Swedish Police Officers’ Perceptions of Conflict Management Training in School and Probationary Training

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Abstract
The aim of this study is to increase knowledge of how police officers define conflict and conflict management as well as how they perceive their training in conflict management, in relation to previous experiences, in-school training and their probationary training. Swedish police officers (n = 20) who had recently finished their probationary training were interviewed focusing on conflict and conflict management. The study shows that the respondents had general descriptions of conflict, which focused almost solely on interpersonal conflict. Further, the development of adaptive conflict behaviors during probationary training was largely dependent on their instructors, whose role and tasks are very complex. In addition, respondents reported an accelerated maturation process of sorts, in which they described themselves as less naïve and more cynical, despite their short time at work. The findings in this study might provide valuable insights into how police officers perceive conflict and conflict management.

Keywords
conflict management, law enforcement, police, professional training, Sweden

Introduction
By the nature of the job, police officers have frequent interpersonal interactions with the public, their own colleagues, and the police organization. These human interactions might expose the officers to a number of conflict situations that sometimes are unavoidable, spanning from verbal disagreements to violent situations. A police-related conflict might be a situation in which the officers themselves are a part of the conflict, when, for example, issu-
Handling these complex conflict situations without losing public confidence or getting into serious disputes or violent situations is a difficult challenge for the individual police officer (Bertilsson, Petersson, Fredriksson, Magnusson, & Fransson, 2017). Also the outcome, or even perceived outcomes of these situations can have serious effects on multiple levels (Hine, Porter, Westera, Alpert, & Allen, 2018; Terrill & Ingram, 2015), not least given that officers are expected by society to handle conflicts in a professional manner (van de Klomp, Stronks, Adang, & van den Brink, 2014). On an individual level, not having the appropriate skills to handle these conflicts can cause negative emotions and in the end affect the mental health of officers (Andersen & Gustafberg, 2016). Further, these negative emotions might also compromise the officer’s work productivity and effectiveness (Lau, Li, Mak, & Chung, 2004). On a societal and organizational level, the outcomes include a possibly substantial economic burden, with police misconduct cases causing society large costs (Andersen & Gustafberg, 2016) and eroding trust and confidence in police (Terrill & Ingram, 2015). Recent research even suggests that mundane, everyday interactions such as being stopped by an officer could affect public perceptions of the police as an organization negatively, even more so than media coverage and consumption (Wozniak, Drakulich, & Calfano, 2020). Given the above, solid conflict-management skills, including communication skills, should therefore be essential to develop for students in basic police training programs (Zaiser & Staller, 2015). These “soft skills” are perhaps more important today than ever before, when considering the change in policing where a less authoritative and centralized police system, with more interaction and cooperation with citizens is demanded by society (Sereni-Massinger & Wood, 2016; Van Dijk, Hoogewoning, & Punch, 2015).

Despite the importance of solid communicative and conflict management skills, not least for patrolling officers, research on the group in general (Ahmad, Islam, & Saleem, 2018) and the topic of conflict management in particular, although growing – is scarce (Zaiser & Staller, 2015). As for Swedish research, a systematic review was conducted that included research \( n=173 \) published between 2010 and 2017 (Bogestam & Bergnor, 2018). According to the review, a major part of the included records are focused on police methods and ways of working; however, the majority of these articles in turn are focused on crime prevention and not conflict management. As for use of force, none of the articles included in the review that focused on use of firearms were conducted at Swedish universities or other similar actors in the field.

**Previous research**

While research on the topic is scarce, some work with relevance to the present study can be found in the research available. For example, Price (2016) describes the historical efforts to import various forms of conflict-management training into the police worldwide since the late 1960s. Nevertheless, such efforts have had only limited success in changing police training culture, partly because the traditional authoritative police role was given less priority in terms of problematizing in the conflict-management programs. Further, Price (2016) argues that the trend now has shifted, and police departments are looking into conflict-management strategies in order to enhance policing. Previous studies have shown that educational attainment, i.e. officers who have gone through higher education (college or similar) can have a positive impact on conflict-management behavior, including stronger verbal com-
munication skills and lesser dependency on coercive methods, including use of force (Paoline & Terrill, 2007). Also, the role of field-training officers (FTOs) providing formalized, on the job training has been shown to have effect on conflict behavior, with FTOs displaying more supportive behavior towards citizens, when compared to non-FTOs (Sun, 2003). Further, several studies have shown a strong correlation between officer age and experience and poor conflict management behavior, with complaints being more frequent for inexperienced officers, with a steady decline with experience (Terrill & Ingram, 2015). Other studies have focused on conflict management tools for the police to improve strained relations between the police and members of the public, including the role of mediation and reconciliation processes (Berger, 2000; Stronks & Adang, 2015; van de Klomp et al., 2014). Further, a study from Hong Kong examined the effectiveness of conflict-management training for traffic police officers and highlighted three major components – heightening awareness of emotional reaction and conflict-management approaches, improving communication skills, and enhancing anger management and emotional regulation – that can be utilized in law enforcement operations (Lau et al., 2004). From a Swedish perspective, a report by Holgersson (2018) focused on conflict management training and use of force within the Swedish police and argued that the police officers, as well as the police education programs have a lack of focus on communication skills in conflict situations. According to the report, one of the most serious deficiencies in the training of future officers is the limited time available for practical exercises in communication, thus making the ability to communicate in an appropriate manner up to the experience and personal characteristics of the individual officer. This in turn makes recruiting people with little lived experience problematic, a finding in line with that of Terrill and Ingram (2015). Another important finding in the report by Holgersson (2018) was a perceived excessive focus on worst-case scenarios.

