Crime Law Soc Change
DOI 10.1007/s10611-008-9177-6

Researching the use of force: the background to the international project

**Philip Stenning · Christopher Birkbeck ·
Otto Adang · David Baker · Thomas Feltes ·
Luis Gerardo Gabaldón · Maki Haberfeld ·
Eduardo Paes Machado · P. A. J. Waddington**

© Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2009

Abstract This article provides the background to an international project on use of force by the police that was carried out in seven countries. Force is often considered to be the defining characteristic of policing and much research has been conducted on the determinants, prevalence and control of the use of force, particularly in the United States. However, little work has looked at police officers' own views on the use of force, in particular the way in which they justify it. Using a hypothetical encounter developed for this project, researchers in each country conducted focus groups with police officers in which they were encouraged to talk about the use of

---

P. Stenning (✉)
School of Sociology & Criminology, Keele University, Keele, Staffordshire ST5 5BG, UK
e-mail: p.c.stenning@crim.keele.ac.uk

C. Birkbeck
School of English, Sociology, Politics and Contemporary History, University of Salford,
Crescent House, Salford M5 4WT, UK
e-mail: c.h.birkbeck@salford.ac.uk

O. Adang
Netherlands Police Academy, De Kleiberg 15, 7312 SN Apeldoorn, Netherlands
e-mail: Otto.Adang@politieacademie.nl

O. Adang
Postbus 1201, 7301 BL Apeldoorn, Netherlands

D. Baker
Criminal Justice, School of Humanities, Communications and Social Sciences, Monash University,
Gippsland Campus, Churchill, Victoria 3842, Australia
e-mail: david.baker@arts.monash.edu.au

T. Feltes
Criminology, Criminal Justice Policy and Police Science, Ruhr-University Bochum,
Universitätsstraße 150, GC 5, 44801 Bochum, Germany
e-mail: thomas.feltes@rub.de

Published online: 20 January 2009

force. The results show interesting similarities and differences across countries and demonstrate the value of using this kind of research focus and methodology.

Introduction

For as long as modern public police forces have existed, their use of force and violence has been a potential topic of public and political interest, scrutiny, challenge and controversy, as well as the subject of occasional litigation. In many contemporary societies, it is a topic that is rarely absent from the news headlines for very long. And in some cases, these events become memorable and emblematic, irreversibly influencing public attitudes toward the use of force by police. Many people remember something about the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles in 1991, the shooting of Amadou Diallo by New York City police officers in 1999, the Uzbekistan "massacre" in May 2005,[1] the execution-style shooting to death of Jean Charles de Menezes by London Metropolitan police officers in July of the same year, and the death of the unarmed Polish immigrant, Robert Dziekanski, after being tasered by police in Vancouver Airport in October 2007.

Indeed, some influential North American policing scholars—most notably Egon Bittner [13, 14], but see also Klockars [47, 49]—have argued that the authority to use force in an almost unlimited range of circumstances is *the* essential defining characteristic of the modern public police. And during the last forty years or so, an astonishing array of new weaponry has been developed and provided to the police for this purpose, to the point that the routinely "unarmed"[2] police officer is becoming an increasing rarity in modern life. The fact that police may be "unarmed," however, does not mean that the use of force is not still an essential "tool" in their working "toolbox" [59].

---

[1] There are indications, however, that these killings were perpetrated mainly by soldiers rather than police officers (see e.g. http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/06/07/uzbeki11077.htm).

[2] No public police officer is completely "unarmed" in the broadest sense, and it is significant that this term has now come to mean simply that a police officer does not carry a firearm. Most police in Britain and in New Zealand are still routinely "unarmed" in this more restricted sense.

L. G. Gabaldón
Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Edificio de Postgrado,
piso 2, Urbanización Montalbán, La Vega, Caracas, Venezuela
e-mail: luisgerardogabaldon@gmail.com

M. Haberfeld
John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY), 899 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY 10019, USA
e-mail: maki@sprynet.com

E. Paes Machado
Faculdade de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Universidade Federal da Bahía, Salvador, Bahía
CEP 40210-90, Brazil
e-mail: epm@ufba.br

P. A. J. Waddington
History and Governance Research Institute, University of Wolverhampton, Room MC309,
Millennium City Building, Wulfruna Street, Wolverhampton, WV1 1LY, UK
e-mail: P.A.J.Waddington@wlv.ac.uk

As we shall illustrate in the brief discussion of the literature which follows, much of the scholarship and research on the use of force by police has been normative in its orientation—addressing the question of when, and under what circumstances and conditions, it may and may not be justified, from a legal [30], philosophical [24] or ethical [46, 61] point of view. And the extant empirical research has tended to focus on identifying the kinds circumstances in which police do actually resort to the use of force in carrying out their duties, and the kinds of precipitating factors in such events [e.g., 6, 12, 78]. A third body of literature focuses particularly on police weaponry and training with respect to the use of force, and the development of "use of force models" to guide police in its use [e.g. 9, 34].

Rather neglected in this scholarship, however, have been the perspectives on this subject of police officers themselves. How do they identify situations as justifying or not justifying the use of force as a police practice? And what kinds of justificatory arguments do they deploy in support of such practices? Is there broad consensus among police officers on these matters, or do they display a significant variety of different viewpoints about them? Does the way the police think about and justify the use of force vary significantly from one class of police officers to another (e.g. regular patrol officers vs. "special weapons" or "tactical" squad members)? Or from one police force to another? From one country to another? Or within different cultural contexts? And if so, what kinds of factors might best explain such differences? Finally, if understandings and practices do differ significantly in these respects, what implications might this have for any attempts to develop some "universal" minimum standards with respect to the use of force by police?

