The Word is Sometimes Mightier Than the Sword: Rethinking Communication Skills to Enhance Officer Safety
Benjamin Zaiser, MA & Mario S. Staller, PhD

Abstract

Communication skills are an important component of the officer’s toolbox when responding to frontline calls. Yet, research-based recommendations for officers’ communicative behavior to facilitate personal safety are rare. Drawing from research on domestic violence, community policing, police encounters with the mentally ill, and crisis negotiations, we suggest to see the subject more as a fellow citizen endowed with civil rights, than as a potentially dangerous adversary, without compromising sound tactical behavior. In conjunction with this perceptual change, we introduce a set of professional communication skills that can prevent escalation to physical violence, while enhancing officer safety. Such skills emphasize empathy and rapport building and have successfully been applied in various contexts. Finally, we advocate that further research is needed on the validation of effective communication on the frontline and on situation-specific factors that influence it.

Keywords: officer safety, communication skills, active listening, de-escalation, framing theory, empathy
It is often the worst-case scenarios that make officer safety a direct result of police use of force. Yet, officer safety may not always correlate positively with physical coercion. As violence breeds more violence, physical interactions are usually of escalatory nature and pose significant risks to law enforcement personnel (Klukkert, Ohlemacher, & Feltes, 2009). In 2013, 49,851 officers were assaulted in the line-of-duty in the United States. In addition, 27 were killed feloniously (Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), 2014). The aggressive behavior behind such assaults often stems from a variety of factors associated with the person identified as the aggressor and the situation of the encounter with law enforcement (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011; Ferguson & Dyck, 2012; Slotter & Finkel, 2008). In order to prevent aggressive behaviors, literature suggests addressing and changing these factors. The social nature of conflictual encounters makes communication the primary tool for preventative approaches. Accordingly, a large share of established pre- and intervention measures are based on the use of verbal and non-verbal communication skills (Clinical Resource Audit Group (CRAG), 1996; National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), 2005; Price & Baker, 2012, Richmond, Berlin, Fishkind, Holloman, Zeller, Wilson, Rifai, & Ng, 2012). Based on these considerations, police officers’ options to influence the situation and also the personal disposition of potentially aggressive citizens are not limited to using force, deterring (e.g., confronting with outnumbering backup) or avoiding (e.g., waiting for backup) violent behavior. Officers’ can also accommodate potential aggression through deliberate communication with the individuals they encounter.

By pointing out how the link between interpersonal communication and officer safety remains under-researched, this article explores potential approaches to officer safety that are grounded in communication theory. A literature review on specialized law enforcement responses in domestic violence, community policing, encounters with the mentally ill, and crisis negotiations will carve out how all of these functional areas rely on the same specific way of communicating with clientele. This approach will be confronted with conventional wisdom on the use of force and officer safety, which usually conceives citizens as potential adversaries. Informed by the discussed areas of law enforcement, we argue that reframing such police officer perceptions from the conception of an adversary, to one of a fellow citizen with rights and dignity widens the scope of police-civilian interaction. A brief introduction of the tools that facilitate such a change of perspective will add de-escalation options to officers’ repertoire, and ultimately enhance officer safety.

1. Interpersonal Communication in the Context of Law Enforcement

In general, the importance of communication and interpersonal skills among police officers is recognized. A growing body of research reflects the increasingly prominent role that such skills play in the basic training of recruits, as well as in continuing education and training measures of police officers (Erickson, Cheatham, & Haggard, 1976; Marion, 1998; Glenn, Panitch, Barnes-Proby, Williams, Christian, Lewis, & Gerwehr, 2003; McDermott &
The Word is Sometimes Mightier Than the Sword/Zaiser & Staller

Hulse-Killacky, 2012). Yet, both literature and the reality on the ground appear to have not yet exhausted the potential to enhance officer safety through professional communication. For example, McDermott and Hulse-Killacky (2012) pointed out that many agencies do not concentrate on providing communication and interpersonal skills training, such as active listening, problem-solving, and conflict management. Furthermore, they witnessed a lack control and assessment mechanisms that ensure the successful skills acquisition by the recruits.

