

# INTERACTIVE POLICE-CITIZEN ENCOUNTERS THAT RESULT IN FORCE

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*The behavior of officers and suspects during encounters is influenced by the actions, comments, and demeanor of the other actor. The present study looks at the interactive context of police-citizen encounters that result in the use of force. The results of the study show that police-citizen encounters are not only interactive but also asymmetrical with respect to authority. Police use-of-force interactions with civilians are more likely to involve greater levels of force by the police relative to the level of suspect resistance when a suspect appears to have less authority relative to the police officer. During an encounter, police and citizens interpret and decide how to respond to each other. This interpretive process can shape the outcome of an encounter and is an important link to the understanding of police behavior.*

**Keywords:** *police use of force; police-citizen encounters; police-citizen interactions*

The nature of interactions between police officers and citizens can range from being civil to being explosive. Although the vast majority of encounters involve professional and business-like interactions, some digress into

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verbal and physical conflict. The behavior of officers and suspects during these encounters is strongly influenced by the actions, comments, and demeanor of the other. Therefore, the interactive context of police-citizen encounters is critical if the behavior of both officers and citizens is to be understood fully. A considerable amount of research attention has been devoted to police discretion and to specific types of police activities, including the use of force. Most of the published research on police use of force has focused on whether force was used in encounters and the attitudes, personality, and demographic characteristics of police officers and the suspects (Geller & Toch, 1995). There has been limited research conducted on the level of force used relative to suspect resistance (Alpert & Dunham, 1997; Garner, Schade, Hepburn, & Buchanan, 1995; Terrill, 2001). The purpose of this article is to build on that work and explore the determinants of dominant and accommodating force used by officers in the Miami-Dade Police Department.

The goal in all police-citizen encounters is for the officer to gain control of the situation. Conceptually, there are two basic ways to achieve the goal. Dominant force occurs in situations in which officers' selected responses include levels of force that exceed reasonably the suspects' levels of resistance. Dominating force is an important tactic when officers sense a heightened level of threat from a suspect and believe that an attempt to de-escalate the encounter would be futile. In these situations, officers try to gain control of the situation by dominance. The purpose for using accommodating force is to de-escalate the encounter and is a proper tactic when the officer believes less force can reduce the tension between the actors and thereby gain control of the situation. The concept of dominant force is operationally defined as relative force greater than the suspect's resistance. Accommodating force is operationally defined as a level of force equal to or less than the level of suspects' resistance.

#### A BRIEF REVIEW OF INDIVIDUAL AND SITUATIONAL INFLUENCES ON POLICE USE OF FORCE

Micro-level research on police use of force has examined a number of individual characteristics as well as attitudes that have an effect on police behavior in general and the use of force specifically. From a review of the research conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, Friedrich (1980) concluded that most of the measured factors commonly thought to explain the use of force were not very helpful. Friedrich stated, "More than anything else, police-

men—like most of the rest of us—tend to respond in kind to the actions of the people they meet” (p. 97). Certain factors continue to surface as important to review when studying police use of force. The most popular is race or ethnic background. Binder and Scharf (1980) noted,

There are obviously many factors that can trigger physical force from a police officer, but two stand out in the research literature, and both are associated with youth and minority group membership. First there is the issue of actual or perceived threat-danger. . . . Another conspicuous triggering mechanism for police violence is the factor of citizen disrespect. (p. 114)

Unfortunately, there are no definitive answers concerning the importance of race, and only a few studies have shown that race explains a significant amount of force or level of force by police (Dunham & Alpert, 2004; Terrill, 2001).

Adams (1999), Geller and Toch (1995), and Worden (1995) have reviewed the literature on many important issues relating to situational factors that affect police use of force. Their reviews indicate that officer characteristics are not strong indicators of use of force but that use-of-force situations are more likely to occur when suspects are under the influence of alcohol or drugs or act hostile (Adams, 1999; Bayley & Garofalo, 1989; Engel, Sobol, & Worden, 2000; Sherman, 1980; Smith, 1986). Although these studies have methodological shortcomings and do not provide conclusive arguments, most of them report that the explanation of police-citizen interactions that involve force should include some measure of the interaction between the actors.

A related influence on police behavior found in previous research is the social status of the citizen (Black, 1976; Chevigny, 1969; Worden, 1995). These studies suggest that police will be more punitive toward citizens from a lower or marginal socioeconomic background. These findings have been incorporated into research on citizen demeanor.

