bond, and then actively use these to interpret the conflict. Then they move into the communicative phase, focusing on calming and autonomy-enhancing communication. If this fails, they turn to verbal commands and physical forms of de-escalation: either reducing the opportunity or moving toward more severe forms of force. As such, it seems that de-escalation is firmly grounded in the force pyramid model in which officers are trained (see e.g., Henriksen & Kruke, 2020b). However, the informants are also alert to the fact that not all conflicts are linear, and sometimes jumping up and down the ladder can be necessary.

6. Discussion

Despite an increased focus on conflicts, use of force and bad police behavior, little research focus on how conflicts end well—and the behaviors that lead them there. To address this, I asked my informants to describe three conflicts they have experienced. The informants reported experiencing conflicts quite often, but emphasized that most ended well, suggesting that de-escalation is always in their toolkit. This corroborates prior research showing that officers feel de-escalation is something they always do (Terrill, 2005; Todak & James, 2018; Todak & White, 2019). The accounts indicate that they have a keen eye on the observable nature of conflict and are well equipped to deal with things they bump into in their daily life. Contrary to what Emsing and colleagues (2020) argue, I find that such focus is productive and important. Policing situations often revolve around the here and now, and while considering the bigger picture is important, the interpersonal dynamics are what matter the most for the informants and for the conflicts.

The informants emphasized a range of ways to handle conflicts, conceptualized as communicative de-escalation, physical de-escalation, and preventive de-escalation. The findings can have several implications. First, they highlight the need to understand de-escalation,

and police-citizen encounters more generally, as transactional. The accounts of de-escalation paint a clear picture of temporality: the preventive elements are used prior to and in the initial phases; the communicative forms are used in the entire encounter, but especially at the initial phase; while the physical elements seem to be saved for last. Therefore, like others (e.g., Terrill, 2005; Todak, 2017) have argued, conflict de-escalation needs to be analyzed through every phase and facet, not just in the moment conflicts end. Secondly, the findings indicate that researchers, police educators and officers in the field should not focus solely on the verbal, but also the nonverbal parts of communication in de-escalation. It seems to be crucial to combine the verbal aspects with being attentive to how body language and gestures can aid (or work counterproductively) officers in calming situations down. Informants in this study mentioned, among other things, showing their hands and face as ways to indicate they were not dangerous to the citizen. Future studies, and perhaps especially observational research, should make an effort to include gestures and body postures in their examination of de-escalation. Moreover, the findings show how the informants sometimes had to use physical coercion—such as grabbing, holding, or even traditional force usage such as wrestling someone to ground—to de-escalate a situation. It is important for future research and practice to acknowledge that these behaviors may have a de-escalatory effect and not just see them as a negative outcome or expression of "failed" de-escalation. In some cases, using force may be the optimal solution to swiftly stop potentially violent and dangerous conflict behaviors, and to make it end well.

In order to get closer to the interactional domain, I explored an interview technique inspired by case-control design that involved forced-choice survey questions. Rather than asking general questions about the informants' understanding of de-escalation, I asked them to describe three experienced conflicts. Future research invested in understanding behavior, culture in action, or the culture-action link should exploit similar approaches. Making the informants focus on actual real events and forcing them to reflect on details moved the interviews closer to micro-descriptions of those events. The informants' accounts of behaviors can inform future research on what behaviors officers typically use and how they understand them. The accounts can also help to understand the interpersonal dynamics at play: which de-escalation behaviors are related to different outcomes, and how? Such research could exploit the rich nature of CCTV and BWC videos, and for example follow the work of Ejbye-Ernst (2023), who tested the impact of intervention behaviors on the continuation of conflict behaviors using CCTV videos in five-second segments. Therefore, by using videos it would be possible to test, for example, if the de-escalation behaviors officers (say they) do have an effect on the level of aggression in citizens, which behaviors work well in what type of conflict, and if the effect is temporary or permanent.

