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Differences in the conflict resolution tactics of male and female police patrol officers

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Dr Neil Brewer is an Associate Professor in the School of Psychology at Flinders University. His current major research activities span the fields of organisational and forensic psychology, and include projects on the effects of electronic supervisory monitoring of employee performance, and the relationship between consistency and accuracy of eyewitness testimony. He recently co-edited (with C. Wilson) the book 'Psychology and Policing' (Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995) and is a member of the National Executive Committee of the College of Forensic Psychology of the Australian Psychological Society.

ABSTRACT

This study examined the conflict resolution tactics of male and female police officers on patrol. An instrument for measuring behavioural tactics was developed from a theoretical model of conflict resolution. Male and female officers were observed when interacting with members of the public, and their behaviour was recorded in real time via a

datalogger. Lag sequential analysis was used to detect sequences of behaviour. Results indicated that male officers used coercive tactics, such as controlling statements, threats and physical tactics, more often than females. The use of coercive tactics by males was likely to elicit verbal abuse from the citizen, which in turn increased the probability of physical abuse. This outcome was not evident for female officers. Consequently, the behavioural tactics of male officers more often placed them at risk of physical resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Police patrol officers regularly deal with conflict situations, such as mediating disputes between neighbours, restoring order in a pub brawl, or arresting a violent offender. It is 'all in a day's work' for officers to communicate with people who are intoxicated, angry or upset, and how well they do so contributes to how successfully they resolve these conflicts. Officers may use a variety of tactics when dealing with an incident, and need to exercise considerable discretion in deciding among actions such as arrest, report, caution or request assistance. Officers' choice of tactics may be a result of situational factors such as citizen demeanour, severity of offence, or even the time of day. However, choice of tactics is also influenced by factors such as

the officer's personality or experience. People have been shown to have a consistent personal style of conflict resolution (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984 and Sternberg and Dobson, 1987), that is relatively stable across scenarios. Consequently, the authors would expect officers to display individual differences in the way they attempt to resolve disputes.

It is likely that, from the wide range of personal styles shown by individual officers, some styles will be more successful than others. That is, some officers will be more effective in resolving conflicts than other officers. An Australian study (Wilson and Brewer, 1991) identified a group of 'resistance prone' officers who experienced abnormally high levels of assaults from citizens. These officers did not differ from the study sample on any of the demographic variables measured, such as experience or rank. Therefore, it was quite likely that some aspect of their behaviour when dealing with members of the public contributed to the above-average levels of resistance they experienced. Although the notion that some officers are more skilful than others in effectively dealing with conflict may be accepted, little is known about the specific behaviour exhibited by officers which results in more successful outcomes. Previous studies examining police performance (McIver and Parks, 1983 and Bandy, Buchanan and Pinto, 1986) have identified general behaviour, such as 'defusing', to be effective. The focus in this study was to describe the *specific* tactics used by police officers which were successful in reducing conflict intensity. As Geller (1985, p. 155) notes: 'there are officers who are "experts at turning parking tickets into riots" (Scharf and Binder, 1983, p. 161) as well as officers who can arrest extremely dangerous suspects and "leave 'em laughing" To say that we know both types of officers exist, how-

ever, is not to say that we know anything systematic about their personal characteristics and methods.'

One issue in the conflict resolution field that has attracted a lot of attention in the popular literature is the possibility that there may be important gender differences in handling conflict. However, previous studies examining the effects of gender on conflict resolution have provided inconclusive results. Some studies examining self-reported styles of handling conflict have shown that females prefer styles which are more passive (Kilmann and Thomas, 1977; Shockley-Zalabak and Morely, 1984 and Utley, Richardson and Pilkington, 1989). Other studies found no gender differences (eg, Shockley-Zalabak, 1981). Similarly, in experimental studies examining preferences for tactics for gaining compliance over another person, some studies have reported differences between males and females, with females being either more competitive (DeTurck, 1985 and Canary, Cunningham and Cody, 1988) or less competitive (DeTurck, 1987) than males. Other studies have reported no difference (eg, Kipnis, Schmidt and Wilkinson, 1980). Conrad (1991) found that males were quicker to use coercive strategies when faced with non-compliance, although women used these strategies as a last resort. The gender of the other party involved in the conflict has also been shown to be an influencing variable (Fitzpatrick and Winke, 1979). Observational studies of children have shown that boys use more threats and physical tactics to resolve conflict, whereas girls prefer verbal strategies (Camras, 1984 and Miller, Danaher and Forbes, 1986).

