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The Use of Psychological Coercion Instruments by Police Officers in Domestic Violence Incidents

Abstract

The main topic of this research paper is the use of psychological coercion instruments by police first response teams in domestic violence incidents. The research on the usage of voice as one of the instruments of psychological coercion in police officers' daily activity in coping with domestic violence incidents is a novelty in the Baltic countries. The aims of this research paper are:

- to present an environment of operations by police officers during the performance of their duties to protect, defend and assist
- to present voice as an important instrument of psychological coercion used by police officers as a soft power tool before resorting to the use of physical coercion instruments prescribed by law
- to analyse the use of elements of the human voice in domestic violence cases
- to present ways to improve police officers' performance who are dealing with domestic violence as a first response team through the proper use of voice as an instrument of soft power

The author of this research paper used research methods to achieve the aims of the research, such as observation, anonymous verbal interviews of participants and discussions with them during specialised training sessions on entrance into premises, analysis of statistical data, surveys, analytical research and logical analysis to explore the topic.

Keywords: aggressive environment, domestic violence, police officer, psychological coercion

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle"
(SUN Tzu s. a. Chapter 3: 18).

Introduction

Police officers, firefighters and emergency medical workers are identified to have a relatively high risk of being confronted with violence at work in many countries (GATES et al. 2006; RABE-HEMP – SCHUCK 2007). The above-mentioned categories of public servants are in charge of providing social services and conducting duties assigned to them by law. They are frequently confronted with different human beings in various circumstances. For example, from providing first aid to chasing down law offenders mostly outside the workplace at different times of the day. This can be at night or during the day.

Police officers also experience stress when going to unknown places. This is evidenced by the results of a survey conducted by the author of this paper in the context of research on stress management. The research is still ongoing. The target audience of this survey were 176 police officers from the first response teams of the National Police of Ukraine in the region and the Patrol Police. The questionnaire was created by the author of this research paper in compliance with ethical and data protection standards prescribed by law. The author reserves the anonymity of the respondents to the survey. The author of this paper also conducted interviews with three heads of units of police first response teams on stress management issues at the police, including questions related to the sources of the stress for police officers. The majority of respondents (more than 90%) answered the questions, such as: What usually causes you stress at the workplace? They replied – law offenders. This has also been proven by the results of another research done by Lisa van Reemst and Tamar F. C. Fischer from the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and based on data from a workplace violence survey of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations of the Netherlands, police officers are at high risk, facing violent behaviour, action outside their workplace (VAN REEMST – FISCHER 2019).

Police handling of violence

Violence involves mainly two forms: physical and psychological. The different forms of violence mentioned above vary in their nature and essence, from simple verbal assaults to attacks against police officers performing their duties using offensive words, phrases and signs, to the use of physical violence aimed at injuring or even killing police officers with lethal tools such as knives or small arms.

According to data from the FBI's Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (hereinafter referred to as "LEOKA") database, 503 officers nationwide were feloniously killed between 2011 and 2020. The author of this paper is going to focus on domestic violence. During the above-mentioned period, 43 officers were feloniously killed while responding to domestic disturbance or domestic violence calls. According to the FBI, 14 officers were feloniously killed when they encountered a domestic incident after arriving at the scene. The 43 officers who were killed while responding to domestic disturbance or domestic violence calls account for roughly 8.5% of the total number of officers killed between 2011 and 2020.

According to John Shane, Professor at the Criminal Justice department at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and based on results of interviews and surveys with police first response team members during the training sessions done by the authors of this paper, several factors may be identified which make a domestic violence incident highly dangerous for the safety of police first response team members.

Firstly, police officers enter into a human being's private space, and they are bringing a public face to a very private matter as potential participants of incidents in many cases are considered. Second, conflict parties' emotions overrun minds. Third, one of the conflicting parties is convinced that police officers are going to use the coercive powers granted by law. It fuels more emotions in human beings' behaviour and makes people angry to see the police, especially knowing that there is a real risk of being arrested or even being in the future incarcerated for breaches of the law. At the same time, it increases the likelihood that police officers will be attacked in hostile territory by a potential perpetrator. This leads to many questions. For example, how to counteract an upcoming threat for police first response team members with the minimum damages? How to protect human beings' lives and health? How to secure the personal safety of police officers?