In order to enhance the training in conflict management, police researchers and practitioners also have to understand how conflict-management training is perceived by police officers, not least in the setting of their in-field or probationary training, an area that also has been scarcely researched (Hoel, 2019).

**Police training – the Swedish context**

**Basic training program for police officers**

In Sweden, budding police officers undergo 2.5 years of training at one of five universities where basic training for police officers is held: Umeå University (Umeå), the University of Borås (Borås), Södertörn University (Stockholm), Malmö University (Malmö), and the Linnaeus University (Växjö). The academies in Borås and Malmö were started in January of 2019, and therefore had not graduated any students at the time of this study. The training for the cohort in question consisted of approximately 80 weeks in school with an additional six-month, integrated probationary training period. After the completion of this study, the structure of the in-school–probationary training has been changed, and graduating students will now finish their training with a six-month probationary period.

The in-school training has a clear inter-disciplinary focus, and students go through training in a wide variety of subjects such as law, criminology as well as behavioral- and political science. Besides these more generic subjects, the students also undergo police-specific training in, for example radio use, tactical driving, and conflict management. The in-school training as a whole is regulated by an education plan authored by the Swedish Police (The Swedish Police Authority, 2018). The document describes in broad terms what is to be included in the training as well as goals and expected learning outcomes.
Conflict management in the basic training program for police officers
Conflict-management training for police officers is regulated in the POLKON manual (an abbreviation for Police Conflict Management, in Swedish) (Swedish Police Academy, 2014). The POLKON manual and system is comprised of several integrated areas such as tactics, use of weapons, physical methods and techniques (i.e. self-defense and arrest techniques), mental preparedness, and communication. The basis for the Swedish police tactics is a non-confrontational approach. This does by no means imply that officers are expected to be passive, but to avoid confrontation and to the furthest extent possible, use communication rather than force to handle situations they are faced with. As a way of highlighting this further, the Swedish government has stated by law in the Swedish Police Regulation (2014:1104) that police officers in contact with the public are obliged to act considerately, to show restraint and to act in a way that instills confidence and trust. In school, the training within POLKON contains both theoretical as well as practical training. Although the in-school training in part is regulated by the Swedish police, most notably in terms of learning outcomes, these regulations are broad, and forms of examination and training differ between schools. As for the POLKON-manual, it includes well-established models to explain conflicts such as Galtung’s Conflict triangle (Galtung, 1996), and brief descriptions of conflict styles, similar to those proposed by Thomas-Killman (Trippe & Baumoel, 2015). The material however has very little theory on psychological aspects of conflict and lacks scientific references.

Probationary training
One substantial part of the training to be a police officer in Sweden is the probationary training period. During their probationary training, students are employed by the Swedish Police Authority and bear the title of police trainee. As trainees they have the same authority as graduated police officers, i.e. the right to bear arms, to use force, etc., but only when on duty.

During the probationary period, trainees are required to work in different areas of the authority such as patrol duties and investigative work. When on duty, trainees work together with instructors who have a one-day training in which the criteria for assessment are covered. Instructors are assigned with regards to personal suitability for the task (Swedish National Police Board, 2009). The trainees are also assigned a supervisor who has the overarching responsibility for the trainee and who has passed an eight-week training course. This responsibility includes regular supervisory meetings with the trainee where feedback is given regarding performance and goal compliance. The supervisor is also required to have a continuous dialogue with the instructors with whom the trainee works closely with, in order to assess the abilities and knowledge of the trainee. The supervisor is responsible for the final assessment of the trainee (Swedish National Police Board, 2009).

At the end of the six-month period, trainees are graded pass or fail. Those who fail can either get an extension to prove their abilities further or they can be separated from duty. An extended probationary period is given as a result of the instructor’s judgment on a variety of skills and abilities such as ability to show initiative, ability to problem-solve and be flexible, tactical skills, and handling of tools such as navigation and communication equipment.

Theoretical framework
In the following section, the theoretical framework for the study will be established. Starting with establishing a working definition of conflict, the specifics of police involved conflict and conflict management will be elaborated upon.
Conflict

Although depictions of conflict date back to ancient, biblical times, the formal study of conflict and conflict resolution (the original term used) is a relatively novel field, situated in a cross-disciplinary environment including apparently disparate disciplines such as social psychology, ethology and political science to name but a few (Aureli & de Waal, 2000; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2016).

Within the field, there are several definitions of conflict. While the definitions differ, many of the definitions used in the field however share some commonalities. Firstly, conflict is often viewed as an inevitable or at least common part of the life of any group living organism, where competition over resources or harmonization of goals and values and are a universal feature of human societies (Aureli & de Waal, 2000; Elgoibar, Euwema, & Munduate, 2017; Ramsbotham et al., 2016). Also, conflict is commonly referred to as being either intrapersonal and/or interpersonal, with interpersonal conflicts occurring between individuals or groups (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). Intrapersonal conflicts on the other hand are conflicts that occur within a person and can be related to, for example: moral issues, feelings of inferiority, or motivation, creating a tension between what a person wants to do and their beliefs on what they should do (O’Connor et al., 2002; Tymofieva, 2016). While intra- and interpersonal conflicts here are discussed as separate constructs, it is important to note that interpersonal conflicts, more often than not have an internal root (O’Connor et al., 2002).