Although no clear trends have thus far emerged from this literature, it would be premature to conclude that gender-related differences in conflict resolution styles do not exist. Most of the re-

search conducted thus far has involved self-reported measures or examination of behaviour patterns during experimental simulations. Close examination of actual behaviour in real-life contexts has not occurred. However, in the process of conducting a very large field study on effective conflict resolution in police–citizen interactions, an opportunity arose for the authors to examine gender differences in dealing with conflict using a sub-sample of male and female officers who were performing similar patrol duties in the same environment. Although the sample size was small, the combination of actual behavioural data and real-life conflict interactions suggested that this preliminary investigation was worthwhile.

METHOD

Setting

Observations were conducted at two suburban police stations located in Adelaide, South Australia, a city of approximately 1.5 million people. Officers were observed when interacting with members of the public during general duties patrols. Interactions took place at the citizen's home, at business premises, shopping centres, hotels, schools, or in the street. The interaction may have been self-initiated, or the officers may have responded to an incident as a result of a call via radio.

Sample

Eight officers were observed, four of which were female and four male. All officers were of the rank of Constable. The average age of the officers was 28 years four months (range 23–32 years). The mean length of service was just over six years (range three–eight years). Officers were equally represented from the two stations included in the study.

Behavioural recording instrument

An instrument for measuring conflict behaviour was developed from a model of conflict resolution, based on previous theoretical and empirical work. This new instrument was developed because it provided a method for measuring conflict behaviour which was theoretically based, operationalised specific conflict behaviour, and was generalisable across various settings. The instrument also allowed for the sequential analysis of behaviour. The behavioural recording instrument comprised 11 behavioural categories, into which all verbal and physical communication was recorded. Five categories (support, control, reject, threat and physical) referred to officer-only behaviour, and four categories (self defence, refuse, verbal abuse and physical abuse) referred to citizen-only behaviour. In addition, two categories (information seek and information give) referred to tactics that could be used by either the officer or the citizen. A full description of the model and recording instrument is provided in Braithwaite (1997).

Apparatus

A computerised device called a datalogger was used to collect behavioural data during observations. The datalogger measured approximately $15 \times 9 \times 3$ cm and could be held comfortably in one hand. It had a keypad for entering data, with each key marked in a similar configuration to an electronic calculator. The datalogger was preprogrammed with the behavioural categories, such that the depression of a particular key on the keypad recorded the occurrence of a particular behaviour. The datalogger had an inbuilt clock, and the duration of each behaviour was recorded with an accuracy of 0.01 seconds. Therefore, the behavioural tactics of both police and citizens were recorded as they happened

and stored in sequence, along with their corresponding times of occurrence. A visual display on the datalogger allowed the user to check which button was being depressed. An internal battery powered the NEC V25+ microprocessor and associated hardware. The unit had 256 K of static Random Access Memory (RAM) for the temporary retention of collected data. Data were downloaded at the end of each observational session from the unit to a personal computer via a serial port.

Observations

The observer accompanied the participating officer (with his or her partner) on patrol in the vehicle. When an interaction between an officer and a member of the public commenced, the observer coded all behaviour using the coding system and entered each behaviour into the datalogger. All verbal and physical behaviour was therefore recorded as it happened and preserved in sequence. During observations, the observer remained within hearing distance while taking care not to become involved in the interaction. The observer tried to minimise her presence by directing non-verbal behaviour, such as eye contact and body position, away from the participants. The observer did not verbally communicate with participants.

