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Relevance of Authority and Respect for Police Action

How do police authority and respect arise and how can they be integrated into police action?



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It is still a priority for police officers to respond in an appropriate manner to disrespect from citizens. The research emphasises a correlation between perceptions of police authority and the use of force in response to so-called disrespect. In order to deal with challenging situations in everyday police life, it is worth integrating the relevant curriculum in police training. A curriculum of this kind should first provide a theoretical basis of what forms of authority exist, what forms of authority may appear in police actions, and a theoretical basis of how the use of police authority and the respect that police officers demand are correlated. This article discusses these theoretical foundations in order to create a comprehensive training curriculum and it also shows the initial steps taken in which the contents have already been taught to police officers in rudimentary form in their studies.

1. PROBLEM SCENARIO INVOLVING AUTHORITY, RESPECT AND THE USE OF FORCE

Police officers are expected to act safely in challenging situations involving citizens. Basically, attempts are being made to strengthen the police officers' safe approach by means of new legal powers or technological innovations, such as body cams or, for example, tasers. In America, research is currently being conducted into how such innovations affect officers' perceptions of safety (cf. Sierra-Arevalo 2019). However, it is more complex in reality when citizens simply do not immediately do what police officers say or question the police officer's presence. Perceptions of authority and respect for police decision-making in these situations are always central and sometimes associated with abuse of authority, disproportionate

use of force, and lack of police legitimacy in the eyes of the public (see, e.g., Weber 2020, 50; Klein 2016; Loick 2018; Taylor 2019). Police officers want their authority to be recognised and respected, but it is sometimes a challenge for police officers to deal appropriately with disrespect that is in itself exempt from punishment (cf. Bettermann 2014, 17 f). Thus, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between respect and authority, since losses of authority are often mentioned in the same breath as a perceived increase in disrespect towards citizens (cf. ibid., 24) and are repeatedly criticised (cf. vom Hau 2017, 4 ff; Hermanutz 2013; ibid. 2015). Behr justifies an increase in disrespect by stating that citizens think critically and implement what is learned in many places at school, namely to speak up when experiencing an injustice (cf. Behr 2013, 83). However,

as a result of perceived disrespect combined with a lack of support from politicians and the public, police officers may feel powerless (cf. Hunold 2012, 113). Technical upgrading is of course not primarily suitable for dealing with such problems, but what is required in particular are psychological-pedagogical innovations in police training that give police officers a robustness that is supported by a professional attitude on the part of the officers themselves and that does not endanger the relationship between the police and civil society, but rather strengthens it. The article sheds light on how different forms of authority appearing in everyday police life, respect towards police officers and the use of police force are theoretically related in order to then to focus on how these theoretical insights can be integrated into a police training curriculum.

2. AUTHORITY

There are various definitions of authority, none of which is generally accepted, but they have in common that authority is always attributed to an actor (cf. Lemme/Körner 2018a, 12). This granting and recognition of authority can be sincere or feigned (cf. Sofsky/Paris 1991, 22). Popitz also describes authority as a relationship structure that is not based solely on the acceptance of the authority holder's dominant power, but at the same time is also based on the subordinate's need to be recognised (cf. Popitz 1992, 14). According to Weber, possessing authority always involves possessing social prestige, which assigns role model functions and reliability to the bearer of authority (cf. Weber 1972, 16). According to Sennett (Sennett 1993), a bearer of authority possesses certain personality traits, such as self-confidence and exceptional professional judgement. A person also gains authority if they can inspire admiration among their followers