1.1 Officer Safety

Literature on the relationship between communication theory and officer safety is scarce. Publications can be categorized into two groups. One conceives communication skills that enhance officer safety as a defensive and/or deterrent prevention that aims at reading non-verbal indicators of imminent aggressive behaviors (Glennon, 2010; Pinzotto & Davis, 1999). The other part paves the way for this article's argument: the use of de-escalatory communication as a potential eliminator of physical force (Breadstreet, 1986; Keathley, Kupritz, & Haas, 2012; Miller, 2006). Pinzotto and Davis (1999) promoted awareness of and encouraged further research into the non-verbal communication between officer and malicious offenders. Based on studies in social psychology, criminal justice, and internally conducted reviews, they found that non-verbal behaviors and actions provide insight into an individual’s internal disposition. These provide opportunities for “human predators” to exploit. Therefore, they argue for an increased alertness with regards to the non-verbal cues that officers send out, as well as corresponding behaviors police officers observe in individuals encountered on duty. In addition, the case studies Pinzotto and Davis discussed exemplify vulnerable demeanors of policemen that fell victim to fatal attacks and deterrent appearances of officers who have not been attacked. Glennon (2010) took the same line, as he analyzed what he referred to as sensible psychological theories applied to real-life examples. He tied the art of communication to "accomplishing the basic mission of law enforcement: controlling, redirecting, and influencing others" (Glennon, 2010, p. 8; italics in original), which also enhanced officer safety.

In contrast, Bradstreet (1986) listed several reasons for the crucial importance of equipping law enforcement personnel with communication and interpersonal skills that prevent potentially violent situations, resolve conflicts between officers and citizens, and de-escalate crisis situations. With a focus on compliance-gaining, Thompson's (2013) "verbal judo" also aimed at preventing aggressive behaviors, with the inherent benefit of enhanced officer safety. Keathley, Kupritz, & Haas (2012) conducted a study aimed at validating the approach through a comparative analysis of two traffic stop training videos, which corroborated verbal judo’s basic conjecture.

1.2 Domestic Violence

Already more than four decades ago, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration of the US Department of Justice accounted for the significant risk to officers that lies in family crisis with a pioneering research project (Bard, 1970). Even though the risk of domestic violence to officer safety has been put into perspective (Meyer & Carroll, 2011; Eigenberg & Kappeler, 2012), Meyer and Carroll (2011) found, based on the FBI’s Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) database, that there are significant risks and dangers to an officer’s well-being associated with domestic violence calls for service. The
quasi-experimental field study supervised by Bard (1970) showed that training in interpersonal skills and conflict resolution can improve community relations, reduce violence, and improve officer safety during emotionally volatile domestic conflict situations. Bard’s recommendations included the use of active listening skills. Accordingly, police departments have come to implement crisis intervention programs along with education on the corresponding communication and interpersonal skills for domestic violence into their training agendas (Breci, 1989; Marion, 1998). Two studies on police training called for police officers to use communication to accommodate all parties involved in domestic violence situations, in order to increase officer safety (Birzer, 1999; Marion, 1998).

1.3 Community Policing

Giles (2002) started off investigating police-civilian encounters through the lenses of communication science. Among his conclusions were the principles according to which the establishment of rapport with diverse constituencies enhances officer safety. Recent trends in research on police-civilian relations suggested that cooperation with the police stems from general trust and confidence in law enforcement (Barker, Giles, Hajek, Ota, Noels, Lim, & Somera, 2008; Tyler, 2002). The literature reviewed by Barker and colleagues (2008) and their cross-cultural, international study dealt with perceived police officer accommodation, the result of a set of key communication and interpersonal skills including active listening, and how it predicts trust and confidence in law enforcement. This, in turn, predicted attitudes about compliance with police requests and with the logical consequence of enhanced officer safety. The underlying theoretical framework is referred to as communication accommodation, a set of models explaining how the deliberate use of communication strategies converges communication and linguistic patterns between interlocutors to talking at an eye-level (Giles, 2009). Giles’, Willemyns’, Gallois’, and Chernikoff Anderson’s (2013) review of empirical and theoretical analyses validated the value of communication accommodation as a bundle of communication skills that are highly relevant for law enforcement.