Types of tasking attended varied from routine encounters, such as house burglary and responding to domestic alarms, to more serious incidents, such as domestic disputes or assaults. At the observer's discretion, some taskings were not observed, with the observer maintaining a safe distance from the encounter (eg, an incident involving a firearm).

Participants were observed for a minimum of 25 interactions each, of which a minimum of 10 interactions must have involved an offender (as opposed to a victim, witness or complainant). Propor-

tionally, female officers interacted with an offender in 59 per cent of cases, and male officers 56 per cent. Observations were conducted predominantly during the afternoon shift (1500 to 2300 hours), and the night shift (2300 to 0700 hours), on seven days of the week, and were spread over five months.

Inter-observer reliability

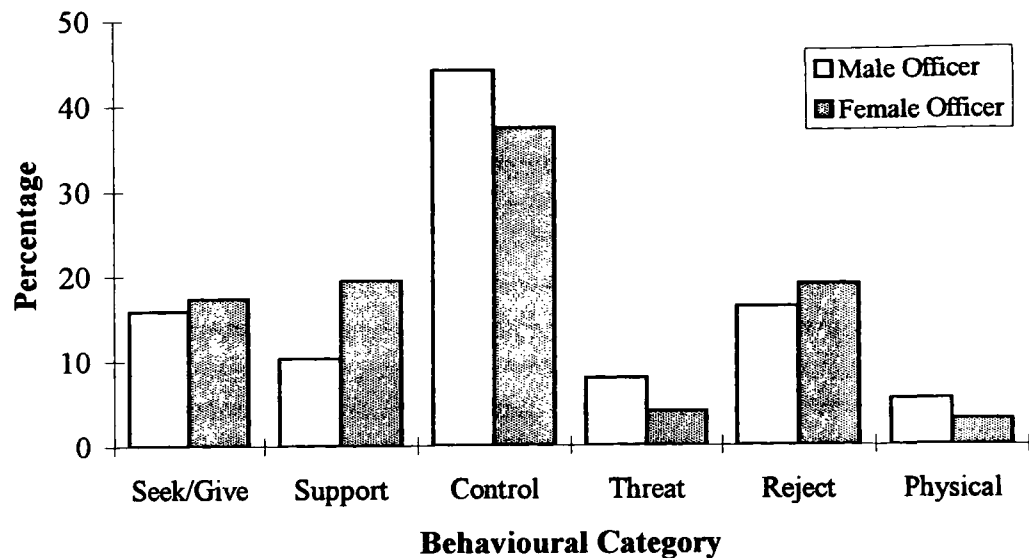
Inter-observer reliability assessment was conducted during the larger field study that ran in conjunction with this study. A second observer was trained in the use of the behavioural coding scheme and the datalogger, and then accompanied the primary observer on patrol and independently coded approximately 40 interactions. Reliability observations were conducted at both stations, during similar times to main observations. A computer program was developed to assess inter-observer reliability. An agreement was recorded if the two observers coded the same behavioural code and participant code (target officer, partner or citizen) within the same four-second time period. Analysis revealed that the mean inter-observer agreement per interaction was 80.0 per cent ($SD = 5.41$).

RESULTS

Data set

The mean number of behavioural tactics recorded for each officer was 2,765 ($SD = 646$, range 1,692–3,772). The total number of behavioural tactics recorded for male target officers was 11,258, and for females 10,861. Since a large proportion of recorded behaviour involved the officers asking the citizen for information, a new category was introduced to collapse consecutive information seek/give behavioural tactics into one occurrence of the behaviour information exchange. This