(cf. *ibid.*, 7 f). Recognition of an actor as an authority involves believing that they are inferior in terms of their own abilities (cf. Sofsky/Paris 1991, 22). A person who trusts in authority submits differently from someone who only trusts in the sanctioning power of the other person. A supervisor's leadership style is also different when they know that their subordinates trust in their authority. Thus, authority is valuable to its bearer because it provides them with voluntary obedience and the encouragement of their loyal following gives them additional protection from immediate hostility (cf. *ibid.*, 19 f). Erich Fromm distinguishes between two forms of authority, which he calls being an authority and having authority, and which are conferred on an authority bearer through the process of social attribution. Having authority is conferred on the authority bearer on the basis of a formal role they hold (cf. Fromm 1976, 300). Being an authority is conferred on the authority bearer on the basis of qualities associated with authority, such as competence. Authority, according to Verhaeghe (Verhaeghe 2016), has a three-pole structure: something (1) is attributed authority (2) over another actor on the basis of a source or foundation of authority (3) that provides legitimacy to the authority and is commonly believed in (cf. *ibid.*, 55). This foundation, which provides it with legitimacy, is essential for any authority. There are different forms of authority, such as official authority, which is attributed to a holder of an office (cf. Strohal 1955). The distinguishing feature of official authority lies in the assumption that it is already legitimised by a higher authority. The scope of the demands of official authority is determined and limited by the scope of its legitimacy (in Verhaeghe's words: the basis of authority) (cf. *ibid.*, 76). In the case of official police authority, legitimisation comes from the state, which takes on the role of

the higher authority. Strohal believes that official authority enforces its demand for legitimacy from its counterpart in every interaction and demands that its authority is respected in its actions and claims that it is already legitimised by higher state authority (cf. *ibid.*, 23). This can cause conflict. First, it can easily give the impression that every citizen must obey a police officer because they wear a uniform as a symbol of official authority. Secondly, it is forgotten that citizens can also grant and deny legitimacy to the police, regardless of the fact that the police's authority to exist is already legitimised by higher state authority. Thirdly, the importance of personal police authority in contact with citizens is pushed into the background. However, personal authority is indispensable in the interpersonal interaction between police officers and citizens.

Since authority is always attributed, it follows that authority (official authority and personal authority) is only permanent if it is also affirmed by a counterpart. If the counterpart takes the view that a public official does not automatically hold authority, then the official authority, despite its legitimisation by higher authority, is invalid for the counterpart in this particular interaction. Personal authority is attributed on the basis of personal qualities. Hannah Arendt (Arendt 1957; *this.* 1970) echoes the remarks on the social construction of authority. Arendt focuses on the recognition of personal authority, emphasises the connection between authority and respect and shows that authority is maintained through respect. At the same time, Arendt emphasises that authority and violence are mutually exclusive. Force means that authority can no longer be maintained through the aforementioned granting of respect and recognition, so that the use of force always reflects the reaction to an imminent loss of authority (cf. *this.* 1957,

159 ff). Authority needs neither coercive threats nor rational discussions to exert influence (cf. *this.* 1970, 45). According to Strohal, personal authority also arises from trust (cf. Strohal 1955, 31). Omer and von Schlippe (Omer/von Schlippe 2010) as well as Körner et al. (Körner et al. 2019a) also deny that official authority as well as personal authority arise through power. They put forward the thesis that authority is the result of relational work without the threat of force (cf. *ibid.*, 16 ff).

Authority in social change

Authority is relevant to control and it regulates social order and social order problems. It does this as a hierarchically conceived, traditional authority by providing self-contained, homogeneous worldviews and thereby constituting a social compass that gives people direction (cf. Hüther 2018, 177). In primitive societies, it was important to establish hierarchies so that social roles were clearly distributed and functions could be performed well to maintain societies. This hierarchical principle then extended to all social sub-sectors and all other social units (families, monasteries, clans, etc.) (cf. *ibid.*, 66). This aforementioned traditional authority is understood as an authority based on power, enforcement and obedience (cf. Lemme/Körner 2018a, 38). It did not take responsibility for the escalation of situations, but tried to control escalations through punishment and humiliation, and even physical violence against subordinates. Traditional authority was based on the status of the authority figure. It was considered impossible that the authority figure could be wrong and they therefore had to maintain the appearance of infallibility (cf. Körner et al. 2019a, 30). The stability of a traditional authority was measured by the extent of obedience it received (cf. Omer/von Schlippe 2010, 30 ff). The concept of honour was central

to maintaining traditional authority. If the latter suffered a violation of its sense of honour, it had to immediately humiliate its adversary in order to compensate for the feeling of superiority that the latter had gained through the dishonour it had achieved (cf. *ibid.*, 40). The notion of honour, which was associated with authority, compelled immediate retaliation from the person who had experienced a perceived humiliation (cf. *ibid.*, 60). The idea that authority is embedded in social-historical phases and is subject to social change is also advocated by Sennett (Sennett 1993). Omer and von Schlippe also note that authority is subject to legitimacy crises (cf. Omer/von Schlippe 2016, 13), the outcome of which determines whether an authority will continue to exist or lose influence. The hierarchical order structure of traditional societies is proving to be unsuitable for ensuring stability in a modern, differentiated society (cf. Lemme/Körner 2018a, 67).