Furthermore, conflict, as a construct, can be analyzed in terms of what drives the conflict. One very influential model is Galtung’s model of conflict, violence and peace, sometimes referred to as the conflict triangle that was proposed by Johan Galtung (1996). In Galtung’s model, conflicts can be viewed as a triangle with A(titudes), B(ehaviors) and C(ontradictions).

In this model, Galtung divides the triangle into two levels, one that is latent and that may be subconscious (A & C) and one that is manifest and conscious (B) (Galtung, 1996). With this distinction it follows that conflicts can be present not only at the manifest level, but may well be located only at the latent level with attitudes and contradictions being latent and subconscious. Galtung also defines conflicts as symmetrical or asymmetrical where symmetrical conflicts are defined by the parties and their incompatibilities. In asymmetrical conflicts the conflict is instead defined by the relationship between the parties (Ramsbotham et al., 2016). Finally, depending on the nature of the conflicts and how they are handled, intrapersonal- as well as interpersonal conflicts can facilitate growth or change, but they can also have severely a destructive effect (Deutsch, 1994).

Police-specific conflict and conflict-management

Many of the theories of conflict-management and resolution are derived from conflict studies set in an interstate or international setting, for example negotiating peace among nations at war. Within the field, the terms conflict-resolution, transformation, engagement and management are equally viable as suffixes (Avruch, 2013). We argue however, similarly as Elgoibar et al. (2017) that there should be a differentiation between the terms not least in the specific context of police-related studies and education. While the difference could be argued to be of a merely semantic nature and there are many generic factors at play in conflicts, certain specifics of conflicts in a police context need to be addressed in order to enhance the training and understanding of the topic. This clarification is therefore necessary, and the choice of suffix can influence the conflict behaviors of officers and should not be arbitrary. While for example, Wallensteen (2012, p. 13) points out that “conflicts are solvable”, in the context of police conflict management – for the individual officer an unrealistic
view on the possibility of solving conflicts in the moment, can actually lead to negative conflict management behaviors.

While it certainly is possible for police officers to resolve conflicts, the nature of many of the conflicts that police officers are faced with (especially patrolling officers responding to emergency calls) makes it difficult to resolve them in the moment. For example: officers are often in “ongoing battles” such as domestic disputes, that may have a long history with many layers (Geerinck & Stark, 2003). The actions of the officers to handle the conflict can therefore be viewed as a third-party intervention (Ramsbotham et al., 2016). However, in contrast to traditional between-state negotiations, officers rarely have much information about the conflict and the full history and scope of it. Further, officers may be unwelcomed by one or more conflicting parties, especially if called to the scene by witnesses or others (Geerinck & Stark, 2003). Another important aspect that is crucial to fully understanding the challenges of police conflict management, is the contexts in which police officers are called to intervene. In many situations the officers are faced with managing conflicts in situations that are not only unpredictable and uncontrollable, but that also are situated in sub-optimal conditions including darkness, new environments and various distractions such as bystanders and noise (Andersen & Gustafberg, 2016).

As mentioned above, an unrealistic expectation to solve conflicts can lead to officers employing non-constructive ways to handle the conflicts by attempting to “solve” the conflict. In police-involved conflicts there will almost always be an inherent asymmetry, such as that stipulated by Galtung that comes into play, both in terms of quantitative and qualitative measures where the police more often than not is the “top-dog”. If looking at police-involved conflicts through a game-theoretical perspective, i.e. “winning or losing”, the police has the power and the mandate to “always win” by using various legitimate coercive measures, including violence if necessary. This asymmetry could lead to less motivation to find ways of co-operation, and officers are also limited by legislation and expectations in terms of how they can bargain in negotiations; the conflicts are thereby “locked” (Jordan, 2015) and a competitive climate could easily be created. This in turn calls for all stakeholders to rethink pay-offs by altering and/or reframing them as a common problem and to minimize the dysfunction of the conflict rather than solving it (Elgoibar et al., 2017; Ramsbotham et al., 2016). Given that one key element in constructive conflict management such as this is building trust (Elgoibar et al., 2017), forcing a solution to a conflict can have adverse effects on the long term outcome.

**Aim**

In summary, despite the importance of solid conflict management and communication skills, the area appears to need further research to enhance the training of police officers and to provide a scientifically based conflict management base of knowledge.

The overall aim of this study is therefore to increase knowledge of how police officers define conflict and conflict management and how they perceive their training in conflict management, in relation to previous experiences, in-school training and their probationary training.

**Methods**

**Study design and setting**

This qualitative study is based on interviews conducted with police trainees from three universities in Sweden that provide basic training for police officers. A qualitative perspective
was chosen because the aim was to explore police trainees’ perceptions of conflict management in relation to themselves and their probationary training.