1.3 Crisis Intervention Teams

The de-institutionalization in the provision of mental health care (World Health Organization, 2008) significantly increased encounters between law enforcement and individuals with mental illness in many countries (Franz & Borum, 2011; Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), 1997; Wilson-Bates & Chu, 2008). Following this trend, an affluent body of literature investigates the implications on the use of force, measures taken to improve such interactions, and on officer safety (Ellis, 2014; McCann, 2013; Reuland & Margolis, 2003; Wells & Schafer, 2006). At its heart are programs that train law enforcement personnel in dealing with individuals with mental illness. These programs are often referred to as crisis intervention team (CIT) models. CIT programs familiarize police officers with the challenges that people with mental illness or those in emotional distress face and introduce them to local mental healthcare resources. One of the basic tenets of the CIT program is that police officers acquire a set of verbal and non-verbal key communication and interpersonal skills. This accounts for an effective accommodation of the mentally ill by law enforcement representatives and thus, enhances the safety on both sides (Bonfine, Ritter, & Munetz, 2014; Compton, Bahora, Watson, & Oliva, 2008). Correspondingly, Wells’ and Schafer’s (2006) study on CIT effectiveness validated that police officers perceived an improvement in their
ability to communicate with persons with a mental illness. Canada’s, Angell’s, and Watson’s (2010) qualitative study on the effectiveness of the CIT model found that the tools provided by the program helped law enforcement representatives to talk to persons with mental illness, to effectively calm them down, and to de-escalate the situation. In a quantitative analysis of the Chicago CIT program, Morabito, Kerr, Watson, Draine, Ottati, and Angell (2012) established empirical evidence of how CIT implementation can reduce police use of force. Specifically, the study found that “officers with CIT training were less likely to use force as the subject’s demeanor becomes more resistant” (Morabito, Kerr, Watson, Draine, Ottati, & Angell (2012). Similarly, Ellis’ (2014) quasi-experimental study comparing police officers’ knowledge, perception, and attitude before and after CIT training found that it may help in rapport-building, de-escalation, and communication skills. It comes with little surprise that the PERF acknowledged effective communication as key to successful management of encounters with the mentally ill and published its corresponding Trainers Guide and Model Policy accordingly (1997).

1.4 Crisis Negotiations

The expertise of the negotiator in conflict or crisis draws on key communication skills including rapport building and active listening (Fisher, 2011). Strentz (2012) listed listening (including active listening) and tone of voice, among others, as axioms of the crisis negotiation process. He conducted interviews with dozens of hostage takers and was told that those who were involved in crisis situations with peaceful endings remembered the caring tone of the negotiator’s voice. However, in most cases, interviewees could not recall if the negotiator was male or female. Vecchi, van Hasselt, and Romano (2005) introduced the FBI’s Behavioral Change Stairway Model to the academic community, stressing the prominence of certain key communication skills that can facilitate behavioral change away from aggression. According to the FBI negotiators, persuasive, behavioral change is based on active listening. Only by listening actively (step one on the behavioral change stairway model) to the person in crisis (i.e., the hostage-taker or suicide), negotiators are able to empathize effectively (step two), which leads to rapport (step three). Once rapport is built, the individual can be reasoned with and negotiators can influence (step four), and ultimately change the behavior of the person they are talking to (step five). In his on-scene guide for crisis negotiators, Lanceley (2003) noted that, contrary to what most believe, the primary skill of a negotiator is listening. In their standard work, McMains and Mullins (2014) noted that if “the negotiator does not understand the basics of communications, crisis communications, and the ability to actively listen, he or she can have all the tools and equipment in the world and still not be effective” (p. 236). Covering the technical end of the continuum, Taylor and Thomas (2008) analyzed nine hostage negotiations and found that successful negotiations were associated with higher levels of linguistic style matching than unsuccessful situations. Linguistic style matching happens when interlocutors use increasingly similar or same speech, greater coordination of turn taking, and reciprocation of positive affect to accommodate for each other. As such, linguistic style matching is both dependent on as well as facilitating active listening (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker; 2002). Voss (2004) noted that crisis negotiation, which he referred to as nothing else but a set of specific communication skills, is designed to reduce risks and increase options in a crisis situation.
1.4. Common features