Figure 1
Proportion of
target officer
behaviour per
behavioural
category



reduced the data set to 3,854 behavioural tactics for males and 3,909 for females, thereby increasing the relative frequency of the remaining behavioural codes.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics concerning the frequency of each tactic expressed as a proportion of one's total behaviour are presented for male and female officers in Figure 1. Male officers were marginally more controlling than female officers (44 per cent cf. 37 per cent), indicating a preference for tactics which directed the citizen to change their behaviour. Examples of controlling tactics were 'Come here', or 'Don't walk away when I'm talking to you'. Female officers used supportive tactics more frequently (19 per cent cf. 10 per cent), more often making statements which complimented, empathised, or showed concern for the citizen. Statements such as 'I realise this is very upsetting for you', or 'You did the right thing' were coded into this category. Male officers tended to be more threatening in their approach (8 per cent cf. 4 per

cent), more often making statements such as 'If you do that again, you will be arrested', or 'I'm starting to get very angry with you'. Male and female officers did not differ on the categories information seek/give, indicating that officers asked an equal number of questions and used informative statements, such as 'This matter won't go to court', or 'You may have to go to the station and report this', to a similar extent. The category reject, which included statements like 'I didn't come down in the last shower', or 'I'm afraid I don't accept that', were used with about the same frequency by males and females. Physical tactics involved the officer touching the citizen, for example, restraining or searching the citizen. While male officers used this tactic only slightly more frequently than females, analysis of the duration of behavioural tactics revealed that males spent approximately twice as long engaged in physical contact with the citizen than females (44 mins, 28 secs cf. 23 mins, 6 secs).

The proportional frequency of citizen tactics when interacting with either male

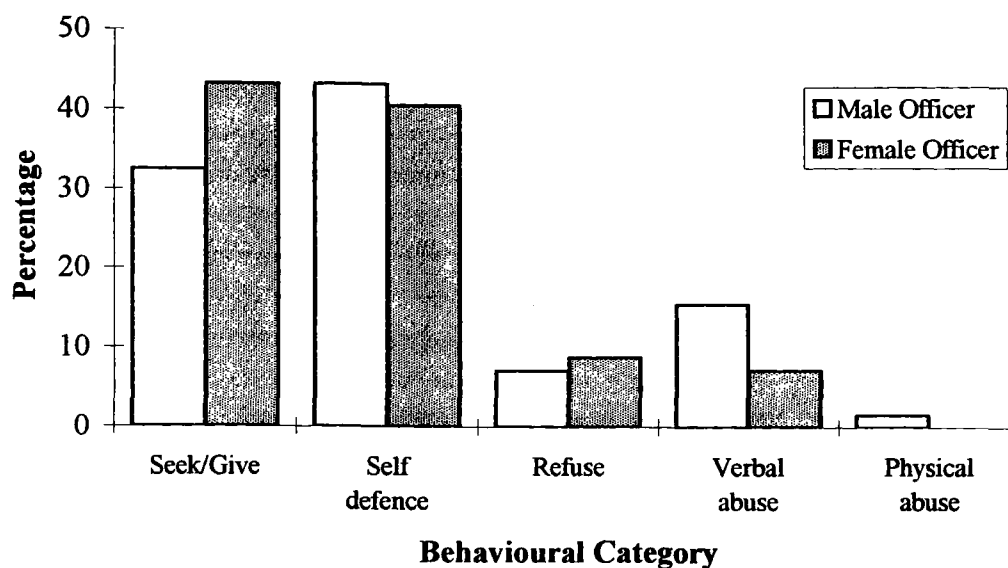


Figure 2
Proportion of
citizen behaviour
per behavioural
category

or female target officers is presented in Figure 2. Of note is the higher frequency of verbal abuse directed towards male target officers (16 per cent) compared with females (7 per cent). Verbal abuse was defined as any statement which insulted, undermined or threatened the officer, such as 'I'll get you for this', or 'Haven't you got any real work to do?' Members of the public engaged in the mutual exchange of information marginally more frequently with female officers. Citizens frequently made statements in self-defence, for example, 'I didn't do anything', or 'I was only doing 60 km, honest!' Citizens were equally defensive with male or female officers. The refuse category included both verbal statements indicating refusal to comply, such as 'I'm not going to answer that question', as well as non-verbal behaviour communicating non-compliance, such as silence in response to an officer question. Male and female officers experienced similar levels of refusals. Physical resistance from the citizen, such as biting, struggling, or striking, was an extremely rare event, with male officers encountering

low levels of physical abuse and females experiencing none of this behaviour.