Given the aim of the study, interviews provide a sensitive yet powerful way of grasping the respondent’s subjective experiences of the phenomena (Bryman, 2018). Several factors were considered when deciding upon semi-structured interviews. For one, the relatively large number of respondents and condensed focus made semi-structured interviews suitable (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews enable comparisons between the respondents while still allowing for a dynamic and flexible interview situation (Bryman, 2018). An interview guide was prepared before the interviews, with nine open-ended questions, focusing on the experiences of the respondents and a number of possible follow-up questions. Besides questions on the experiences of the respondents, the respondents were also asked questions about how they define conflict and conflict management. The intention of the guide was to enable comparisons between respondents, providing broad themes for the interviews.

Sample and data collection
Interviews were conducted from January 15 to April 19, 2019. Twelve respondents were male and eight were female, and they spanned in age from 23 to 38 years. The respondents were selected using a combination of convenience- and snowball sampling. To be included in the study, police trainees needed to meet the following criteria: (a) having completed their pre-probationary training at Umeå University, the Linnaeus University in Växjö, or Södertörn University in Stockholm (as these where the only ones which had graduated students at the time of the study), (b) having completed their probationary training with a pass or fail grade, and (c) being able to participate in the study. The reason for including individuals from all three schools was the previously mentioned fact that the curriculum provided by the Swedish Police is written in broad terms, and that how the training is conducted could differ between the schools. The distribution of students between the academies was Umeå (n= 11), Växjö (n= 4) and Södertörn (n= 5).

Initially trainees were randomly selected from a list that included information about what area they had been posted to as probationary officers, thus enabling a geographic spread as well as diversity in terms of city size. The areas included ranged from southern Sweden, to the north and included metropolitan, urban and rural areas. Using the aforementioned snowball sampling, the respondents were also in conjunction with their interviews, asked if they could provide contact information for other officers who met the inclusion criteria, who were then contacted and asked to participate. When asking respondents for contact information to other officers, gender, which academy they had received their training in, and in the case of the metropolitan areas, which patrolling district they had done their probationary training in, were considered. For example, the question to the respondent could then be asked as follows: “Do you know of a female officer that went to Södertörn University who could participate in the study?”

Interviews
Interviews were conducted in face-to-face meetings with twelve of the respondents. The remaining eight respondents were interviewed by telephone. All interviews were conducted by the first author. While some researchers argue that face-to-face interviews are superior to interviews conducted over the phone, phone interviews enabled a larger geographical spread of respondents and provided solutions to logistical hurdles that otherwise would
have been difficult to overcome (Drabble, Trocki, Salcedo, Walker, & Korcha, 2016). Initially Skype interviews were tested, but due to technical difficulties (poor Internet connections, no access to computer for example) among the respondents, phone-based interviews were used instead. In advance of the interviews, all participants were sent an information letter as well as a written consent form. In all interviews, time and attention were paid to establishing a rapport and clearing up any questions with the respondents, not least given that this has been proven to be a factor that enhances the quality of interviews (Drabble et al., 2016). All interviews were recorded and lasted 30–60 minutes, with no significant difference in length or volume of information between interviews conducted over the phone or face-to-face (mean time: 36.8 and 38 minutes respectively).

Data analysis
Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data in order to search for patterns in the data. To solidify the methodological process, the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used. These guidelines consist of five phases. First, a familiarization of the data was obtained by reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews. Second, a summary of each interview was created to aid in the discussion of the data and to enable broader themes to be identified as well as to become more familiarized with the data. All transcripts were then imported to the NVivo 12 software where the initial phase of coding began. After the initial coding, the initial development of themes was done. Third, in accordance with the recommendation of Braun and Clarke (2006), a mind-map was created to aid in the data analysis process and the relationship between the codes began to be established. The themes were in part defined by the research questions in the study, but also by using the theoretical framework and the analysis from the previous phases. In phase four, the themes were reviewed, and in phase five, the themes that had been defined through the subsequent phases were named and finalized. Finally, the data was discussed by the authors, comparing conclusions and thoughts about the interviews and the themes that were created in the processes.

One of the advantages of using thematic analysis is that it is suitable for highlighting similarities as well as differences in perspectives (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). While it is important to note that, just as the education sites, instructors and teachers all have their unique characteristics, so do the officers interviewed. It is however, beyond the scope and aim of this article to examine the differences of the individual respondents; instead we focus on the differences and similarities in their perspectives.

Results
Views of conflict and conflict management
Overall, the respondents gave very short and general definitions of what conflict is when asked directly. One representative example of this was a respondent who gave the following definition: “A conflict is when two people disagree. You have different opinions on different subjects and a conflict arises” (Respondent 11). Two of the respondents gave definitions that included intrapersonal as well as interpersonal conflict, the remainder of the respondents’ defined conflict in terms of solely inter-personal conflicts. One of these exemplified this concretely by saying how conflicts can arise within oneself when forced to act in discord with one’s beliefs: “… maybe I have an inner conflict with myself, it could be that you are expected to act in a certain way but it does not feel right inside or feels the wrong way around” (Respondent 1). The other respondent exemplified intrapersonal conflict through a specific
situation, namely delivering a message that a person had died. When asked what such a conflict would consist of, the respondent elaborated that the intrapersonal conflict would consist of a person not wanting to believe: "Some do not want to believe. They think that you have gone to the wrong door. That becomes sort of a conflict. Not too aggressive, but still" (Respondent 9). Most of the definitions included various ways in which conflict can manifest itself, for example, that conflicts can be verbal and/or physical. However, one respondent stood out in this respect, saying that to him as a police officer conflict is some sort of a physical altercation:

Well, for me a conflict is when it gets physical … when you have to intervene physically, like grapple someone to the ground or use some sort of a weapon: baton, OC (pepper spray), or in the worst case your gun […] Very few people do not listen to the police when it comes to wrangling if you speak up […] But conflict for me … when I think of conflict it is directly something physical. (Respondent 4).