*Demeanor, norm resistance, and arrest.* Richard Lundman (1974, 1994) conducted the first major studies on demeanor and arrest in the 1970s. Lundman’s research found that a citizen’s demeanor affects police behavior. Building on this research, Worden and Shepard (1996) re-analyzed the Police Services Study data and David Klinger (1994, 1996) used a data set from Metro-Dade Police in Miami-Dade County, Florida, to examine this same relationship between demeanor and arrest. Worden and Shepard reported results similar to those found by Lundman and concluded that

“police behavior is influenced by suspects’ demeanor” (p. 99). Klinger concluded, after controlling for the seriousness of the crime, that demeanor “does not exert an independent effect on arrest” and that “hostile suspects are more likely to be arrested because they are more likely to commit crimes against and in the presence of police, not because their demeanor connotes a lack of respect for police authority” (Klinger, 1994, p. 489).

In his subsequent analysis of the same data, Klinger (1996, p. 69) isolated interactions involving “extreme hostility” by citizens. From these findings, Klinger concluded that the “analyses conducted show an increased likelihood of arrest when citizens display ‘extreme’ hostility, which suggests that displays of hostility may independently increase the odds of arrest once they pass a severity threshold” (p. 75). However, other studies on suspect demeanor reached different conclusions when examining encounters that remain at a low level of conflict between the officer and the suspect. However, when the encounter involved “extreme hostility,” research concurs in suggesting that a suspect’s demeanor will have some influence on an officer’s decision to effect an arrest.

The level of hostility in Klinger’s study (1996) was determined by coding the suspect’s words and gestures at the point of initial contact between the citizen and the officer to determine her or his degree of cooperation. Extreme hostility was the highest level of conflict or insubordination (Klinger, 1996, p. 64) and can be thought to include perceived or actual resistance, although there is no indication that the encounters deteriorated into a situation in which force was used. In these data, only a small subset (13%) of the 245 coded encounters was determined to have extremely hostile citizen behavior. When a suspect’s behavior is extremely hostile, it is likely that an officer will respond with his or her own brand of hostility. Obviously, these actions and reactions are central to understanding the dynamics of police-citizen encounters. Although this research was limited to arrest and included encounters that may not have deteriorated into the use of force, it does suggest that suspect demeanor and the hostility threshold are important concepts to understand police citizen interactions.

*Norm resistance.* Closely related to the hostility threshold is the concept of norm resistance developed by Turk (1966). Citizen resistance is viewed by the police as more than simply resisting their attempts at control but is seen as resisting the generally accepted social norms. The research conducted on the concept of norm resistance establishes a strong link to the deference exchange theory set forth by Sykes and Clark (1975). Several studies

have focused on the relationship between norm resistance and conflict in police-citizen encounters. These studies have moved from the development of a conceptual model (Lanza-Kaduce & Greenleaf, 1994) to the application of that model involving calls for domestic disturbances (Greenleaf & Lanza-Kaduce, 1995; Lanza-Kaduce & Greenleaf, 2000). Findings from these studies indicate “the deference balance remained significantly related to norm resistance after controls were introduced . . . age and race deference patterns that reversed or countered positional authority resulted in more resistance; deference norms that reinforced authority resulted in less resistance” (Lanza-Kaduce & Greenleaf, 2000, p. 230). Lanza-Kaduce and Greenleaf (2000) suggested that future research must explore “which norms of deference have currency in authority-subject relationships, and we will then need to begin the complicated task of determining how they work in combination” (p. 234).

Research conducted on norm resistance and suspect demeanor has shed important light on the interactions and exchanges that exist in police-citizen encounters. At least in extremely hostile situations, a suspect’s demeanor is likely to affect an officer’s decision to make an arrest. The present research examines the most hostile police-citizen encounters: those that involve force.

#### DATA AND METHOD

The data used in the present study are part of a comprehensive research project on police use of force (Alpert, Dunham, Kenney, & Smith, 2001) and include information from 676 official Miami-Dade Police Department Use-of-Force Reports from the years 1997 and 1998. These reports describe the police-citizen contacts when officers use force, suspects physically resist an officer, or suspects are injured during the arrest process. Unfortunately, police reports do not capture any measure of the suspects’ social class. The study is designed to evaluate the relative level of force used by the police, not whether force was used. Interactions that involve force are only a small fraction of the 699,451 police-citizen contacts and the 118,939 arrests for 1997 and 1998. The reports are written by the officer’s supervisor and contain individual and environmental information that is recorded in a narrative section. They are prepared after the supervisor interviews the officer, suspect, and available witnesses. The reports contain a detailed description of the use-of-force incident, including specific actions and when they were taken by both the officer and suspect. They provide a more accurate picture

of the event than a report authored solely by the officer involved in the encounter (Alpert & Smith, 1999). Because we think it is best to examine the authority maintenance perspective through a dyadic process, the detailed descriptions of the interaction between the officer(s) and suspect(s) were ordered in sequences of reciprocal events. The levels of force for each incident as included in the official report was coded and used as a basis for the present research. The coding scheme incorporated a force continuum for each step and each actor. The continuum followed the Miami-Dade Police Department's policy and included the following levels of force and resistance:

<i>Officer Force</i>	<i>Suspect Resistance</i>
1. Presence	1. Cooperative
2. Strong order	2. Verbal resistance
3. Defensive force	3. Defensive resistance
4. Offensive force	4. Active resistance
5. Intermediate weapon	5. Nondeadly weapon
6. Deadly force	6. Deadly weapon

The descriptive data from the force reports of the Miami-Dade Police Department are presented in the appendix. These data show the sequential order of the levels of officer force and suspect resistance and indicate how one level of resistance may have influenced the subsequent level of force. The data indicate that most of the incidents began as a cooperative encounter and deteriorated into the various levels of force or resistance. In the first sequence, the "force" used by most of the officers (66%) is limited to his or her presence. Similarly, 54% of the suspects begin the encounter in a cooperative manner. The most frequent level of force in the second sequence is a strong order by the officer and verbal resistance by the suspect. As the dyadic sequence of events increases, so do the levels of force used by the police and levels of resistance by the citizen. The data show that police use of deadly force was used in 21 incidents. Seven of those incidents occurred in the second sequence and 9 occurred in the third sequence. The remainder of deadly force events occurred in other sequences. In 32 incidents, suspects used a deadly weapon. Ten of the uses of deadly weapons occurred in the second sequence and 13 occurred in the third sequence. The remainder of uses of deadly weapons occurred in other sequences.

To examine the determinants of officers deciding to use dominant and accommodating force, we investigated available measures that predict

asymmetrical force. We examine the dyadic police-citizen encounters across five dyads. Specifically, we assess whether the officer's level of authority relative to the suspect's status increases the likelihood that the force will be asymmetrical. In other words, we examine whether an asymmetrical relationship is related to imbalanced force-resistance ratios. To test this proposition, we examine the relationship between the characteristics of police officers and suspects and the interactive nature of force between the two.

#### DEPENDENT VARIABLE

Dominant and accommodating force can best be examined using the Force Factor, a measure of force used by an officer relative to a suspect's resistance (Alpert & Dunham, 1997). The measure is calculated by subtracting the level of suspect resistance from the officers' level of force. Force sequences were operationalized into dominant-force and accommodating-force cases to distinguish between these types of force. In other words, cases for which the average level of force applied by the officer across all five dyadic interactions was greater than the suspect's resistance were defined as dominant force (coded 1). Other dyadic interactions in which officers applied less or equal force than the level of suspects' resistance were defined as accommodating force (coded 0). We developed this measure to conform to Lanza-Kaduce and Greenleaf's (2000) conceptualization of dominant and accommodating force. Many of the encounters were brief and included only a limited number of interactions (see appendix). Therefore, we analyzed the first five interactions ( $n = 553$ ). Thirteen percent ( $N = 60$ ) of the use-of-force interactions involved dominant force.

#### INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Dominant force should be more likely when there are greater levels of distance in authority between the officer and suspect. There are many indicators of a person's authority or status. However, our data include only two indicators: age and race. We used the available proxy measures of authority, age and race. To capture the authority factor, we followed the work of Lanza-Kaduce and Greenleaf (2000) and created a dummy variable representing age and race differences between suspects and officers. Age was recoded for suspects and officers into two groups: (a) younger than 30 years old and (b) 30 years and older, signifying that adults are given more respect

and authority than youths. Race was coded into either White or minority (Black or Hispanic). These status differentials were then combined so that an authority measure could be computed. The authority factor was dummy coded into cases for which authority was greater for the officer. We exclude the use of authority from the suspect perspective because only 2% of cases involved greater age and race authority for suspects ( $n = 15$ ) compared to officers.

We include several control variables in the analysis. Prior research suggests that years of experience affects an officer's performance (Roberg, Crank, & Kuykendall, 2000). To account for this potential influence on the nature of force, we included a control variable for the level of officer experience. Use-of-force cases in which officers had less than 2 years of experience were coded as 1. In addition, there is a rich body of literature on the importance of officer risk and police officer behavior in conflict situations (Walker, 2001). Because the majority of police and citizen encounters are initiated by citizens' calls for police service, we include a measure of the type of service call that initiated the use-of-force situation. The type of calls officers were responding to were coded into six distinct groups: (a) administrative, (b) traffic, (c) property offense, (d) violent crime, (e) domestic disturbance, and (f) other. Table 1 presents the descriptive data for our dependent and independent variables.

## RESULTS

First, we examined the bivariate relationship between dominant force and the authority factor. The cross-tabulation between dominant force and police-citizen authority indicates that use of force cases were more likely to be dominant when the officer had higher authority than the suspect, based on age and race. The data in Table 2 suggest that dominant force is rare, regardless of the suspect and officer status relationships. The data indicate, however, that dominant force is more likely when the police officer has greater status than the suspect (16.3% vs. 9.7%;  $\chi^2 = 4.36$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .05$ ). This relationship is consistent with our expectations that police would apply more force relative to citizens' resistance when it is the citizen who has relatively lower status.