The research above showed a common theme shared between police responses to domestic violence, community policing, CITs, and crisis negotiations: all areas rely on professional, non-confrontational communication, using tools such as active listening skills to enable empathy and thus rapport with other persons. This inhibits violent outcomes and ultimately enhances officer safety. But how do these insights translate into other contexts of policing? How can officers, especially those on the frontline, enhance safety through communication?

2. Reframing Adversaries as Citizens

An additional axiom of the negotiation process that Strentz (2012) conceptualized is the changing of roles. He found that successful negotiators acted more like a counselor than a cop. That way, they are able to empathize with the subject and thus to establish rapport. The result is often a positively changed perception of the police officer by the individual he or she is dealing with, which ultimately leads to behavioral change away from aggression. Prerequisite for such a change of roles, though, must be a change in how police officers perceive the individuals they are dealing with.

2.1 A common path to escalation: perceiving adversaries

Law enforcement personnel cognitively refer to individuals encountered in the course of their duties often as potentially dangerous adversaries (Bayley, 1976; Kappeler & Gaines, 2011; Kitaeff, 2011; Scharf & Binder, 1983; Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 2011; Walker & Archbold, 2013). As a long-standing problem in American policing, Walker and Archbold (2013) identified the tendency of police officers to escalate situations based on their perceptions of disrespect or lack of cooperation on the part of the citizen. According to the scholars, research on police-citizen encounters, including Klukkert and colleagues’ (2009) study on the legitimization of police use of force, has consistently found that perceived disrespect or resistance against an officer increases the probability of force being used. In the officers’ surveys of deadly use of force by the police, Scharf and Binder (1983) theorized officer perception of citizen action was one of four stages that encounters usually go through. Hence, the perception sets the pretext for the officer’s response.

Even though law enforcement representatives are often aware that their preoccupation of getting injured may be higher than the actual chances of getting hurt, their perception remains that what they do is very dangerous (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 2011). Bayley (1976) observed early on that the possibility of an armed confrontation shapes training, patrol preoccupations, and operation procedures, and more importantly, “the relationship between citizen and policeman by generating mutual apprehension” (p. 171). He further pointed out the escalatory potential, as the officer never forgets that the individual he or she is dealing with may be dangerous, while the individual constantly has to think of the officer perceiving him or her to be a threat.

Theoretical approaches that explain these preoccupations are broad and informed mainly by psychology, sociology, and organizational studies (Worden, 1996). From a psychological perspective, danger, disrespect, and the way they are perceived plays a crucial role in the development of police officers’ working personality (Bailey, 1976; Chevigny, 1969; Skolnick 2011; Walker & Archbold, 2013). From a sociological point of view,
The Word is Sometimes Mightier Than the Sword/Zaiser & Staller

2.2 A de-escalatory approach: addressing citizens

Aware of the disparity between objective hazards and subjectively perceived dangers, which often guide their actions, police officers need to refer to their clientele not as foes or malefactors. Addressing citizens instead of enemies shapes the communication in a neutral, respectful, and accommodating way that does not pre-determine the situation in adversarial terms. In other words, whenever confrontation overshadows police-civilian encounters, law enforcement personnel must reframe the relationship with the individual they are dealing with from adversary to citizen.

Such an interpretive effort is warranted by communication theory and its literature on communicative framing. In most basic terms, Canary, Cody, and Manusov coined human communication as “a transactional engagement in which individuals co-construct an interactive definition of reality” (as cited in Rogan, 2012, p.56). This interactive definition of reality is based on how we make sense of our day-to-day experiences by interpreting them along categorical designs, which are commonly referred to as frames (Goffman, 1974; Volkmer, 2009). Hence, any effort of framing and reframing represents each individual’s attempt to assert his or her cognitive schemata and conceptions about the issues that are subject to the conversation and the relationship nature of the interaction.