Definitions of conflict management were also short and described in general terms. One salient feature in many of the respondents’ answers was a desire to resolve the conflict rather than just manage it. For example, one respondent said, “For me it is about solving a situation” (Respondent 20), while another said: “Conflict management is… a way of solving these problems, I think. It is different ways of solving a problem” (Respondent 18). Or as one respondent put it: “Well, it’s about how you solve conflicts, of course. Conflict management, it’s self-explanatory” (Respondent 7). The omission of intrapersonal conflicts was also somewhat evident when the respondents recounted conflict situations that had resonated with them, where a large proportion described that the reason for the conflicts was because of choices made by the persons they interacted with, and that there was little that the officers could do to change the outcome of the situation. For example, one respondent described a situation when the police used force against a 15-year-old girl, when assisting the child psychiatric services in moving the girl from one care-unit to another. The respondent had said to the girl: “you decide what the outcome will be now, either you go with us voluntarily or we will bring you out.’ And so it was. We had to carry her out” (Respondent 1).

The respondents were asked to elaborate on conflict situations that had stuck with them during their time on duty, and a wide variety of different types of cases were recalled. Interestingly, one respondent (Respondent 16), who worked in a “Particularly vulnerable area” described that he had not had any conflicts during his probationary training. He did explain that he had been in situations where people in affect had screamed at him or similar, but said that to him this was not a conflict. Instead, he would listen to the person screaming and let them have their say, then he would tell them calmly, “Now I’ve listened to you, now you listen to me”, which he felt was a very effective way of pre-empting conflict, by addressing a need within these individuals to have their voice heard and listened to. Among the respondents there were also several examples of successful and constructive conflict management, and respondents for the most part emphasized the need for them as officers to be creative and constructive conflict managers. One respondent said that being a police officer can be a really simple job if you put aside moral issues and “act like a pig”, because you have a lawful right to use force, you usually outnumber the people you intervene with and you have your weapons. However, he further emphatically said that that was not the officer he wanted to be, and that most of the officers he had worked with seemed to share that notion [respondent 6].

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1. An area defined by the Swedish Police as particularly exposed to criminality [Swe. Särskilt utsatt område].
Perceptions of conflict-management training

The description of perceptions of conflict-management training is divided into two different sections: in-school training and probationary training.

In-school training

Overall, the respondents seemed very satisfied with the training they received in POLKON during their time at school. Knowledgeable teachers and a strong connection to their (then) future work were central in the respondents’ overall perceptions of the POLKON subjects, along with the fact that these subjects were not perceived to be too abstract. Also taking part in the experiences of primarily the teachers with a police background were seen as positive. As for negative perceptions of conflict-management training, the opposite was also evident. Where respondents referred to inadequacies in their training, these were largely attributed to individual teachers rather than to the system itself or the training as a whole. As with their overall perception of the training in conflict management, the respondents also felt that the application of their skills overall worked well and that the skills and knowledge gained during their in-school training, was mostly in line with what they later applied during their probationary training.

There were also examples of respondents referring to the content of the training as well as the desired approaches. One example was a seeming lack of practical training in situations that did not escalate, i.e. situations where the use of force was not necessary or where the conflict could be managed with verbal communication. As one respondent put it: “In school it was always the worst situations we trained for” (Respondent 16), or as Respondent 7 put it:

[In school] often when we work in cases, then we work with cases that are completely insane. There is often some axe-murderer running towards your car or a regular LOB 2 ends up with something crazy with handcuffs and foot restraints and pepper spray and all. It’s very rare that we train for the cases where people actually listen to the police. Because those types of cases happen as well. Everyone doesn’t hate the police or want to be mean… you were almost surprised when you started working and you talked to people who actually listened.

A similar view was expressed by Respondent 10:

In school everything is so hyped-up. You always go forward, spraying and holding people. You have a great base to stand on, but [on duty] you don’t use those things as much… I’ve had very few situations where I’ve had to go in and hold on to people, but those times it felt so natural because then I’ve brought it with me from school, that in the beginning you feel a little like it’s supposed to be that way. That you grab on to people and that you should use your spray.

One respondent even thought that she in a way was a less efficient conflict manager after she had received training on the subject than before going through training. The respondent had previously worked in a caregiving setting in which she would use communication such as talking or making jokes. Now, having trained using tools of coercive force and the knowledge that if she did not succeed in communication, she could always solve the situation using force, it affected her communicative skills. The respondent viewed this as something negative, as it clashed with her willingness to solve conflicts without using force.

While the respondents acknowledged the need to train for these scenarios as well, and did not necessarily want to exclude them from their training, they clearly identified a gap

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2. LOB = Abbreviation for a law that allows police to detain people due to intoxication.
between their later professional practice and their training. Another example was that the respondents appreciated the theory on conflict management and related subjects, but they identified a need for practical application and integration of the theories that were presented. Also, given the focus on conflict theory, a lack of feedback on the topic was expressed in conjunction with practical case work.