3. RESPECT

Respect can be exercised in two forms, as Darwall already noted in 1977 (cf. Darwall 1977). There is the so-called “recognition respect”, which is due to all people equally (cf. *ibid.*, 38). The so-called “appraisal respect” is due to a particular person on the basis of special character traits (cf. *ibid.*, 39). Darwall emphasises that respect is due to all people equally on the basis of their being human (cf. *ibid.*, 37). Sennett (Sennett 2004) states that respect is an intangible currency for mutual appreciation in the face of successful dignified behaviour (cf. *ibid.*, 253). Similar to authority, respect is attributed to a counterpart. Respect can be shown towards persons, symbols and institutions, such as a legal system. This form of respect only flows in one direction, as in this scenario it is given by one actor to another. However, respect can also flow in two directions as mutual

respect (cf. *ibid.*, 253 ff). Respect is attributed to the actor to whom equal value is attributed and respect is only given to someone who also has self-respect (cf. Strobl 2010, 16). In addition, respect must be presented in a credible manner (cf. *ibid.*, 27). Respect is thus a reciprocal, social (exchange) currency, as well as a momentous and enormously meaningful gesture (cf. *ibid.*, 20). According to Sennett, respect is a scarce resource in modern society (cf. Sennett 2004, 11). Thus, individualisation results in increasingly differentiated life situations, so that this complexity makes it difficult for individuals to understand the supposed otherness of their counterparts. In addition, respect is becoming increasingly rare as social inequality increases in addition to individualisation. The consequences of a lack of respect are fatal: Lack of respect means that a person is seen as a human being whose presence is of no value. Prevailing norms and values as well as social orders can be questioned through lack of respect (cf. Strobl 2010, 20). Respect cannot be taken for granted: Instead, it is precisely in antagonistic, emotionally stressful situations or in crisis situations that the mutual paying of respect must be negotiated (cf. Sennett 2004, 315). For the demand for respect to be successful, it is best for an actor to give respect in advance in a way that is appropriate for him or her and wait to see if the counterpart invests the same amount of respect. In such situations, it is most appropriate and consistent for the strong to show respect to the weak (cf. *ibid.*, 318) and then wait to see whether the counterpart accepts or rejects the offer. If the transaction is successful in terms of mutual respect, it can minimise conflict, as mutual appreciation has prevented loss of face.

4. CONSEQUENCES FOR POLICE WORK

Official authority, personal authority and police attitudes corresponding to traditional authority can shape police communication with citizens. State authority automatically grants official authority to the police, but this does not mean that citizens automatically grant authority to the police. A practitioner's one-sided view that all police action is already legitimised by higher state authority and therefore official police authority must be obeyed unconditionally can be linked to official authority. Thus, this fixation on already legitimised official authority can foster police officers' attitude that the counterpart must respect them. However, this can become a problem because citizens also grant authority. Citizens are much more likely to recognise police authority as legitimate only when police officers treat them with respect. For example, research indicates that trust in the police, as well as the legitimacy of police actions, comes from "procedural justice," i.e., fair and transparent dealings with citizens (see, for example, Wolfe et al. 2016; Murphy/Mazerolle 2018; Bradford et al. 2015; Reisig et al. 2012).

In such situations, the risk of the use of force is high, because the police see their actions as legitimised by their official authority and the wearing of their uniforms, but they may forget that police authority is also legitimised by respectful, transparent and fair dealings ("procedural justice"). Official police authority is also linked to the use of the monopoly of force, which has also been granted by higher authority. Recognition of authority and force are linked in a way that can lead to problems. The possession and exercise of the monopoly on the use of force should also have the effect that citizens follow and respect police instructions, otherwise they will have to fear consequences such

as direct coercion and further sanctions (resistance to state power). The possession of the monopoly on the use of force and the related possession of power over others suggests that authority is only recognised in this case out of fear of sanctions. Thus, force is threatened in order to gain respect or fear and, consequently, submission.