The research that is reported in this Special Issue was designed specifically to try to address some of these questions in a systematic, comparative international, empirical way. Originally the brainchild of the Venezuelan participants (and initiators) of the research, the study of which the findings are reported in this issue grew over a period of five years eventually to include replicated research in seven disparate countries[3] in different parts of the world. While obviously this "coverage" does not allow us to draw any "global" conclusions about police understandings of the use of force,[4] it does, we believe, allow us to begin to identify similarities and differences in the way in which officers talk about, and approach, the use of force in their work.

Before describing in more detail the design, objectives and methods of the research, however, we provide, by way of background, some brief comments on the extant published research literature on the use of force by police, out of which our interest in this topic developed.

Scholarship on the use of force by police

There is a vast body of research literature on the use of force by police, dating back over many years. Obviously we cannot summarize all of this literature here. Rather, in this section we seek to do no more than highlight some of its main themes in recent years, so that our readers will be able to gain some appreciation of how our own research relates to this body of work and contributes to current understandings of this topic.

---

[3] Australia, Brazil, Germany, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Venezuela.

[4] No countries in Africa or Asia, for instance, were included in the research.

The great majority of the published literature on the use of force by police has derived from research in the United States of America (for a recent review of this research, see [6]), beginning with the seminal works of William Westley [89] and Albert Reiss [67]. These researchers demonstrated the centrality of force to the police role in that country, and it was Egon Bittner [13, 14] who first put forward the idea that access to, and the legitimate authority to use, force is *the* central defining characteristic of modern police work. Police organisations are not commonly called "police *forces*" for no reason [17].

Even some non-English language books on the subject are actually reviews of North American research (e.g. [45]). However, since there is every reason to believe that the use of force by police is at least significantly influenced by the culture and traditions of the societies in which they do their work,[5] this major bias of the extant literature towards the situation in the United States of America almost certainly has negative implications for the possibility of generalising from its findings. One might reasonably suspect, for instance, that the use of force by police is significantly related to such factors as the general relationship between the police and the citizens they police (including the perceived legitimacy of, and public confidence in, the police), levels of violence and weapon carrying within the wider community, the domestic laws and customs that define acceptable and unacceptable police practices, and expectations of citizen deference to police authority and compliance with police demands [68]. In this respect, the U.S.A. undoubtedly has very particular characteristics which are quite different from those of many other countries of the world.

Even within the U.S.A, however, systematic research on the use of force by police is a relatively recent addition to the broader literature on the police. A variety of factors account for this, including the obvious sensitivity of the topic (particularly in a relatively litigious society such as that in the U.S.A.) and the related reluctance of police forces to grant access to relevant data on the subject.[6] Indeed, police executives understandably have concerns that such research may focus disproportionately on *misuse* or *abuse* of force by police (see e.g. [30, 88]), while not paying sufficient attention to instances of legitimate, justified and acceptable use of force. Participation of police forces in such research is often perceived to involve some degree of organisational risk.

In our own research, we have been fortunate to draw on research literature on the use of force by police which is derived from a number of other countries. For example, significant research has been undertaken in Latin America focusing on police use of force and citizens' reactions to it [11, 12, 16, 20, 21, 25, 31, 32, 39, 40, 58, 62, 70].

---

[5] So, for instance, Great Britain, New Zealand and, until fairly recently, Australia all have long traditions of police who do not routinely carry firearms, which clearly have implications for the incidence of the use of deadly force by police in those countries.

[6] Alpert & Dunham [6] have argued, however, that it is only since the 1980's that police in the United States have kept sufficient systematic and reliable records of their use of force to make such research possible. This is undoubtedly true of many, if not most, other countries too.

Research in Germany, on the other hand, has focused primarily on police–citizen encounters and violence by citizens against police officers [10, 18, 28, 36, 41–44, 51, 55, 63, 72]. In The Netherlands, research on the use of force by police has mostly been rather more recent, but is nevertheless substantial [2–5, 50, 60, 80–83, 50].

At the heart of any discussion of the use of force by police are some difficult definitional issues. What, precisely, is legitimately (or usefully) embraced within the term "use of force"? A range of terminology—from "coercion" [17: Ch. 2; 79] and "force" [6, 32, 33, 65] to "violence" [23–24, 35, 45, 56, 68, 89], "brutality" [52, 66, 74] and "torture" [19, 29]—with variably emotive connotations, can be found in the literature.[7] While "violence," "brutality" and "torture" arguably connote *excessive* or *unjustified* degrees of force, the content of even the seemingly more neutral terms "coercion" and "force" is nevertheless not self-evident. While many people might concede that even police presence could be considered at least mildly or potentially intimidating and coercive, treating mere police presence as police "use of force" is arguably not conceptually useful. On the other hand, it is generally recognised that numbers and appearance (police "out in force" and "a show of force") can make a difference to how police are perceived and how the policing that they do is experienced [87]. While most research on police use of force considers only the actual use of physical force, with or without weapons, there have been those who have argued that this is too narrow a definition for understanding the essentially *coercive* character of police work, which derives as much from the *threat* of, or *potential* for, force rather than from its actual use (see e.g. [78]).

Even the concept of actual physical force, however, is open to interpretation. Can, for instance, a coerced strip search (coercively requiring a suspect to remove their own clothing and submit to intimate bodily inspection) be legitimately regarded as police "use of force" [73]?[8] Does a high-speed police vehicle chase amount to police "use of force" [7]? Or shouting commands or interrogating in an aggressive, threatening manner? Obviously, the decision whether or not to treat such actions as "police use of force" in undertaking research will have direct implications for findings about the prevalence and circumstances of the use of force by police.