Accordingly, studies on interpersonal relationships consistently back the cognitive model of relational framing theory, which conceptualizes three dimensions of interpersonal relationships: affection-hostility (liking), dominance-submission (power), and involvement-non-involvement (Dillard & Solomon, 2005; Greene, 2009). In the context of law enforcement, the liking and power continua are of significant relevance. The degree of involvement, which intensifies either of those previously mentioned frames, is usually pre-determined in police-citizen encounters and can therefore be disregarded for this paper’s purpose. Hence, any verbal or non-verbal statement is perceived as a relational frame on a continuum between affection and hostility and between dominance and submission (Greene, 2009). On the bottom line, frames reduce the complexity of information we have to take in and therefore help us to navigate the world. Yet, they do not only help us to interpret the
The Word is Sometimes Mightier Than the Sword/Zaiser & Staller

For example, if a citizen who is filming the arrest of another person with a mobile device is not following an officer’s instruction to stop recording, the officer may interpret the behavior in different ways. He or she may interpret the bystander’s action as disobedient, disrespectful, and confrontational, refusing public authority. Such an interpretation would entail the perception of the citizen as a hostile, dominant interlocutor, a potential threat to the police officer’s operation and possibly the officer’s wellbeing. In this case, the officer is likely to choose a corresponding course of action, which may, depending on the citizen’s reaction, include verbal and physical force. This, in turn, may prompt the citizen to interpret the officer’s behavior in the same way, completing the cycle of escalatory communication and creating the accomplished fact of a socially constructed, adversarial reality. As a result, the situation may escalate and expose the officer, who is already involved in another confrontation, to potential violence and thus an increased risk to his or her wellbeing. On the other hand, the police officer may interpret the citizen’s behavior as an insistence on his or her First Amendment rights. In fact, the U.S. Constitution allows for recording police officials carrying out his or her duties, as long as there is no interference with an officer’s lawful execution of his or her duties (American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), 2015; ACLU v. Alvarez, 2011/2012; Glik v. Cunniffe, 2011). Instead of perceiving the citizen’s behavior as an act of disrespect, the officer could also refer to the bystander as a citizen with constitutional rights and responsibilities. That way, the relational interaction would be framed in a more cooperative (i.e., less hostile) and mutually respective (i.e., less dominant) way. Consequently, instead of creating a new conflict in addition to the one he or she is already dealing with, the officer could choose another option and de-escalate the situation. He or she could communicate to the citizen that filming cannot be tolerated within a range of potential interference. Furthermore, the officer could point out that in case of an actual obstruction, he or she may have to take action against that citizen, in order to safely execute his or her duties. In this case, an alternative reality may have been constructed and the risk of physical injury for both parties would be minimized.

Figure 1 illustrates how officer perception determines officer behavior, which influences the situational outcome of the encounter. At the same time, the way officers communicate with individuals in situations with potential, physical aggression feeds back into the officers’ perception. Consequently, the model points out that professional communication has the ability to frame perception. Viewing Ellrich’s and Baier’s (2015) study, which found that, compared to the general public, German police officers were less able to change perspective, this insight provides a viable approach to master this challenge and reframe the adversarial perception.
3. The Officer’s Communication Toolbox

Research on domestic violence, community policing, CITs, and crisis negotiations has shown that the police are capable of changing the way they perceive the people they serve and are often able to prevent the escalation of potentially violent encounters. Instead of addressing potential adversaries, officers assigned to these functional areas relate to fellow community members, mentally ill citizens, and persons in crisis. The studies discussed have established the positive impact of such conduct on officer safety and service quality. Furthermore, literature also provides the tools that facilitate such a social reconstruction of relational frames (see Table 1; M. Reschny, personal communication, February, 10, 2015; McMains & Mullins, 2014; P. Harper, personal communication, October 17, 2011; Strentz, 2012; Vecchi et al., 2005).