Along the same lines, more communicative practice seemed to be a perceived gap in their training. In this regard there were discernible differences between the respondents, seemingly related to which school they attended. Some respondents emphasized that they had received training on the subject, putting forward seminars and workshops dealing with nonverbal communication and paralinguistic training. These training efforts were also put forward as being among the efforts that resulted in the most impressions and that they learned the most from, although they too wanted more practical training. This was, as mentioned above, especially true in scenarios where they could use this training without using force as well. Some of the respondents were, however, much more critical of the communicative part of their training, saying “The training on communication, it sucks, it is non-existent… Not one single time did we have an exercise where we actually were supposed to talk and make things right” (Respondent 13). “Communicatively, it was lacking. It was a lot like you were just expected to be able to talk to people, maybe you should when you apply to the police academy, but I would still have wanted more” (Respondent 14).

Finally, some respondents reported problems with getting a grip on why certain skills and knowledge would be important for their future work, and they did not understand their importance until the end of the training or even during their probationary training.

Among the POLKON subjects, the training in mental preparedness stood out in this regard. A number of the respondents said that they used these skills to a large extent in their present work, but that they had a hard time grasping the subject while in school.

Probationary training
When the respondents contemplated their time in probationary training, it seemed that their experience was largely dependent on not only what city they were placed in, but also what police district, and even who they had as an instructor played a large role. One respondent described his probationary training as “horrible, disgusting, I wanted to quit…” (Respondent 6). After the respondent was given a fail grade and he was given an extended probation period, he received a new instructor and was told by his new instructor that he was on a pass-level after only two weeks.

The dual role of the instructor – as a support as well as an examiner – became evident in some of the answers where a need to “please” the instructor resulted in certain behaviors to achieve this, despite this perhaps not being the preferred choice. Most respondents felt that they were allowed to stay true to their own methods of conflict management. As one of the respondents put it: “You are allowed to be who you are… They encourage you to be a thinking individual, an independent person with your own opinions” (Respondent 16). On the other hand, one respondent reported changing his behavior in a conflict situation, using force, in part to show his instructor that he was capable of this (Respondent 12):

I mean, I’d read the criteria. So, they were somewhere in the back of your head all the time. Shit, I have to show my instructors that I can make decisions and that I can grab a hold of people and use the techniques… It was probably the first time that I had a chance to show this instructor that I was capable of this part too. So, I probably took the chance. Yes, I made a quicker decision to show the instructor that he can assess me on this part too…
Another respondent (Respondent 6) had been given feedback that he needed to be more dominant and scream at people, regardless of the dignity of the situation “So I screamed at a drunkard at some point; I thought that it was completely absurd, but I did it because the instructor told me to. Then the instructor was really happy”. Yet another respondent (Respondent 3) reported that he received feedback during his probationary period that he needed to be faster and more effective, not least in terms of conflict management, and he understood that “conflict management was about…it is 100% dominance wherever you are. It works. It does. Sometimes the situations get ‘rougher’ than need be, but I’m thinking of how seldom it did. So, it works, and it’s time-effective.” After reportedly changing his behavior to be more effective, the respondent received a passing grade after a month-long extension.

The transformation to being a police officer

Despite their fairly short time on duty at the time of the interviews, several respondents already expressed that they had been “naïve” before they started working as police officers and that their view of not only people, but also for some, society as a whole had changed. Respondents said, for example, that they had become “…perhaps a bit more cynical. I used to be more naïve and credulous, but that picture has changed, unfortunately” (Respondent 9). Others said that they had become quicker to judge people: “If I have to choose between thinking the best of people or being on my guard, I think I am more on my guard now” (Respondent 14).

Also, respondents reported having become more prejudiced “I feel primarily that I have more prejudices, that a lot of people lie” (Respondent 11), or that their view had become “colored” by meeting the “bad side” of society all the time, which “can lead to becoming a little prejudiced to certain categories, while I of course know that it is not true for everyone [in the category] (Respondent 19). For some of the respondents, their previous experience in similar lines of work had in various ways had an effect on their view of other people. One respondent, who formerly worked in a jail said “You lose a bit of your faith in humanity. You feel a disappointment that these people will probably continue [committing crimes] when they get out. It might be a little judgmental, for better or worse” (Respondent 5). Another respondent, with a similar experience but who had worked in a prison, on the contrary said that working closely with clients over longer stretches of time, in part by investigating their life stories, had made it easier for her to understand the mechanics of why people act in certain ways “Even though the crimes were horrible, you still could understand why they ended up where they did” (Respondent 17). As for a changed view on society, this change was largely due to an appreciation of the poor living situations people have and how many who suffer from poor mental health do not get any help “What kind of society is this? We are not helping the ones who need all the help that they can get” (Respondent 15).

One exception to this change to a more negative view was Respondent 12 who had amassed lengthy experience working as a security guard and who appreciated life more now that he had greater insight into the misery of others:

I think I have begun to value my own existence and what I have. I mean, you’ve met people that have had the worst days of their lives: sexual or violent crimes and so on. You go to the homes of addicts and others, conduct search warrants, and you see their living conditions. Then you come home to your own place. I am more grateful for what I have today.
Discussion
The overall aim of this study was to increase knowledge of how police officers define conflict and conflict management and how they perceive their training in conflict management, in relation to previous experiences, in-school training and their probationary training. In the following section, some of the findings from the analysis of the data will be accounted for and discussed.