Coercive measures

There are different forms of coercive measures to address the risks and threats to the personal safety of police officers in the performance of their duties under the law. For example, part 1 of Article 27, Conditions for the Use of Coercive Measures by the Police of the Republic of Lithuania states: “An officer shall have the right to use coercion only in cases of clear necessity and only to the extent necessary for the performance of his official duties. The use of coercion by an officer shall be appropriate to the circumstances and proportionate to the danger involved, considering the specific situation, the nature and intensity of the offence, and the individual characteristics of the offender. Physical coercion shall only be used when psychological coercion has been ineffective or when any delay endangers the life or health of the official or another person.”

Part 2 of Article 30 on Types of Police Measures of Law of Ukraine on the National Police states: “For the purpose of protecting human rights and freedoms, preventing and combating threats to public order and civil security, the Police shall also apply, within the scope of its competence, preventive police measures and coercive measures contemplated in this Law.”

Provisions as mentioned above for using coercive measures exist in the laws on police activity in other countries. Two forms of coercion are in place and assigned for the police to use: physical and psychological (in some academic research, laws use the term “mental”).

So, this leads to the conclusion that police officers have to choose which form of coercion is going to be used to cope with the challenges during the performance of assigned duties. The author would like to underline that in this paper the term “instrument” is used instead of the term “measure”.

Psychological coercion during domestic violence

The author of this paper is going to analyse psychological coercion during domestic violence by police first response teams.

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, coercion is “the threat or use of punitive measures against states, groups, or individuals in order to force them to undertake or desist from specified actions”. According to the “Dictionary of the Conflictologist” compiled by A. Y. Antsupov and A. I. Shipilov the term “coercion” is defined as

a tactical technique in a conflict, accompanied by the threat of sanctions, violence, or blackmail in order to force the opponent to take certain actions (or go to concessions).

According to the American Psychological Association dictionary, the term “psychological coercion” is defined as the process of attempting to influence another person through the use of threats, punishment, force, direct pressure and other negative forms of power.

According to the contract database and resource centre “Law Insider”, mental coercion means “a warning of the intention to use physical coercion, special means, a firearm, or explosives. Warning shots shall be held equal to mental coercion.” Psychological coercion is an intentional pattern of behaviour (often used alongside other forms of abuse) that can include threats, excessive regulation, intimidation, humiliation and forced isolation. It is designed to punish, dominate, exploit, exhaust, create fear and confusion, and increase dependency. It strips a person of their identity and breaks down the very core of who they are.

Analysis of the term “psychological coercion” or also the widespread usage of another form of the term “mental coercion” by using different research methods (linguistic, analysis, synthesis) allows us to conclude that psychological or mental coercion is a process of purposeful influence on a natural person’s consciousness and subconscious, aimed at correcting or changing the natural person’s behaviour, at fulfilling wishes to comply with the law, ethical requirements or to obey orders or instructions for the benefit of someone. Psychological coercion also includes the element of warning about negative consequences that are going to affect a natural person directly if he/she does not obey instructions given by another natural person. This can happen in different situations even if natural persons are not bound by subordination. For example, a robber orders a potential victim to hand over jewellery, or police officers give commands to stop the use of impolite words in public places. If you do not obey given commands, negative consequences might come soon. For example, a robber may use physical coercion to achieve a goal. As we can see, the influence on a natural person’s behaviour comes from the outside. It includes the high probability of using physical coercion measures in case of refusing to change the behaviour of a person desirably for another person or society. There is no space for freedom in a human being’s mind to make decisions about how to act in a given situation: to follow the robber’s orders or not do what you are told. There is a high probability that physical coercion is going to be applied right now.

The next question might be raised in this paper. How do we connect two parties with opposite positions, approach towards someone or something? One part of the conflict is the sender who has requested or been ordered to do something.

Another part of the conflict is the receiver, who must obey some procedures, instructions and directions. The answer is communication. It is a bridge for connecting the opposite parts of a conflict or relationship.

According to John Locke, “communication is inherently problematic because it is never perfect, and the transmitted ideas never properly coincide in the minds of the sender and receiver” (LOCKE 2000). Obviously, the uniqueness of each person during the communication process can lead to problems of interpretation, meaning, or understanding, but dealing with certain behaviour types, such as conflicted individuals, makes communication even more difficult. This is especially relevant in the activities of police officers because many of them communicate with various individuals on a daily basis. So, there is a need to identify which communication methods of police officers are effective when communicating with individuals with different types of behaviour (DOBRŽINSKIENĖ–PALAITYTĖ 2023).