Sequential analysis

Frequency statistics describe how often particular behaviour was performed, but do not reveal anything about the relationships between tactics. Since the thousands of behavioural tactics recorded were stored in their original order, it was possible to analyse the more prevalent sequential relationships that occurred among them. To do this, a computer program was developed to scroll through the data and count the number of times particular tactics followed others. For example, did the tactic threat follow the tactic verbal abuse very often? If so, this would indicate that, when officers were confronted by an abusive citizen, they commonly responded by threatening them. This statistical technique, known as lag sequential analysis, was developed by Sackett (1979), and later modified by Allison and Liker (1982). The technique can also be used to determine which tactics preceded others by counting the number of

times certain behaviour occurred before another. For example, in what contexts did officers use physical tactics? Did officers use physical tactics in response to citizen resistance or not?

The frequency analysis presented in the previous section showed that not all tactics occurred with the same frequency. Some tactics, such as control, occurred quite often, while others, such as threat, did not. Therefore, one would expect to see a greater number of the tactic control in the data set, and fewer instances of the tactic threat. This posed a problem when counting the number of times particular tactics followed or preceded others; if certain behaviour was common in the data set, then it would not be unusual to find that this behaviour commonly followed other behaviour. To control for the relative frequency of tactics, sequential analysis examined the occurrence of behaviour in terms of probability rather than frequency. That is, the analysis took into account how often particular tactics were expected in the data set when determining whether these tactics regularly followed others to form a sequence. For example, if the tactic verbal abuse had a frequency of 10 per cent in the data set, then its probability of occurrence was 0.1. If verbal abuse was observed to follow some other tactic, such as physical, with a probability of 0.4, then this was significantly higher than expected. As a result, one can conclude that there was a relationship between physical and verbal abuse, such that the citizen was likely to become abusive after being touched by the officer. In contrast, a frequent behaviour, such as control, may have occurred with a frequency of 40 per cent in the data set, giving it a probability of 0.4. If this tactic was observed to follow physical with a probability of 0.4, then there was no increase from the base rate of occurrence, and therefore control fol-

lowed physical at the same level as would be expected by chance.

Sequential analysis thus involved three steps. First, the probability of each behavioural tactic occurring in the data set was calculated, thus giving the expected probability. Then, the probability of each tactic preceding and following all other tactics was calculated, giving the observed probability. Third, a z statistic calculated whether the observed probability was significantly greater than the expected probability, indicating that one behaviour was contingent upon another.

Two terms will be used when describing the results that require explanation. Criterion behaviour is the term given to the particular tactic of interest. If examining the behaviour which preceded or followed a threat, then the tactic threat is called the criterion behaviour. Lag is the term given to the number of behavioural turns before or after the criterion behaviour. In the analysis presented in this paper, only those tactics occurring one lag after the criterion behaviour (lag 1) and one lag before the criterion behaviour (lag -1) will be presented. Therefore, the analysis is limited to those tactics occurring immediately before or immediately after a criterion.

The results examining officer tactics are presented in Table 1. The criterion behaviour is presented on the left-hand side of the table. The upper portion of each section of the table examines the tactics which occurred following the criterion behaviour (at lag 1) for male and female officers. In the lower portion of each section, the tactics observed to occur before the criterion behaviour (at lag -1) are presented. To be included in the table, tactics must have shown a significant increase in probability from their base levels. The figure presented in the observed probability column gives an indication of the strength of the relationship.