Without clear agreement about such definitional matters, gaining a reliable picture of the extent, nature and circumstances of the police use of force through research poses a significant challenge,[9] and given the likely cultural variations in this respect, this poses especial problems for comparative research on this topic. There is, however, widespread recognition that the use of force by police is a matter of concern and controversy in virtually all countries—at least among human rights activists and certain sections of the academic community, if not within government or the mass public. As we noted earlier, how the use of force by police is regarded, at least in terms of official responses to it, may well be influenced by broader social and cultural experiences of, and attitudes towards, force, violence, the carriage of weapons, and police more generally. Thus, for instance, in societies in which levels of violence are high and attacks on police common, it may well be that tolerance towards police use of force is higher, and willingness to characterise it as "excessive" or unjustified lower. The relationships between general levels of violence, attitudes towards police, prevalence of firearms ownership, and use of force by police, however, appear to be by no means straightforward [62]. Thus, even in a country like the United States of America, which is commonly regarded as having relatively high levels of firearms ownership and violence, and in which virtually every police officer routinely carries a firearm on duty, research has consistently suggested that actual use of physical force by police is relatively infrequent, regardless of the definition of force that has been adopted [1, 6: 22].

---

[7] In the present project, we also encountered the intriguing problem that the word "force" is not found in all of the languages represented by participating countries. In Germany, the law refers to "immediate physical coercion" (*unmittelbarer Zwang*), while in The Netherlands the relevant term is *geweld*, which translates as "violence" (there is no distinction in Dutch between force and violence).

[8] In an extensive review of the law relating to strip searches in the case of *R. v. Golden* [2001] 3 S.C.R. 679, a majority of the judges of the Supreme Court of Canada commented that "women and minorities in particular may have a real fear of strip searches and may experience such a search as equivalent to a sexual assault" (at para. 90).

[9] It might be noted, however, that similar difficulties arise with respect to research on the incidence and nature of domestic violence (see e.g. [23], and the debates between Straus & Gelles [77] and Dobash *et al.* [26]).

Data on the use of force by police have most commonly been drawn from one or more of three sources—official records (including the routine use of force reports that have been required in many jurisdictions since the 1980's), observational studies, and the records of various kinds of litigation (including criminal prosecutions, civil lawsuits, coroners' inquests, hearings of citizen complaints against police, and police internal disciplinary proceedings). Each of these involves significant limitations in terms of their completeness and reliability as sources of data for systematic research.

Most of the research, however, has focussed on drawing conclusions about such matters as: the extent to which, and circumstances in which, police resort to the use of force in their encounters with citizens (e.g., [25, 81]); the kinds of factors in police–citizen encounters which make it more or less likely that force will be used (e.g. [54, 55]); the efficacy of different strategies for reducing the amount of force used by police (e.g. [47, 21]); public attitudes towards the use of force by police (e.g. [16]); the emergence of police and police-supported "death squads" (e.g., [20, 39]); whether police use force differentially in their encounters with members of different racial, ethnic, religious, gender, age and/or socio-economic groups within society (e.g. [12, 58, 64, 71, 74, 75]); whether resort to force varies according to the gender or racial background of the officers involved [38, 57]; the role of use of force in citizen complaints against police [37, 74]; the development of use of force decision-making models, designed to regulate the use of force by police (see e.g. [69]), and of alternatives to the use of lethal force by police [86]. Other literature, with a more normative orientation, and written primarily by legal scholars, discusses the legal rules governing the use of force by police and the philosophical and moral justifications which they reflect (e.g. [8, 32, 48]).

Much neglected in this research literature, however, have been the views and attitudes of police officers themselves to the use of force in doing police work. Indeed, we are aware of very little significant published research on this aspect of the topic [11, 58, 62, 88].

On behalf of the U.S. Police Foundation, Weisburd and his colleagues undertook a telephone survey of more than 900 police officers drawn from the estimated

350,000 American municipal and county police [88: 2]. The major findings of this research were summarized by the authors as follows:

- American police believe that extreme cases of police abuse of authority occur infrequently. However, a substantial minority of officers believe that it is sometimes necessary to use more force than is legally permissible.
- Despite support for norms recognizing the boundaries of police authority, officers revealed that it is not unusual for police to ignore improper conduct by their fellow officers.
- American police believe that training and education programs are effective means of preventing police from abusing authority. They also argue that their own department takes a "tough stand" on the issue of police abuse. Finally they argue that a department's chief and first-line supervisors can play an important role in preventing abuse of authority.
- Police officers believe that the public and the media are too concerned with police abuses of authority.
- American police officers support core principles of community policing; they generally believe that community policing reduces or has no impact on the potential for police abuse.
- A majority of African-American police officers believe that police treat whites better than African Americans and other minorities, and are more likely to use physical force against minorities or the poor. Few white police officers, however, share these views [88: 3].

Interesting as these findings are, they only reflect, of course, the views of police officers in the U.S.A., and almost certainly cannot be generalised beyond that jurisdiction. More importantly, from our point of view, however, they do not directly address what we have considered to be a very important element of police attitudes towards the use of force—namely the normative frameworks within which police themselves distinguish between justified (or justifiable) and unjustified uses of force. Specifically, how do police themselves justify their uses of force, and what justifications do they consider acceptable and persuasive in this respect?

Birkbeck & Gabaldón [11] interviewed a group of Venezuelan supervisory officers to explore the "tactical rules" that they articulated as playing an important role in guiding police use of force and in shaping their retrospective accounts of it. They found that these "tactical rules" differed significantly from the formal legal-administrative rules governing the use of force by police, and were oriented by the attempt to avoid external inquiries that represent a continual threat to police occupational stability and prestige—not unlike Ericson's [27] concept of police "account ability".