The overlapping understanding of conflict prevention and conflict de-escalation also merits attention. Phelps and colleagues (2017) note that "police can prevent or reduce conflicts" (p. 203, my translation), juxtaposing the concepts somewhat, while Todak and James (2018) argue that "de-escalation is also used as an 'escalation prevention' strategy and is not just useful in volatile encounters" (p. 531) but in all types and phases of the encounters. It is not very surprising that the informants in this study talk about them concurrently. However, the concepts differ—while prevention refers to the activity aimed at decreasing the likelihood of an offender committing crime, de-escalation refers to efforts to reduce the overall level of aggression with the lowest possible force. Tillyer (2022) showed that when force comes into action, there is only a limited opportunity to scale it back, and this is likely also true for citizens' conflict behaviors. This should be understood in line with the perception that sometimes conflicts explode: when prevention does not work, what then? Future

research should tap into ongoing escalations that were not prevented and systematically investigate what behaviors do and do not work in the preventive phase and in the de-escalation phase. Informant A4's recollection provided an interesting showcase of how a conflict can be scaled back: a mix of reducing the opportunity (through a mild form of force) and calming communication. Here, the informant already knew that conflict behaviors were occurring—therefore, the opportunity to prevent was gone and he had to use de-escalation behaviors.

6.2 Limitations

The study's sample is a limitation. With seven informants from two units, it is important to be clear that these findings should not be taken to be generalizable. The interviews do bring forth valuable knowledge that allow for in-depth analyses of important accounts of behaviors. This knowledge is useful for conceptual development, and can provide a basis for future research to expand on when researching how de-escalation behaviors come into action. In particular, it can enhance observational studies with insights into what behaviors to look for when observing de-escalation and an officer-driven account of what the effects of these behaviors might be. Secondly, the attitudinal fallacy should be revisited. As noted by Jerolmack and Khan (2014), it is crucial not to take accounts as true proxies for behavior, and to acknowledge that interview studies are not the best-suited methodology to study actual behavior. However, interviews are well suited to study how officers perceive conflicts and how they account for dealing with them. Therefore, the analysis in this study provides insights into officers' meaning-making in conflicts they have experienced, and how they perceive to have performed de-escalation. Taken together with the relative lack of observational research on de-escalation, this constitutes a solid foundation to conceptualize different de-escalation behaviors.

7. Conclusion

The majority of police-citizen encounters proceed without any conflict, but when they do turn conflictual, police officers are faced with a challenge that they must solve for the encounter to end well. The aim of the study was to increase the knowledge on how they do that, more precisely how they understand conflict management and the use of de-escalatory behaviors. To do so, I asked seven Norwegian police officers to provide accounts of three conflict encounters (one verbal conflict, one conflict that involved threats, and one physical conflict that involved force or violence) they have experienced, and how they dealt with them. Many of the accounts highlighting these de-escalation behaviors may not come as a surprise to police researchers or practitioners. However, most of the knowledge officers hold seems tacit and under-researched, and the findings from this study can help illuminate how officers attempt to make conflicts end well.

The findings show that they do so in three primary ways: preventive de-escalation, communicative de-escalation, and physical de-escalation. The informants reported trying to prevent escalation by, for example, familiarizing themselves with the citizen and their history. This can be used to build rapport with the citizen that can be drawn upon should a conflict arise. Moreover, they employ different modes of communication based on the behavioral cues the citizens give them. The informants reported doing this in three ways: calming, autonomy-enhancing, and commanding. An interesting finding was that the informants focused not just on verbal communication but also the nonverbal aspects, such as showing their face or hands. Lastly, the informants emphasized that sometimes they needed

to resolve conflicts using physical de-escalation, such as grabbing, holding or even "traditional" use of force. A common view is that when force comes into action, de-escalation has failed, but the informants in this study see it differently, which suggests that physical force can also be very effective. Perhaps the findings of this study might move us closer to a more unified definition of (police) de-escalation. While I did not ask the informants to define the concept, they seem to generally agree with Todak and White's (2019) de-escalation experts, when I asked them to describe how they performed it. A definition of de-escalation should, at the very least, recognize the communicative and behavioral efforts to reduce the severity, intensity, and amount of conflict behaviors through the least severe means possible—but it should not rule out physical force either.

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