Police officers often have to communicate with different types of human beings. Interacting with a conflict-type person makes them feel uncomfortable, as they may be aggressive, have no control over their emotions, and may be under the influence of alcoholic beverages or narcotic or psychotropic substances, which only makes the situation worse. The word aggression connotes active action and is associated with destruction, violence and mutilation. People express their feelings directly, sometimes even using physical violence (PRUSKUS 2012). Timas Petraitis (2010), who analysed the peculiarities of verbal communication between police officers and various individuals, noted that officers lack professionalism, restraint and tact when communicating.

The above-mentioned conclusions also have been confirmed by the results of observations on the communication skills of police officers done by the author of this paper during the conduction of the practical part of 9 training sessions on domestic violence for 176 police officers from the first response teams of the National Police of Ukraine in the region and the Patrol Police of Ukraine in 2022–2023. Premises for the conduction of improved scenarios were used: specially designed in the territory of regional national police training centres, the University of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Lviv city, and other places. The scenarios for the practical part were prepared by the author of this paper and were subject to change during each training session, depending on the level of preparedness of the main part of the participants. The main idea during the preparation stage of training was to adopt practical scenarios closer to real-life situations. Also, the authors of prepared scenarios left enough space and freedom for actors to improvise within the frame of the scenario. The most valuable gem during this type of training, namely, during practical exercises, is the selection

of the actor-players who perform different assigned scenario roles with the use of weapon replicas, fake grenade toys, stiletto knives, empty bottles of champagne, improvised explosive devices, booby traps, etc. Scenarios varied from the peaceful, calm environments to the most dangerous actions. Actors were selected to perform the roles of offender, victim, bystander, offender's or victim's family members and friends. Police officers in teams of two had to conduct assigned duties during practical scenarios closer to real-life situations of domestic violence cases. The focus of the practical exercises was the ability of police officers to communicate with different types of human beings in an aggressive environment and to use different tools and tactics for communication. For example, the first response team arrived at the domestic violence incident spot and met two males walking inside the private fenced territory, around them running two German shepherds without a leash. Some police officers started to use such directions at the beginning of communication: "Your dogs are off leash"; "You will be fined". Although police officers did not even try to set up contact with male actors, they did not try to identify who was the real owner of the dogs running around. Instead of doing it, police officers started to threaten them with negative consequences. What kind of message was sent? How did it help to set up contacts? Did it help to reduce tension? Answers – no, it just increased. The author of this paper is going to analyse one instrument that is used for persuasion, psychological coercion and physical coercion – voice.

Voice – An instrument of psychological coercion

In the above-mentioned situations, police officers have a choice to use different ways to set up contact with a potential abuser and other parts of the conflict. Firstly, persuasion has to be used. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, persuasion entails getting another party to follow a particular course of action or behaviour by appealing to the party's reason and interests without being threatened by negative consequences. For example, the above-mentioned situation with the running dogs. Police officers, after saying "good day", should be creative in the given situation. For example, one may start chatting about dogs' coats. This simple proposal may help to identify the dog's owner and set up contact with him/her, and at the same time, it significantly reduces the risk of being attacked by a dog. Another example of the use of persuasion. A police officer tries to persuade a potential abuser to stop cursing in public places by influencing a human being's beliefs, attitudes and behaviour through arguments

aired by voice and body language. If the above-mentioned instrument – persuasion did not have any impact on the behaviour of the conflict parties, especially on the offender, and did not change his/her point of view regarding something. It is time to use psychological coercion. Both persuasion and psychological coercion are the main tools of soft power in the police's daily routine. The author of this paper is going to analyse one instrument that is used for persuasion, psychological coercion and physical coercion – voice. This leads to the conclusion that persuasion has to be employed first during police officers' performance of assigned duties.

Most police officers demonstrated good communication skills in the above-given situation through polite behaviour and a desire to overcome obstacles to communication in a peaceful and friendly manner. Firstly, police officers try to persuade the other side of the conflict and incident through meticulously selected words. Police officers did not use any words related to negative consequences for the people at the beginning of the contact. It was the act of influencing the minds of those involved directly in parties with conflict through arguments offered by police officers in a friendly way. It includes the will of human beings to act in a good way, to change their attitude toward the police officer's instructions, and to start steadily cooperating. It helped to reduce the level of tension between police officers and two males walking with dogs, allowing set-up contact between them. The above-given example shows the importance of communication style, creative approach to the issue, and properly chosen instruments for transmission of messages, such as voice and posture to the opposite side, to persuade them to cooperate. Police officers have enough instruments at their disposal to persuade conflict parties to change their attitudes and behaviour. For example, a police officer's voice, posture, appearance and equipment.