In addition, a police officer's personal attitude consistent with traditional authority may lead them to demand unquestioning obedience and to be overly quick to threaten the use of force. Authority Maintenance Theory (see Alpert/Dunham 2004) examines the use of police force and argues that the police do not only use force to stop violations of the law. Instead, according to this theory, the police use force, among other measures, to maintain the authority of individual police officers in conflict situations and the authority of the state against attempts to undermine it by provocateurs (cf. Feltes et al. 2007, 288). Bettermann examines the effect of claimed authority on the course of police operations. He concludes that police officers' expectation of respect for their authority tends to contribute to escalation because this demand provokes further disrespect. There is even a growing need for police officers to demand gestures of submission from citizens in order to demand obedience (cf. Bettermann 2015, 170 ff; cited in vom Hau 2017, 76; cited in Weber 2020, 50 f). Thus, the use of force by police officers can serve to restore authority in the absence of respect and to demonstrate power (cf. Hunold 2012, 114). Excessive use of force has consequences. The police also pose a "risk" (cf. Pinheiro 2003) to the civilian population if they use excessive force in a disproportionate manner. Excessive use of force by the police causes mistrust and rejection among the population (cf. Weitzer 2002; Smith/Holmes 2003; Panwala 2002) and destroys the trust between the civilian

population and the police, which the latter needs in a democracy in order not to be seen as a failed institution (cf. Reemtsma 2003, 11).

In any case, strengthening police authority using force, as explained, is superficial and may also provoke covert ridicule and even stronger resentment from the actor giving such superficial recognition. Superficiality also remains present in this strengthening process, as actors can continue to carry out their deception even with an increased demonstration of power. Thus, a loss of police authority can be accelerated further by losing the outcome of the use of force. An authority that seeks to assert itself through the threat and use of force is in danger of disintegrating in the long run because it lacks honest recognition and respect (cf. Verhaeghe 2016, 192). Moreover, strengthening the police monopoly on the use of force only strengthens police authority, which equips the police with new legal powers and technologies to use force to enforce their authority against resistance. This fuels escalations, the dynamics of which are characterised by the fact that more and more of the same intervention principle is supposed to help (cf. on escalation dynamics e.g. Baumann-Habersack 2017, 25 f.). Furthermore, such an approach completely ignores the relevance of personal authority. It is also overlooked that legitimacy of authority comes from good exercise of personal authority and respectful interaction with the population. It should actually be the rule that police officers have personal authority, but it remains unclear in practice whether personal authority is actually granted to every police officer.

It has consequences for positioning police officers to exercise their personal authority well: When authority is genuinely recognised, this entails voluntary obedience (cf. Furedi 2013, 8 f). Good

exercise of personal authority can therefore make the use of force unnecessary. Recognising someone's personal authority means voluntarily following them on the basis of their exemplary deeds or expertise, since following them is linked to benefits for oneself. This also means that respect is automatically shown to such a recognised authority, because, according to the definition by Hannah Arendt, the construction of a stable authority is fuelled by respect (cf. Arendt 1970, 45 ff). This kind of respect shown to the authority as a legitimate leading figure and role model can also be reciprocated by the authority. Thus, an authority can respect the persons who submit to it by treating them with dignity, showing them appropriate appreciation, proceeding transparently and treating them fairly. If authority also respects its counterpart, then it can be assumed that it will receive respect in return as equivalent currency. If there is mutual respect between the authority bearer and the counterpart, this stabilises the exercise of authority and violence becomes unnecessary. It can be seen that the recognition of authority is central to gaining respect, and the use of personal authority in particular should not be overlooked. In addition, respect can be used as an adequate appreciation of the counterpart to compensate for inequality in the situation or a threatened loss of face on the part of the counterpart who is in a difficult position. This application of respect in everyday police life should be authentically conveyed and realistically fit the individual situation in order to be credible, otherwise it is ineffective.