More recently, in a project deriving from the international comparative research reported in this Special Issue, Monsalve [58] interviewed a small number of the more talkative police officers from two police departments in Caracas, Venezuela, who had participated in the focus group sessions undertaken for the main study (discussed below). These officers recognized that the police apply forms of "punishment" involving physical force, either by "delegation" from (or at least with tacit approval of) other criminal justice officials, such as prosecutors, or on their own initiative. The perceived inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system's response to crime and disorder was identified as a motivation for such extra-judicial police punishment. The research suggested that it was citizens who were, in the eyes of the police, morally devalued and/or perceived to have limited effective power to complain, who formed the typical "clientele" for such punishment.

The views and attitudes of front-line police officers towards the use of force in their day-to-day work were the primary focus of the international comparative research project, the findings of which we report in this Special Issue. Before describing the project in more detail, however, we wish to make some comments on why we felt that such research is necessary and important.

Why study police justifications for the use of force?

There are, we believe, several major reasons why it is important to have a better understanding of how police themselves think about and justify the use of force in their work. The first of these derives from the nature of police work itself. Specifically, most "front-line" police work is characterised by low visibility, relatively little direct supervision and a high degree of individual officer discretion. All of these characteristics suggest that an officer's own normative framework for assessing the necessity and justification for the use of force is likely to have a major influence in his or her decisions as to when to use force, and how much and what kind of force to use. Of course, we recognize that an officer's normative framework in this respect is not likely to be confined to abstract ethical principles; it might also be expected to include considerations such as the officer's beliefs about what is "expected" of him or her (by peers, superiors, the public more generally, and specifically by those citizens with whom he or she interacts and who may be in a position to complain), as well as about what behaviour he or she can "get away with."

Secondly, once officer attitudes with respect to justifications for the use of police become known to those whom they police—which seems likely—it can be expected that such knowledge will have a direct and significant influence on the attitudes and behaviours towards the police of those with whom they have dealings, which in turn will have implications for the ability of the police to accomplish effective policing without resort to force.

Thirdly, we do not currently have a very clear understanding about how well aligned police attitudes towards the use of force are with official police policies on this matter, or what factors may be most significant in determining such alignment or non-alignment. Such understanding, if it can be improved, is likely to be helpful for determining the most effective ways to influence and shape such attitudes so that they best reflect accepted policy in this regard.

Fourthly, as several policing scholars have recently pointed out (see e.g. Loader [53] drawing on Bourdieu [15]) the police, as an institution, enjoy significant symbolic and political power and influence in most societies, which allows their voice to be influential in the determination of social policy and legislation (especially policy and legislation directly concerning the police themselves). Police attitudes and values with respect to the use of force are thus likely to be influential in shaping public policy and legislation on this topic. A better understanding of such police attitudes and values may thus be helpful in better understanding public policy and legislation on this sensitive topic.

Finally, if any meaningful and effective universal principles with respect to the use of force by police (see e.g. [84, 85]) are to have any chance of being accepted and implemented in practice, there certainly needs to be a better appreciation of how police officers themselves think about, and justify or not, its use, and the extent to which, and ways in which, their views and attitudes towards the use of force are shaped by cultural and contextual factors.

The research project

Our objective was to gain a clearer understanding of how police themselves think about and justify the use of force in police work, and of the justifications they invoke in this respect—to identify, in other words, the normative frameworks which they deploy in explaining and justifying police practices with respect to the use of force. We also wanted to try to ascertain whether, and if so to what extent, such normative frameworks may be culturally relative, or at least whether they vary in significant and interesting ways from one national jurisdiction to another, and if so, what factors might account for such variations.

In order to answer these questions, we designed a hypothetical scenario which formed the basis for facilitated discussions about the use of force with focus groups of police officers in each of the countries included in the research [76]. Our intent was to apply the scenario in as similar a manner as possible within each country, so that comparable data could be generated. Some small modifications to the scenario were necessary in some countries, however, in order to take account of significant contextual differences.[10]

Why use a scenario rather than standardised attitudinal scales of the Likert variety? First, this was intended as an exploratory investigation and the piloting necessary for the development of valid and reliable attitudinal scales would need to be done in all the participating jurisdictions. This greatly exceeded the resources available. But there were more than simply expedient reasons for eschewing the use of standardised scales, for judgements are, we believe, made in complex social situations that rarely are the product of some aggregation of discrete attitudinal dispositions. This is particularly so in the case of policing with force, because like any violent encounter it involves a complex interplay of considerations and interacting participants. It was as important to understand *what* the members of our focus groups paid attention to, as it was to appreciate *how* they applied normative standards. By providing our focus groups with a single, complex and lengthy narrative that paused at predetermined points to elicit discussion, we hoped to simulate at least some of the complexities of a real encounter in which force might be use.

---

[10] For example, England was the only country in the sample in which regular front-line police do not routinely carry firearms, and in which armed response is a specialist function. The questions asked as the scenario unfolded during the focus groups had to be adjusted to accommodate this reality.

The scenario described a putatively routine encounter which begins when, while on patrol, two police officers see a parked (possibly stolen) car with two young men in it who might be smoking marijuana. They stop to investigate. The scenario was unfolded in nine stages during the focus group discussions, from the young men's failure to comply with the officers' initial requests and commands, through a vehicle chase to a final armed confrontation. Each of the nine stages of the scenario presented new developments that could potentially provide additional opportunities or pretexts for use of force responses by police. After each stage of the scenario was presented, therefore, focus group participants were asked what kinds of police responses would be justified by the developing situation, and why. Members of the focus groups were encouraged to discuss possible alternative responses as well as possible alternative justifications, so that we could gain some indication of how much agreement or dissent there was within the group as to both possible responses and possible justifications.