Table 1: Observed probability of various tactics occurring one lag after (lag 1) and one lag before (lag -1) officer criterion behaviour for male and female officers

Criterion	Lag	Female		Male	
		Tactic	Prob.	Tactic	Prob.
Support	Lag 1 (after)	Info. exch.	.60***	Info. exch.	.57***
		Info. give	.24***	Info. give	.26***
		Support	.11**		
Threat	Lag -1 (before)	Info. exch.	.57***	Info. exch.	.57***
		Support	.10*	Info. give	.29***
		Threat	.09***	Self defence	.19***
	Lag 1 (after)	Info. seek	.09*	Threat	.16***
				Verbal abuse	.12***
				Physical	.06*
	Lag -1 (before)	Control	.27*	Control	.24*
		Info. give	.22*	Info. give	.19**
		Threat	.09***	Threat	.16***
		Refuse	.05*	Verbal abuse	.08**
				Physical abuse	.02**
Reject	Lag 1 (after)	Reject	.20***	Self defence	.26***
		Self defence	.19***	Reject	.15***
		Info. give	.16*	Verbal abuse	.07***
	Lag -1 (before)	Info. seek	.06*	Info. seek	.04*
		Reject	.20***	Self defence	.25***
		Self defence	.18***	Reject	.15***
Physical	Lag 1 (after)	Info. seek	.07***	Verbal abuse	.05*
		Control	.36***	Info. seek	.05***
		Physical	.14***	Control	.42***
	Lag -1 (before)			Physical	.15***
				Verbal abuse	.09***
		Control	.51***	Control	.30***
		Physical	.14***	Physical	.15***
				Threat	.07*
				Physical abuse	.03***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The observed probability may be high but only marginally significant, due to the tactic having a high base rate of occurrence, or the observed probability may be low but statistically significant, due to the tactic having a low base rate of occurrence. The tactics information exchange and control produced similar sequences for male and female target officers, and so were not presented in the table.

The first criterion behaviour is support.

Therefore, this involves examining the tactics occurring before and after an officer made a supportive statement. Reading from the table, three tactics commonly occurred after female officers supported the citizen — information exchange, information give and further supportive statements. For male officers, two tactics followed support — information exchange and information give. Thus, both groups of officers engaged in

informative discussion following a supportive comment, while only females showed the tendency to repeat supportive tactics. Supportive tactics thus appeared to be useful in 'greasing the wheels' of the information exchange process. Turning to the lower portion of the table, female officers were likely to support the citizen in response to the tactics information exchange and support, again revealing the tendency for females to make consecutive supportive comments.

Examining the sequences surrounding the criterion behaviour threat, female officers were likely to follow threats immediately with further threats, or questions. Male officers also repeated threats and, in addition, used physical tactics to back up threats. After making a threat, male officers also experienced defensive or abusive statements from the citizen, while female officers did not. The previous section showed that male officers used threatening tactics more often. Sequential analysis detected that threats from males were likely to provoke a hostile response from members of the public, and increase the likelihood of physical confrontation. Examining the lower portion of the table, threats were used by male officers in response to verbal and physical abuse, a sequence not evident for female officers.

The tactic reject referred to statements which expressed the officer's unwillingness to accept the citizen's story, or which blamed the citizen. These types of tactic were likely to be repeated, and to elicit defensive behaviour from the citizen. Male officers encountered verbal abuse from the citizen after making a rejecting statement, while this pattern was not evident for female officers. The lower portion of the table also shows that males made rejecting statements in response to being verbally abused. As with threats, therefore, female officers were able to use

a rejecting tactic without provoking verbal resistance.

The use of officer physical tactics was likely to occur in conjunction with statements controlling the citizen's behaviour, such as 'Put your arms behind your back', or 'Come with me'. Use of physical tactics by male officers again significantly increased the probability of citizen verbal abuse. Physical resistance was an extremely rare event, not occurring at any stage during the interactions of female target officers. However, results presented in the lower portion of the table demonstrate that citizen physical abuse was likely prior to the use of physical tactics by the male officer, indicating that officers used physical tactics at times in reaction to violent behaviour from the citizen.

Results of analysis entering citizen tactics as criterion are presented in Table 2. The tactic self defence showed no gender differences and was not presented. For the first criterion behaviour, refuse, female officers regularly experienced repeated refusals to comply, and showed the tendency to threaten the citizen in response to a refusal. Males, on the other hand, responded to refusals with controlling statements or questions. Looking at the lower portion of the table to ascertain how refusals came about, for both male and female officers, refusals routinely occurred in response to a question. When interacting with male target officers, it was also likely that members of the public would refuse to obey an officer order.