Perceptions and definitions of conflict and conflict management
A first important finding to emerge from this study is that the respondents’ perceptions of conflict and conflict management were rather uncomplicated and general. For example, focusing mostly on interpersonal aspects of conflicts. One consequence of this might be that they will miss the different characteristics of a conflict, i.e. that a conflict can occur on the individual, group, and/or societal levels and can be both intrapersonal and interpersonal as well as latent or manifested. One possible caveat of not giving thought to the underlying aspects of interpersonal conflicts could be an excessive focus on observable behaviors (Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Galtung, 1996). Hence, they seemed to simplify the concept of conflict to dealing with resolving the conflict rather than focusing on managing the conflict and limiting its dysfunction, thereby perhaps pressing on to a “solution” that is negative for all involved. As stated by among others Elgoibar, Euwema, and Munduate (2017) a conflict does not need to be destructive, but to make a constructive experience from conflict, conflict needs to be managed in an adequate way. In other words, when the knowledge of the complexity of a conflict is lost, consequently conflict management might suffer. There is a risk that focusing too much on resolving a conflict will make the conflict management ineffective and unconstructive.

Tackling the complexity of police-involved conflicts
Along the same lines, police officers are often called upon by someone else to go to an already heated conflict between other people (Geerinck & Stark, 2003) involving multiple layers with the attitudes, behaviors and contradictions described by Galtung (1996) coming in to play. Officers are expected to handle this, and if the situation demands it, officers are obliged to interfere with coercive measures if necessary. Although individual officers can theoretically be aware that the police cannot resolve a long-standing conflict in a relatively short interaction, the respondents seemed to overestimate their ability to do so. The nature of policing is solution-focused, and patrol officers often traditionally choose force (Cooper, 1997; Price, 2016), which according to Elgoibar, Euwema, and Munduate (2017) implies that one party aims to achieve his or her goal by imposing a solution on the other party. Consequently, the current situation is solved, but new problems might have been generated due to the confrontation. Many times, in policing the situation does not leave any other choices than to impose solutions in a manner such as this. One salient example of an effect of this, was the respondent that implied that in some ways she might have been a better conflict manager before she had the option of using coercive force.

Worst-case scenarios and its effects on conflict-management behavior
A second important finding is the respondents’ perceptions of a focus on worst-case scenarios during conflict-management training in school. This perceived focus is in line with the findings from Holgersson (2018). If the students perceive that the training is mainly focused on violent and extreme situations, there is a risk that the police will act as though
all situations are dangerous even though they are not. When officers anticipate a high level of resistance, they will likely use more force at an earlier stage. Also, it is rare that already at the beginning of an interaction, violence is met with violence, rather situations tend to escalate and officers then try to be proactive and preempt with regard to the use of force (Klukkert, Ohlemacher, & Feltes, 2009). The respondents wanted training in more ordinary situations without excluding training in worst-case scenarios. While the limited time available to students and teachers during basic training, and the inherent complexity of the job certainly does not allow the students to prepare for every possible situation, using new ways of training could provide this opportunity. Even if the perceived focus on worst-case scenarios would only be the view of a limited number of officers and students, the possible negative repercussions of this, as mentioned above, warrants that this finding is examined further. Without changing the contents of the education, merely emphasizing more clearly that certain parts of the training are in fact worst-case scenarios that are relevant to train on even though they are less likely to occur on a frequent basis, if at all, could be beneficial.

The role of instructors in development of perceptions and behaviors
A third important finding is that the police trainees are partly dependent on experienced and knowledgeable supervisors/instructors in order to develop adaptive conflict management strategies. One example of this in our findings was that some of the respondents received feedback from FTOs to be more dominant, even in situations that seemingly could have been handled with less forceful (i.e. more accommodating) behavior. Contrary to this Sun (2003), discusses the possibility that more skilled police officers might be more willing to engage in a greater range of conflict-management behaviors because of confidence in their ability to handle conflicts. Further, Sun (2003) argues that without skills and knowledge regarding conflicts there is a risk that police officers become too dependent on force in conflict situations. This in turn might lead to an increase in provocations against citizens and by extension lead to mistrust and a potential increase in future conflicts (Lersch & Mieczkowski, 2005; Todak & White, 2019; Van Dijk et al., 2015). In a study conducted among police officers in rural areas in the U.S., Tetting (2010) found that an accommodating conflict management style could be explained by the educational attainment of the officer. In other words, with higher education the police officers were more likely to neglect their own needs in order to satisfy the needs of others. A possible explanation for excessively forceful conflict-management behavior might be due to insecure and inexperienced police officers acting as supervisors for the trainees. This is in line with results from a previous study by Bergman, Karp and Widding (2018), in which the complexity of the instructors’ role was identified by instructors as a possibility to grow both professionally as well as personally. However, lack of training among the instructors, and selecting inexperienced instructors was associated with negative spirals of collective learning, limiting the possibility to see the whole picture in terms of police work.