The single most prominent skill set that allows law enforcement personnel to successfully accomplish their mission – without physical injury – in any of the functional areas discussed in the literature review is active listening. With two basic functions, conveying empathy and gathering information, active listening skills (ALS) are the initial step in renegotiating the relational framework with the people police officers encounter in a de-escalatory way. The genuine application of ALS prevents the pre-judgmental, selective perception of the situation of an encounter on both sides by setting the officer in an inquisitive state of mind and reducing behaviors that the citizen may perceive to be adversarial. In addition, while accommodating for the citizen, ALS provide the officer with valuable information, based on which he or she can further and more effectively de-escalate the situation, establish rapport, and consolidate the cooperative relational frame (Noesner & Webster, 1997; Rogers, 1957; Vecchi et al., 2005). Also, information gained through ALS
allows officers to make better-informed decisions on subsequent ways of action (Drusenbury, Falco, Lake, Brannigan, & Bosworth, 1999; McDermott, 2012; Purdy & Borisoff, 1996;), including the use of force, if necessary.

Furthermore, other communication skills are well suited to convey an officer’s changed perception of the person he or she is dealing with. Table 1 provides an exemplary list of ALS and pro-active communication skills that prompt compliance and cooperation by contextualizing the situation of the encounter and the relationship of both parties as a police-civilian interaction.

Table 1: The Officer’s Communication Toolbox

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication Skill / Technique</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active Listening Skills (ALS)</strong></td>
<td>a set of communication skills that allows interlocutors to build a relationship that facilitates effective communication (&quot;MOREPIES&quot; is an effective mnemonic to memorize the following key active listening skills)</td>
<td>&quot;mhm&quot;, &quot;ya&quot;, &quot;I see&quot;, &quot;oh&quot;, &quot;aha&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minimal Encouragers</strong></td>
<td>giving verbal and non-verbal cues that reassure the person talking that he or she is being listened to and followed</td>
<td>&quot;What would make you think that we are treating you differently from the rest?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Open-ended Questions</strong></td>
<td>formulating questions that cannot be answered with &quot;yes&quot; or &quot;no&quot; to encourage the citizen to expand on his or her answer</td>
<td>&quot;I got it, you’ll make somebody pay if we don’t leave within a minute.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflecting / Mirroring</strong></td>
<td>repeating the last few words of what has been said to reassure that the conversation is being followed</td>
<td>&quot;You seem very upset, Ma’am.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotion Labeling</strong></td>
<td>identifying and naming the emotions of the citizen to empathize and convey understanding</td>
<td>&quot;I understand you are frustrated, Sir.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paraphrasing</strong></td>
<td>reframing a citizen’s statement with different words to demonstrate the genuine motivation to understand it</td>
<td>&quot;So, you are saying everything had already happened before you got here?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&quot;I&quot; Messages</strong></td>
<td>framing messages in the first person to build rapport through personal disclosures and nonjudgmental statements</td>
<td>&quot;I think you may be better off seeing a doctor, Ma’am.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effective Pauses</strong></td>
<td>using deliberate silences before and after meaningful comments to increase anticipation and reflection</td>
<td>&quot;So basically, you just came here to meet your friends, but ended up being caught in the middle?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summarizing</strong></td>
<td>summing up emotions and the message of the citizen to reassure understanding and prevent misunderstanding</td>
<td>&quot;Sir, we’ve been called to respond to an aggravated assault on this parking lot. Could we take a look at your ID?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explanatory Communication</strong></td>
<td>explaining the measures taken against civilians to increase transparency and predictability of police behavior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on these considerations, we encourage law enforcement professionals to recognize the value of deliberate communication and its relational framing dimension as an effective tool to enhance officer safety. As skills to be trained and maintained, the potential of professional communication skills for officer safety has not yet been exhausted, despite the present knowledge and experience of the discussed functional areas of law enforcement. A way to facilitate the overdue cross-fertilization is to organize integrated communication training sessions with officers on patrol, community liaison officers, CIT members, and crisis negotiators. On such a platform, law enforcement professionals could exchange experiences, knowledge, and ideas to further refine, and standardize the ways they communicate not only to gain compliance and accomplish the mission, but also to get home safely after each tour.