The focus groups were recorded and the discussions subsequently transcribed and analysed in accordance with a common conceptual framework. The results were written up (in English) in separate reports for each country included in the study, each of which was in an agreed format including standard contextual information. These country reports provided the basis for the next article in this Special Issue which seeks to draw out some commonalities in the findings from the different sites where focus groups were conducted (see Waddington et al.). The other articles in the issue present findings from the focus groups in individual countries.

The papers in this special issue

The paper by P.A.J. Waddington et al. offers an overview of findings in six of the countries where the study was conducted (Australia, Brazil, England, Germany, the Netherlands and Venezuela). It begins with a brief description of each country and of the public policing arrangements to be found there. This serves to highlight the contrasts between wealthy countries and poorer countries, but also between countries with a Common Law tradition of policing (Australia and England) and those with a Continental tradition (the rest). Such contrasts, it might be thought, would be reflected in different attitudes to, and experiences with, the use of force. In some ways they were; notably in the much greater disposition among Brazilian and Venezuelan participants to say that firearms would (and should) be used in the final stage of the scenario (a disposition which is paralleled by the higher incidence of fatal shootings by the police in Latin America compared to wealthier countries). Waddington et al. attribute this difference to the considerably higher levels of threat perceived by Latin American police officers in their daily work environment, a perception that was very evident in comments they made in the focus group sessions.

Nevertheless, there were also a surprising number of similarities between the responses from focus groups at all sites included in the study. All participants perceived the encounter to initiate in a routine way, and many were critical of the fact that it was allowed to get out of hand (with the suspects fleeing in their vehicle). In addition, officers in all focus groups articulated similar regulatory considerations regarding the appropriate use of force at different stages of the encounter, for example, in relation to the possibility of a vehicle chase or the use of firearms in the final confrontation. Finally, participants displayed a marked tendency towards caution in their approach to the encounter, even when—as in the case of the Latin American police—they were more likely to say that the use of lethal force was justified. Thus, Waddington et al. argue, common elements of reasoning, justification and disposition emerge from very different institutional and cultural contexts.

David Baker's paper illustrates very well the cautious approach taken by Australian police. While officers said that they would feel a rush of adrenalin as the encounter developed, they felt that efficient and low-key approaches to control were paramount. Thus, as Baker aptly points out, the discussions were as much about preventing the use of force as they were about using it. Moreover, he finds considerable similarity between the cautious approach to the use of force shown by focus group participants and the policies and practices used to police public order and disorder in Australia. Nevertheless, officers are not so idealist as to think that all encounters can be managed peaceably: force is recognised as a necessary (and important) last resort for maintaining control.

The paper by Kevin Barrett, Maki Haberfeld and Michael Walker presents findings from focus groups conducted with officers from urban, suburban and rural police departments in the state of New Jersey, USA. Of particular interest to the authors are the differences in perspectives on the use of force that emerged between urban officers and their rural and suburban counterparts. The urban officers in this study revealed an action-oriented, "watchman" [90], approach to the use of force which focused heavily on the behaviour of the two young men in the scenario and the need to respond quickly to the situation as resistance to officers' instructions became evident. By contrast, the suburban and, especially, the rural officers showed a much more legalistic approach to the use of force, citing legal and administrative guidelines with great frequency. Nevertheless, in the final stage of the encounter, in which one of the young men is described as pointing a handgun at the officers who are in pursuit, focus group participants from all departments were in quick and clear agreement that they would shoot. Barrett et al.'s findings seem to locate the US police closer to their colleagues in Latin America than to their colleagues in Europe or Australia.

The paper by Astrid Klukkert, Thomas Feltes and Thomas Ohlemacher presents results from Germany, prefaced by an overview of the organisation of public policing in that country and of the findings from prior research on the use of force there. Klukkert et al. analyse their focus group results in considerable detail and identify a number of dimensions that characterise officers' thinking about the situation, including the fear of escalation, the need to maintain authority and the tension between rational action and emotional behaviour. The latter, in particular, offers an interesting window on the psychological ingredients in decision making which can push legal considerations into the background. Klukkert et al. find that justifications for the use of force are sometimes framed as a reaction to resistance to government authority, or as self defence. However, they may also rest on the fact that disrespect has been shown towards the officer. While the margin for declaring force to be "excessive" is greater in this third instance, the authors find that all of the justifications are associated with the potential abuse of force, although accounts may subsequently be constructed to hide excess.

In the final paper in this issue, Luis Gerardo Gabaldón presents results from Venezuela. Congruent with the notion of higher perceived levels of threat in Latin American policing environments, identified in Waddington et al.'s paper, Gabaldón finds in the Venezuelan focus group discussions a strongly developed sense that the scenario is impregnated with uncertainty. Officers frequently commented that "anything could happen" and had no difficulties in imagining the nightmare circumstances that, for example, German police officers could not specifically envisage (but definitely wanted to avoid). Gabaldón argues that, in situations of uncertainty, officers employ force as a strategy for bringing the suspects (and the encounter) under control. While on some occasions force may be justified in ways that are supported by the law (for example, when used in self-defence) on many occasions force is seen as necessary for interrupting the continued development of events and bringing the encounter to a close, irrespective of whether the action taken is subsequently vindicated (e.g., through successful avoidance of disciplinary inquiry or the successful conviction of the offender). The findings from Venezuela therefore suggest that levels of predictability (or better, unpredictability)—in the social interactions that make up police–citizen encounters, in the functioning of the police organisation and in the workings of the criminal justice system—may be a key determinant of the disposition to use force, in any country.