Logistic regression analysis was also employed to examine the degree to which the authority relationship predicted dominant force, independent of other factors. The results from the model are displayed in Table 3. Consistent with our predictions, the authority relationship significantly increases

**TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics for Variables (N = 553)**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Frequency (n)</i>	<i>%</i>
Dominant force	72	13.0
Authority status	233	50.7
Traffic calls	61	11.0
Property calls	67	12.1
Violent calls	180	32.5
Domestic calls	70	12.6
Other calls	60	10.8
Administrative calls	115	20.8
New officer	209	38.0

**TABLE 2. Dominant Force by Authority Status (age and race)**

	<i>Dominant Force</i>		<i>Nondominant Force</i>	
	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>
More officer authority	16.3	38	83.7	195
No difference in officer authority	9.7	22	90.3	204
Total		60		399

*Note:* Chi-square = 4.36; *df* = 1; *p* < .05.

the likelihood of dominant force. It appears from this analysis that use-of-force incidents are more likely to be asymmetrical when police are confronted with resistance from citizens who are not perceived as important. The results also indicate that dominant force can be explained by the type of call to which the police are responding. Encounters involving violent calls for service and property offenses are significantly more likely to result in dominant force than the reference group in the model: administrative calls. Although these results are not surprising, they do suggest that the dyadic relationship between level of police force and suspect resistance is not independent of the type of call that a police officer is responding to or the social status differentials that exist between the officer and suspect. Interestingly, the results suggest that property calls are the most likely to result in dominant force. This finding suggests that once force is used, the level of force is not contingent on the perceived dangerousness of the event to which an officer was responding. In contrast to the research on other aspects of police behavior that suggests the importance of experience, we do not find any

**TABLE 3. Logistic Regression for Dominant Use of Police Force (N = 458)**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Odds</i>
Authority status	0.56*	1.76
Traffic calls	0.59	1.82
Property calls	1.18*	3.28
Violent calls	0.84**	2.33
Domestic calls	.38	0.67
Other calls	0.88	2.42
New officer	.03	0.96
Intercept	2.83	
Log-likelihood	170.19*	

\* $p < .05$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p < .05$ , one-tailed.

influence of the years of experience on the likelihood of asymmetrical force.

These findings also support Black's (1976) principles regarding the vertical direction of the law in that police are more likely to apply a greater degree of law (e.g., force) when the resisting suspect has relatively low social status. The findings from this study suggest support for the link between Black's insights and the concepts from norm resistance and deference exchange theories in explaining the inverse relationship between the quantity of police use of force and suspect status.

## CONCLUSION

Police-citizen encounters are interactive and asymmetrical with respect to authority. In other words, behavioral cues and responses to them are guided by the actors status (Molm, Peterson, & Takahashi, 1999). When the suspects' status is lower than that of the officer, a greater level of police force relative to suspect resistance will result. Our results show that police use-of-force interactions with civilians are more likely to involve greater use of force by the police relative to the suspect when a suspect appears to have less authority relative to the police officer.

To understand the nature of police-citizen encounters, data on the interactive processes among the actors are required. Police use of force is similar to any human engagement that is a result of a series of interactions. Unlike most other human encounters, results from those involving the police rely more on authority. Our analysis indicates that police-citizen encounters are more asymmetrical when the officers' level of status differs from that of a citizen. These findings support the notion that officers will use greater force when their authority is significantly greater than that of a citizen. Future research should include more concrete indicators of social class, such as education level, employment, and income. In addition, future studies should include perceptual measures of the suspects' status from police officers that include the nonverbal gestures, dress, and citizens' demeanor. Debriefing officers after use-of-force incidents to describe their perceptions would provide important information on how to best operationalize the concept of authority.

One of the explanatory variables is the type of call to which the officer is responding. Our data show that officers may prepare themselves differently to respond to certain types of calls. This may lead them to expect higher levels of resistance from suspects on those calls and may cause them to respond with dominant force in cases in which they feel they cannot negotiate a less violent exchange. Similarly, suspects may be more likely to challenge the police authority when they have not committed a serious offense. In this case, officers may be seen as having less authority than when they are responding to a call for a serious crime. Another interesting finding is the lack of significance of the officers' years of experience. This finding suggests that officer experience may have less to do with the nature of police use of force than academic literature typically suggests (Geller & Scott, 1992).

The social world of policing is composed of communication through ongoing processes or messages. Many of those messages are threatening to other actors. When interacting, police and citizens interpret and decide how to respond to these messages, resulting in the interaction process becoming central to an understanding of police behavior.



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