4. Limitations and Further Directions

Treating potentially dangerous individuals not as such may ring the alarm bells of those on the frontline. Police officers are indeed operating in hostile environments and dealing with people who are threatening their safety, causing bodily harm, or even going after their life. Accordingly, this paper’s argument may encounter criticism for not acknowledging the objective and real dangers that officers face everyday, increasing the risk for officers who see only good in the bad guy they are dealing with. Reframing potential malefactors to fellow citizens may sound like a naïve recommendation as a strategy to prevent the escalation of initially non-violent situations. Yet, it does not encourage officers to neglect perilous realities in the field. The paper clearly states to approach citizens in a neutral way that respects their rights and dignity, which, by no means, rules out awareness of potential risks stemming from the encounter or the rules and triggers of necessary use of force. The value of the approach lies in the way it broadens the scope of possible responses. By adding de-escalative options to the officer’s repertoire, it has great potential to prevent uncertainty, misunderstanding, misrepresentations, and ignorance on either side, and limits potential aggression threatening officer safety.

The taxonomy of the literature discussed above is based on the contribution of each functional area of law enforcement to this paper’s argument. Certainly, communication theory and communication skills play a crucial role in investigative interviewing, too. Yet, due to the static situation in which police interviews are conducted and the relational context that assumes a crime has already been committed, the lessons that could be drawn from enhancing officer safety under the dynamic circumstances of frontline duty remain limited. Therefore, investigative interviewing was not addressed in the literature review.
With a view to the limited research that has been done so far, we would encourage scholars and practitioners in law enforcement to further investigate the relevance and the extent to which deliberate communication could enhance officer safety (Keathley, Kupritz, & Haas, 2012; Klukkert et al., 2009). This paper’s argument draws conclusions from the reviewed literature, informed by experiential knowledge. However, it still requires empirical validation. In addition, we see value in studies that analyze relevant frontline situations to identify ways and skills of communication that work better than others. Vast amounts of corresponding data (stored at law enforcement agencies) could be used for meaningful research on and training in the area of officer safety. Potential for further empirical research lies also in the examination of situation-specific factors that influence effective communication on the frontline, such as mental or physical exhaustion.

Finally, we suggest developing and examining the effectiveness of professional communication skills training programs for frontline officers. Especially the integration of such skills within police use of force training, since the training of decision-making processes regarding the course of action is crucial for highly dynamic and complex situations (Staller & Zaiser, 2015).

4. Conclusion

Research on domestic violence, community policing, police encounters with the mentally ill, and crisis negotiations showcases the de-escalative and constructive potential of deliberate communication. Professional communication skills (see Table 1) have allowed police officers in these functional areas to change the way they relate to those individuals and to perform their duties more effectively, with less risk to their own safety.

Based on these insights, we suggest three important steps that could enhance officer safety through improved communication. First, police officers should be aware of the disparity between the objective hazards they encounter and the subjectively perceived dangers that often guide their actions. Second, police officers should pro-actively reframe their perceptions of the individuals they are dealing with from adversary to citizen. And third, in conjunction with this re-interpretative effort, officers should capitalize on the power of professional communication skills to facilitate this crucial change of perspective and to translate it into effective, de-escalatory options. This widens the officer’s operational repertoire, increases the chances of resolving issues without violence, and ultimately enhances officer safety.

About the Authors:

Benjamin Zaiser, MA, is a former police officer that served as a crisis negotiator and narcotics agent in both national and international settings. His research interests focus on the psychology of interpersonal communication during critical and major incidents, tactical decision making in police contexts, and on the pedagogy of corresponding training and education. Correspondence regarding this article can be sent to: bzaiser@syr.edu

Mario Staller, PhD, is a police use of force, self-defense, and firearms instructor. His research focuses on psychological aspects of conflict management in police contexts as well as skill development and pedagogical practice in police use of force and self-defense training. Correspondence regarding this article can be sent to: mario.staller@gmail.com
References

American Civil Liberties Union. Photographers. Retrieved from https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/photographers


The Word is Sometimes Mightier Than the Sword/Zaiser & Staller