Conclusion

Taken together, the papers in this special issue suggest that inviting police officers to talk about the use of force yields considerable benefits. As always, the immediacy and richness of qualitative data provides a striking counterpoint to the more abstract tone, and character, of quantitative data. To hear, for example, a German officer talking about "hunting fever," a Venezuelan officer matter-of-factly predicting that the armed aggressor will become "luncheon meat," or an Australian officer saying that "We'd draw a line in the sand," is to gather seductive discursive clues to modes of thought that arguably have some bearing on behaviour. But beyond the turns of phrase, the occasionally colourful language, the anecdotes and the jokes, the conversations between participants in our focus groups offered a picture of the way that they think about the key characteristic of policing that is the use of force.

Particularly striking about officers' comments was the greater tendency to talk about *what* they would do rather than *why* they would do it—a focus, in fact, on actions rather than justifications. And in so doing, they revealed an enormous diversity of choices, which was greater within focus groups than between them (and, similarly, within countries rather than between them). Both at the beginning of the scenario (quickly defined as routine) and at the end (which for some was like a horror story), participants disagreed with each other over what might be done and what should be done. There are many ways of approaching a suspicious vehicle, just as there are many ways of bringing a firearm into play. This suggests that the manner in which encounters are actually handled may vary quite subtly (although occasionally very markedly) from one officer to another.

When the conversation did turn to justifying the use of force, this diversity disappeared and officers in all groups called on similar strategies to defend their putative actions: the legal responsibility to investigate crimes or make arrests; force as a legitimate response to civilian resistance; and the right to self-defence. What was interesting, therefore, was the manner in which a wide variety of behaviours was discursively subsumed under these normative frameworks. Not only does this process underline the character of these justifications as accounts, constructed either prospectively or retrospectively, but it raises questions about the degree of fit between a given justification and its behavioural referents. These are matters for further research.

Finally, the opportunity created by the international research group to conduct focus groups in seven countries provided a unique comparative perspective on police officers' attitudes towards the use of force. That perspective allowed the identification of commonalities in thinking among focus group participants, notably the cautious approach to the use of force and the desideratum that the encounter be kept under control, while also highlighting differences, such as the markedly greater perception of threat and uncertainty among the officers in Latin American countries.

There is, however, another sense in which this special issue provides a comparative perspective on the use of force by the police. As with any other international project using a common methodology, we have obviously developed a common framework for analysis and compared the countries in our sample (viz., the paper by Waddington et al. in this issue). However, the other contributions represent autonomous reflections undertaken by colleagues who have explored particular themes or lines of analysis that are of interest to them. While their findings are presented with reference to one country, their arguments and conclusions could fruitfully be explored for other countries. Thus this special issue does not simply offer a comparative study of cases; it also offers an opportunity for the comparative study of perspectives on the use of force by the police.

References

1. Adams, K., Alpert, G., Dunham, R., Garner, J., Greenfield, L., Henriquez, M., et al. (1999). *Use of force by police: overview of national and local data*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice/National Bureau of Justice Statistics.
2. Adang, O. (1998). *Hooligans, autonomen, agenten. Geweld en politie-optreden in relsituaties*. Alphen aan den Rijn: Samsom.
3. Adang, O., & Mensink, J. (2004). Pepper spray: an unreasonable response to suspect verbal resistance. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, *27*(2), 206–219.
4. Adang, O., Kaminski, R., Howell, M., & Mensink, J. (2006). Assessing the performance of pepper spray in use-of-force encounters: the Dutch experience. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management*, *29*(2), 282–305.
5. Adang, O., Kop, N., Ferwerda, H., Heijnemans, J., Olde Nordkamp,W., et al. (2006). Omgaan met conflictsituaties: op zoek naar goede werkwijzen bij de Politie. *Politie en Wetenschap* nr 30. Uitgeverij Kerkebosch, Zeist
6. Alpert, G., & Dunham, R. (2004). *Understanding police use of force: officers, suspects, reciprocity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
7. Alpert, G., & Fridell, L. (1992). *Police vehicles and firearms: instruments of deadly force*. Prospect Heights: Waveland.
8. Alpert, G., & Smith, W. (1994). How reasonable is the reasonable man? Police and excessive force. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, *85*, 481–501.
9. Amendola, K. (1996). *Officer behaviour in police–citizen encounters: a descriptive model and implications for less-than-lethal alternatives*. Washington, DC: Police Foundation.