The author of this paper analysed police officers' algorithm of actions in different real-life situations related to domestic violence and the content of verbal instructions transmitted to the potential abuser by an instrument of psychological coercion – voice. The scenario of the practical exercise was the following. Police officers received a phone call from an actress performing the role of a victim of domestic violence. When they entered premises, a potential abuser was sitting in the kitchen and cutting a salted flitch of bacon with a knife. Observation of practical exercises and interviews with the participants of the training reveals two different scenarios depending on the nature of the algorithm of actions. One – immediately stop cutting the salted flitch of bacon with a knife. Other algorithms of action were performed in such a way. Police officers said hello to the participants of the conflict when entering the premises, and patiently waited until the potential abuser finished cutting the fat and only then did the officers

issue the verbal instructions. In each situation, it facilitates decreasing the level of tension, especially if a potential abuser is under the influence of alcohol, and it also allows officers to set up contact with a potential abuser, or the abuser's supporters.

Another aim of the above-mentioned exercise was to analyse how a potential abuser understands the content of instruction issued by a police officer. Is it clear instruction for him/her or not? What words were used to build the core of the instruction? An abuser-actor was instructed by the author of this paper to fulfil instructions given by the police first response team's member in the way he/she had been understood. Police officers entered the house. A potential abuser was sitting in the kitchen and cutting a salted flitch of bacon with a knife. After issuing an instruction to a potential abuser by a police officer: "Put down the knife", the follow-up action was that the person put down the knife on a desk or floor. However, a different outcome followed when the police officer issued a different verbal instruction to the offender. "Throw the knife." It allows for the abuser to choose a different model of behaviour during the performance of such instructions: throwing a knife on the floor or throwing a knife toward the police officer. The verbal instruction was not clear.

So, correct and clear, short, easy to understand and perform instructions, and skilful use of vocal elements such as volume, tempo, pauses, articulation, tone of voice and intonation play an important role in reducing tension during domestic violence cases. The importance of the use of voice as a psychological coercion element is also supported by the survey results done by the author. Target audience – 18 police first response team officers (9 male and 9 female) from the National Police of Ukraine in the region, located in the western part of Ukraine. The questionnaire was created by the author of this research paper in compliance with ethical and data protection standards prescribed by law. The author reserves the anonymity of the respondents to the survey. The goal of the survey is to determine how the physical appearance of police officers and the usage of appropriate words to express the instructions/commands influence the offender and other persons present at the scene of the conflict. To the question: Does the physical appearance of a police officer (height, body composition) impact the offender or other participants of the conflict? 9 respondents answered: Yes, it has a crucial impact on the behaviour of participants involved in conflict, mainly on the offender. 5 partly agreed and 4 slightly agreed with the idea expressed in the question. Another question was: Does the use of proper wordings to express instructions affect the behaviour of an offender, also other participants of a conflict? 9 respondents answered: Yes, it has a crucial impact on the behaviour of participants involved in the conflict, mainly on the offender. 2 respondents partly agreed and

7 slightly agreed. The following question inquired: Was it necessary for the police officer to add the additional word “please” to the instruction? For example: “Put down the knife, please.” 15 respondents answered yes. It is a polite way to communicate with every natural person, including an offender. 2 answered that the offender could accept this as a police officer’s weakness, and there is no need to use the word “please”. One respondent answered that a police officer does not need to use polite words at all. It is just an instruction issued by a police officer. The Police Act gives the police the right to issue a verbal instruction, which the addressee must comply with.

Conclusions

1. Police officers have a relatively high risk of being attacked at domestic violence spots.
2. Persuasion and psychological coercion are the main tools of soft power in the police’s daily routine.
3. Police officers have enough psychological coercion instruments at their disposal to persuade the conflict parties to change their attitudes and behaviour such as voice, posture, appearance and equipment.
4. Based on the behaviour of the conflicting parties, a sequence of measures is recommended for police officers acting in an aggressive environment, using first persuasion, psychological coercion, and then the last measure – physical coercion.

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Further reading

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