Both male and female officers responded to an abusive citizen with controlling tactics. However, male officers also made rejecting or threatening statements and were likely to encounter physical resistance from an abusive citizen, representing the 'worse-case' scenario for patrol officers. Previous analysis identified

Table 2: Observed probability of various tactics occurring one lag after (lag 1) and one lag before (lag -1) officer criterion behaviour for male and female officers

Criterion	Lag	Female		Male	
		Tactic	Prob.	Tactic	Prob.
Refuse	Lag 1 (after)	Refuse	.15***	Control	.32**
		Threat	.05*	Info. seek	.08**
	Lag -1 (before)	Info. seek	.17***	Control	.49***
		Refuse	.15***	Info. seek	.23***
Verbal abuse	Lag 1 (after)	Control	.30**	Control	.36***
		Verbal abuse	.06**	Verbal abuse	.17***
				Reject	.10*
				Threat	.07**
	Lag -1 (before)			Physical abuse	.04***
		Control	.33***	Control	.24*
		Verbal abuse	.06**	Verbal abuse	.17***
				Reject	.14***
				Threat	.10***
				Physical	.07***
				Physical	.30***
				Threat	.20***
Physical abuse	Lag 1 (after)	—		Verbal abuse	.50***
	Lag -1 (before)	—			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

the tendency for male officers to elicit verbal abuse when using particular tactics when communicating with people. The lower part of the table shows that, prior to the citizen becoming abusive, female officers were likely to have directed the citizen's behaviour, while male officers were likely to have issued a direction, a rejecting statement, a threat or used physical tactics. Thus, a greater range of tactics was associated with verbal abuse for male officers, and the abuse itself resulted in poorer outcomes.

The final criterion behaviour is physical abuse. There were no occurrences of this behaviour during the interactions involving female target officers. For male officers, the only behaviour likely to precede physical abuse was citizen verbal

abuse, indicating that, on some occasions, verbal resistance escalated into physical resistance. Officers reacted to citizen violence by employing physical tactics themselves, and making threats.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide further evidence for previous work (Wiley and Hudik, 1974; Sykes and Clark, 1975; Brent and Sykes, 1979; Binder and Scharf, 1980; Sykes and Brent, 1980), demonstrating that police-citizen encounters are interactive processes, whereby the behaviour of the officer significantly influences the behaviour of the citizen. Not only do officers respond to the behaviour of the citizen and act

accordingly, but the tactical choices of officers were also shown to affect the level of citizen resistance experienced.

The findings with respect to gender differences were interesting. Male officers sampled in this study adopted an approach which could be described as more competitive, preferring tactics which emphasised power over the citizen, such as control, threat and physical actions. A consequence of males using these tactics more often was that males more often encountered the negative outcomes produced by these tactics. In addition, certain tactics produced negative outcomes for male officers and not for female officers. The use of rejecting, threatening and physical tactics by a male target officer was likely immediately to elicit verbal abuse, whereas females used these tactics without eliciting this response. The verbal abuse experienced by males was often a precursor to physical resistance from the citizen. Consequently, the tactical choices of male officers more often placed them at risk of physical confrontation than female officers. Females were generally more supportive of citizens, preferring tactics which emphasised mutual power in the interaction. Females used coercive tactics less frequently and in different contexts than males and, as a result, experienced less verbal abuse during their discussions with members of the public, and avoided physical resistance.

Although substantial data were collected for each subject, it is quite clear that considerable care must be taken in interpreting these findings because the sample size was so small. Replication with larger samples is obviously required. Nevertheless, results are extremely interesting, generally consistent with popular notions about gender differences in conflict resolution style, and suggest that further work following similar lines is

warranted. Should future work establish the generality of these findings, a range of other interesting questions will need to be addressed. For example, do such behavioural differences reflect a socialised pattern of behaviour for dealing with conflict?

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