10. Amnesty International. (2004). *Erneut im Fokus: Vorwürfe über polizeiliche Misshandlungen und den Einsatz unverhältnismäßiger Gewalt in Deutschland*. Bonn: Amnesty International, Sektion der Bundesrepublik Deutschland.
11. Birkbeck, C., & Gabaldón, L. (1996). Avoiding complaints: Venezuelan police officers' situational criteria for the use of force against citizens. *Policing and Society*, *6*, 113–129.
12. Birkbeck, C., & Gabaldón, L. (1998). The effect of citizen's status and behaviour on Venezuelan police officers' decisions to use force. *Policing and Society*, *8*(4), 315–338.
13. Bittner, E. (1974). Florence Nightingale in pursuit of Willie Sutton: a theory of the police. In H. Jacob (Ed.), *The potential for reform of criminal justice*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
14. Bittner, E. (1970). *The functions of the police in modern society.* Chevy Chase: National Institute of Mental Health.
15. Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
16. Briceño León, R., Carneiro, L., & Cruz, J. (1997). El apoyo ciudadano a la action extrajudicial de la policía en Brasil, El Salvador y Venezuela. *Realidad*, *60*, 603–614.
17. Brodeur, J.-P. (2003). *Les visages de la police: pratiques et perceptions*. Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal.
18. Brusten, M. (ed.) (1975). *Die Pollizei—eine Institution öffentlicher Gewalt: Analysen, Kritik, empirische Daten*. Neuwied: Luchterhand.
19. Burkeman, O. (2006). Chicago police 'tortured black suspects'. *The Guardian*, 21st July, 2007, p. 19.
20. Cano, I. (2001). Policía paramilitares y escuadrones de la muerte en América Latina. In K. Bodemer, S. Kurtenbach, & K. Meschkat (Eds.), *Violencia y regulación de conflictos en América Latina* (pp. 219–235). Caracas: Nueva Sociedad.
21. CELS (Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales). (1998). *La inseguridad policial: violencia de las fuerzas de suguridad en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Eudeba.
22. Chappell, D., & Graham, L. (1985). *Police use of deadly force: Canadian perspectives*. Toronto: Centre of Criminology, University of Toronto.
23. Coady, C. A. J. (1986). The idea of violence. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *3*(1), 3–19.
24. Coady, T., James, S., Miller, S., & O'Keefe, M. (eds.) (2000). *Violence and Police Culture*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
25. Del Olmo, R. (1990). Violencia policial en las calles de Caracas. In R. Del Olmo (Ed.), *Segunda ruptura criminològica* (pp. 217–239). Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela.
26. Dobash, R. E., Dobash, R. D., Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1992). The myth of sexual symmetry in marital violence. *Social Problems*, *39*(1), 71–91.
27. Ericson, R. (1981). *Making crime: a study of detective work*. Toronto: Butterworths.
28. Falk, E. (2000). *Widerstand gegen Vollstreckungsbeamte: Ein praxisbesogenes Forschungsprojekt* [Texte der Fachhochschule Villingen-Schwenningen, Hochschule für Polizei, Band 25. Villingen-Schwenningen: Fachhochschule Villingen-Schwenningen, Hochschule für Polizei.
29. Fernando, B., & Puvimanasinghe, S. (eds.) (2005). *An X-ray of the Sri Lankan policing system & torture of the poor*. Kowloon: Asian Human Rights Commission.
30. Fyfe, J., & Skolnick, J. (1993). *Above the law: police and the excessive use of force*. New York: The Free Press.
31. Gabaldón, L. (1993). Police violence and uncertainty in Latin America: linking the macro and micro levels of analysis. *International Criminal Justice Review*, *3*, 44–59.
32. Gabaldón, L. & Birkbeck, C. (eds.) (2003). *Policía y fuerza física en perspective intercultural*. Caracas: Nueva Sociedad.
33. Garner, J., Maxwell, C., & Heraux, C. (2002). Characteristics associated with the prevalence and severity of force used by the police. *Justice Quarterly*, *19*(4), 705–746.
34. Geller, W., & Scott, M. (1992). *Deadly force: what we know. A practitioner's desk reference*. Washington, D.C.: Police Executive Research Forum.
35. Geller, W., & Toch, H. (eds.) (1996). *Police Violence*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
36. Herrnkind, M., & Scheerer, S. (eds.) (2003). *Die Polizei als Organisation mit Gewaltlizenz. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Kontrolle*. Münster: Hamburger Studien zur Kriminologie und Kriminalpolitik, Band 31.
37. Hickman, M. (2006). *Citizen complaints about police use of force*. *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report*, June 2006. Washington: Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
38. Hoffman, P., & Hickey, E. (2005). Use of force by female police officers. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *33*(2), 145–151.
39. Huggins, M. (1991). *Vigilantism and the state in modern Latin America: essays on extralegal violence*. New York: Praeger.