5. TEACHING POLICE AUTHORITY AND INCLUSION IN POLICE TRAINING

The definitions of official authority, personal authority, traditional authority and their correlation with respect and the use of

force presented here provide the theoretical basis for an official, uniform, comprehensive curriculum in police training, which has so far been lacking in this format. To date, trainees have only been able to learn informally about what personal authority looks like and how it works during practical training. Thus, students have received personal authority through the tutor, whose working style and tips in dealing with citizens were formative for the development of the students' personal authority during practical training. The students' personal experiences of police authority during their practical training also depended on how distinctive collective ideas about official authority, traditional authority and personal authority were in the service groups.

In order to complement this informal learning process, the aforementioned formal curriculum is required to impart these theoretical insights. In particular, personal authority arising through respect should be taught as an attitude and action concept in this training curriculum. On the one hand, this means that personal authority is reflected in stable attitudes and convictions of police officers and that these attitudes also reflect certain actions. This is didactically relevant, since police knowledge (cf. Grutzpalk 2016 on the topic of police knowledge) about these terms, their differences and their interrelationships contributes to police action (cf. Frevel/Groß 2013). Professional knowledge influences how practical action is carried out (cf. Schützeichel 2014, 43 ff). In addition, a formal curriculum can be based on and combine some of the existing courses at the College of Police and Administration (Hochschule für Polizei und Verwaltung) North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Bielefeld (HSPV NRW). The components of police authority (official authority and personal authority) have already been taught at

the HSPV NRW since 2018 in individual seminars (training in social skills and professional role reflection), although comprehensive integration into the curriculum of training in social skills (TSC) and professional role reflection is still required. In addition, the correlation between traditional authority, official authority and force were elaborated on the basis of the aforementioned theoretical explanations. The correlation between recognised authority and respect was also highlighted. The didactic approach adopted was that the students in seminars should first develop their own working definitions of the concepts of authority, force and respect based on their everyday understanding and experiences. These working definitions were then cross-referenced with the definitions given here in order to get an overview of the relationships between these terms and the formation of authority and respect. The teaching of personal authority was made possible, for example, by integrating it into learning modules, such as TSC, and in professional role reflection. New concepts for teaching personal authority were also taught to the students during these training courses. Thus, the concept of the "new authority" (cf. Körner et al. 2019b) was introduced and modified in order to be transferred to the police law enforcement service (cf. Weber 2020). The new authority focuses on strengthening personal authority and is a psychological concept that was originally developed for highly escalated family systems (cf. Lemme/Körner 2018a, 11). In the meantime, applying the new authority has expanded to other contexts, such as youth welfare and community work (cf. Körner et al. 2019a). Omer and colleagues aim to design a form of authority based on the development of a stable relationship between authority holder and authority receiver, characterised by mutual respect and clear boundaries, and roles (cf. Omer/

von Schlippe 2015, 34). The new authority assumes that the exercise of authority is increasingly possible in relationships characterised by respect and mutual recognition (cf. Lemme/Körner 2018b). Gilad (Gilad 2013) has already discussed how the new authority can be transferred to the police. Gilad et al. (Gilad et al. 2018) have already successfully evaluated initial programmes involving the transfer of the new authority to the police, and the author has already adapted this concept to the German region (cf. Weber 2020). Initial research demonstrating the connectivity of this concept for the police is in progress. However, the existing accompanying research has not yet been completed.

6. CONCLUSION

Merely invoking the legitimacy of their official authority is not enough for police officers to deal with citizens and gain respect and appreciation from them. Similarly, attitudes conforming to traditional

authority generate conflict situations instead of regard and respect. Nevertheless, exercising personal authority in a positive way has enormous potential to prevent the use of force. It is necessary to teach how authority can be exercised in a professional and effective manner. The same question arises in relation to respect: how can the police apply respect in an adequate way by using intervention techniques to resolve conflict situations? Here, it is a good idea to provide police officers in training with theoretical basics on these concepts in order to build on them and teach them how authority can be exercised well without falling into the pitfalls of official authority and traditional authority. It also seems necessary to systematically integrate new authority approaches into police training. The new training content needs to be evaluated by further accompanying research in order to document the potential benefits for police officers.

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Further literature and links

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