40. Huggins, M., & Mesquita, M. (1995). Scapegoating outsiders: the murders of street youth in modern Brazil. *Policing and Society*, *5*(4), 265–280.
41. Jäger, J. (1985). *Angriffe auf Polizeibeamte 1983*. Münster: Polizei-Fürungsakademie.
42. Jäger, J. (1989). *Angriffe auf Polizeibeamte 1987*. Münster: Polizei-Fürungsakademie.
43. Jäger, J. (1994). *Angriffe auf Polizeibeamte 1992*. Münster: Polizei-Fürungsakademie.
44. Jäger, J. (1988). *Gewalt und Polizei: Theoretisch-empirische Beiträge zur Kriminologie des Widerstandes gegen Vollstreckungsbeamte und zur Konfliktforschung* [Beiträge zur gesellschaftswissen-schaftlichen Forschung, Band 6]. Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft.
45. Jobard, F. (1999). *Les Violences Policières: État des recherches dans les pays anglo-saxons*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
46. Kleinig, J. (1996). *The ethics of policing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
47. Klockars, C. (1995). A theory of excessive force and its control. In W. Geller, & H. Toch (Eds.), *And justice for all: understanding and controlling police abuse of force* (pp. 11–29). Washington, D.C.: Police Executive Research Forum.
48. Klockars, C. (1980). The Dirty Harry Problem. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *452*, 33–47.
49. Klockars, C. (1985). *The idea of police*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
50. Kop, N., Spaan, R. B., & Driessen, F. (1997). *Politie en publiek: een onderzoek naar de interactie politie-publiek tijdens de surveillancedienst*. Politiestudies 19. Deventer: Gouda Quint.
51. Lange, H. - J. (2003). *Die Polizei der Gesellschaft. Zur Sociologie der Inneren Sicherheit*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
52. Lawrence, R. (2000). *The politics of force: media and the construction of police brutality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
53. Loader, I. (1997). Policing the social: questions of symbolic power. *British Journal of Sociology*, *48* (1), 1–18.
54. MacDonald, J., Manz, P., Alpert, G., & Dunham, R. (2003). Police use of force: examining the relationship between calls for service and the balance of police force and suspect resistance. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *31*(2), 119–127.
55. Manzoni, P. (2003). *Gewalt zwischen Polizei und Bevölkerung. Einflüsse von Arbeits-belastungen, Arbeitszufriedenheit und Burnout auf polizeiliche Gewaltausübung und Opfererfahrungen*. Zürich: Rüegger.
56. Mars, J. (2003). *Deadly force, colonialism and the rule of law: police violence in Guyana*. Westport: Greenwood.
57. McElvain, J., & Kposowa, A. (2004). Police officer characteristics and internal affairs investigations for use of force allegations. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *32*(3), 265–279.
58. Monsalve, Y. (2005). Control social y castigo: percepción en funcionarios policiales venezolanos. *Capítulo Criminològico*, *33*(1), 7–30.
59. Mopas, M., & Stenning, P. (2001). Tools of the trade: the symbolic power of private security an exploratory study. *Policing and Society*, *11*(1), 67–97.
60. Naeyé, J. (2005). *Niet zonder slag of stoot. De geweldsbevioegdheid en doorzettingskracht van de Nederlandse politie*. Uitgeverij Kerckebosch, Zeist.
61. Neyroud, P., & Beckley, A. (2001). *Policing, ethics and human rights*. Cullompton: Willan.
62. Norris, M., Birkbeck, C., & Gabaldón, L. G. (2006). Social geometry and force: a partial test of Black's theory of law with Mexican, U.S. and Venezuelan police. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, *22*(4), 324–326.
63. Ohlemacher, T. (2003). *Gewalt gegen Polizeibeamtinnen und -beamte 1985–2000: Eine kriminologische Analyse* [Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur kriminologischen Forschung]. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
64. Queensland (Australia), Criminal Justice Commission. (2000). Reported use of force by Queensland police. Research Paper Series 6(2). Brisbane: Queensland Criminal Justice Commision.
65. Rahtz, H. (2003). *Understanding police use of force*. Monsey: Criminal Justice Press.
66. Reiss, A. (1968). Police brutality—answers to key questions. *Transaction*, *5*(8), 10–19.
67. Reiss, A. (1971). *The police and the public*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
68. Ross, J. (2000). *Making news of police violence: a comparative study of Toronto and New York City*. Westport: Praeger.
69. Rossiter, L., & MacLennan, R. (2003). Validation of a model for use-of-force decision-making using live scenarios. *Canadian Journal of Poli8ce & Security Services*, *1*(1), 41–52.
70. Santos, T. (1992). *Violencia criminal y violencia policial en Venezuela; signos de una frustrada modernizaciòn*. Maracaibo: Instituto de Criminología, Universidad del Zulia.

71. Schuck, A. (2004). The masking of racial and ethnic disparity in police use of physical force: the effects of gender and custody status. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *32*, 557–564.
72. Sessar, K., Baumann, U., & Müller, J. (1980). *Polizeibeamte als Opfer vorsätzlicher Tötung* [BKA-Forschungsreihe, Band 12]. Wiesbaden: Bundeskriminalamt.
73. Shuldiner, P. (1979). Visual rape: a look at the dubious legality of strip searches. *J. Marshall Law Review*, *13*, 273.
74. Smith, B., & Holmes, M. (2003). Community accountability, minority threat, and police brutality: an examination of civil rights criminal complaints. *Criminology*, *41*(4), 1035–1063.
75. Stenning, P. (1994). *Police use of force and violence against members of visible minority groups in Canada*. Ottawa: Ministry of the Solicitor General of Canada.
76. Stewart, D., Shamdasani, P., & Rook, D. (2007). *Focus groups: theory and practice*, 2nd ed. [Applied Social Research Methods Series, Vol. 20]. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
77. Straus, M., & Gelles, R. (1990). How violent are American families? Estimates from the National Family Violence Survey and other studies. In M. Straus, & R. Gelles (Eds.), *Physical violence in American families*. New Brunswick: Transaction.
78. Terrill, W. (2003). Police use of force and suspect resistance: the micro-process of the police–suspect encounter. *Police Quarterly*, *6*, 51–83.
79. Terrill, W., Paoline III, E., & Manning, P. (2003). Police culture and coercion. *Criminology*, *41*(4), 1003–1034.
80. Timmer, J. (2005). *Politiegeweld. Geweldgebruik van en tegen de politie in Nederland*. Alphen aan den Rijn: Kluwer.
81. Timmer, J., Naeyé, J., & van der Steeg, M. (1996). *Onder Schot Vuurwapengebruik van de politie in Nederland*. Deventer: Gouda Quint.
82. Uildriks, N. (1997). *De normering en beheersing van politiegeweld*. Deventer: Gouda Quint.
83. Uildriks, N. (1996). *Geweld in de interactie politie-publiek. Een onderzoek naar opvattingen en ervaringen binnen de politie*. Deventer: Gouda Quint.
84. United Nations General Assembly. (1979a). *Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials*—endorsed by General Assembly Resolution 45/166 of 18th December, 1979—accessible at: http://www.uncjin.org/Standards/Conduct/compendium.pdf ("D. The judiciary and Law Enforcement".
85. United Nations General Assembly. (1979b). *Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials*—adopted by General Assembly Resolution 34/169 of 17th December, 1979 accessible at: http://www.uncjin.org/Standards/Conduct/compendium.pdf ("D. The judiciary and Law Enforcement".
86. Urban Alliance on Race Relations/Queen Street Patients Council. (2000). *Saving lives: alternatives to the use of lethal force by police*. Toronto: Urban Alliance on Race Relations.
87. Waddington, P. (1991). *The strong arm of the law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
88. Weisburd, D., Greenspan, R., Hamilton, E., Bryant, K., & Williams, H. (2001). *Abuse of police authority*. Washington, DC: Police Foundation.
89. Westley, W. (1970). *Violence and the police*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
90. Wilson, J. (1968). *Varieties of police behavior*. Boston: Harvard University Press.