The trainees will inevitably be exposed to both positive and negative role models in terms of conflict management behavior while on probationary training. In our results we could see examples of both officers that seemingly accommodated unconstructive behaviors such as 100% dominance, as well as officers that showed great restraint and instead went through months of “hell” and were given a fail grade, rather than changing their belief or resorting to unconstructive behavior. One problem with dominant behaviors such as those described is that while they might provide short term “solutions” to problems that officers are faced with, the long term effects are not necessarily as positive. Extant research on the topic for example shows that the long-term effects on perceptions of important fac-
tors such as credibility, competence, trust and affinity are primarily negative (Carney, Hall, & LeBeau, 2005; Dunbar & Abra, 2010; Koppensteiner, Stephan, & Jäschke, 2016; Rezlescu et al., 2015; Schmid Mast, Hall, & Roter, 2008). This does not mean that officers should never be dominant, in fact the ability to be dominant can be essential (Costa, as cited in Otu, 2015). However, the level of dominance has to be adapted to the context and situation at hand to have positive long terms effects and is not a viable one-size fits all solution for conflict management (Carrard, Schmid Mast, & Cousin, 2016).

The possible negative effects of accommodating behaviors such as those displayed by some of the instructors are perhaps obvious, but one possible negative effect that stands out in this context is lack of collaborative conflict-management skills. According to Elgoibar, Euwema and Munduate (2017), authorities (someone with authority over another party, i.e. parent over child or police over citizens) should intervene or take over the conflict (for example by using dominant behaviors) only as a last resort in cases of immediate threat, and can instead act as an escalator for the process of conflict resolution or as a facilitator. This strategy, of refraining from decision-making in place of the conflicting parties can improve the conflict management skills of the parties that officers come in contact with and can impose upon the parties an acceptance of responsibility, both for the conflict and for ways to end it. To achieve this might require a combination of conflict-management behaviors that focus on collaborative conflict management. Hence, collaborative conflict management can lead to trust, which is tightly and positively related to constructive conflict resolution in the long-term (Bijlsma & Koopman, 2003; Hempel, Zhang, & Tjosvold, 2009; Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006).

Changes in perceptions of society and people
A fourth important finding is that several respondents reported having changed their view of other people to a more negative and cynical view. Respondents stated that they were “naive” before they became officers and that they had more prejudiced views, only a short time after completing their training. This is not necessarily something negative but could be seen as a process of maturation. It could merely be a sign that the respondents, during their probationary training witness firsthand some of the harsh realities of what happens around us all, albeit most people never have to confront it directly. However, this change in their view of other people could have negative repercussions as they continue their careers. The views displayed by the respondents might be early signs of depersonalization, especially if left unaddressed. Depersonalization has been proven to have negative effects in human service work, with deterring effects on interactions with the community (Euwema et al., 2004; Hesketh, Cooper, & Ivy, 2019). In terms of conflict management behaviors, this change in their view of their world will inevitably affect their attitudes and presumptions, which when analyzed through Galtung’s (1996) model, can both trigger conflicts as well as influence their behavior when managing conflict. Thus, there might be an increased risk of poor mental health depending on personality and previous experiences, and the combination of demanding police work and insufficient conflict management training might further increase this risk.

Limitations
One limitation of this study is that our results are based on individual interviews with one cohort of police trainees and conducting this study in another cohort might have yielded different results. Also, using a fully random or clustered sample, could have provided a
wider spread and more diverse sample that would enable more generalizable results. However, in this study we wanted to explore the perceptions of the officers, more specifically in their role of students and during probationary training. The results from the interviews are the subjective experiences, retrospectively recalled, on both their own actions as well as by their teachers during in-school training. Conducting interviews with other agents involved, could have provided other insights and interpretations of the events described by the respondents. However, despite these limitations, the analysis of the interviews in this study can provide valuable insight into the perceptions and experience of police officers in training, and can provide a basis for further research into this relatively uncharted area of research.

Conclusions

This study has shown perceptions of conflict and conflict management, that appear to be general and that might have an effect on Swedish police trainees’ conflict-management strategies. They seem to focus on conflict resolution, even though many of the conflicts they encounter cannot be solved in the moment.

The results of this study also suggest that there could be, at least a perceived over-exaggerated focus on worst-case scenarios, with regards to in-school training for police officers in Sweden. Also, the results suggest that the respondents perceived a need for more practical training in communication and conflict management, in more mundane, everyday situations. While practicing for both worst case and more mundane situations is necessary and practicing one, could improve capabilities in the other, the perceived exaggerated focus on worst case scenarios could have negative effects on conflict management behavior.

In line with extant research on the subject, the results in this study also highlight the complexity involved with being an FTO for officers in probationary training. Navigating not only the “normal” complexities that come with being a police officer, they also have to create a positive learning environment, make assessments of the officers they are training and lead by example. While most instructors appear to handle this well, some less positive examples were also put forward by respondents. Even if the less positive examples of instructorship are isolated cases, the negative effects of officers adapting unconstructive conflict behaviors such as “100% dominance”, are serious enough that they warrant further attention. To give the FTOs better prerequisites to perform their tasks, a longer and more comprehensive training, similar to that of probationary training supervisors, could be a feasible way forward.

The study has also shown what appears to be an accelerated maturation process, in which the respondents, despite a fairly short time at work, reported that they were less naive but also more cynical than before their probationary training. Further research, for example using a longitudinal research design, could provide deeper insight into this process and possible interventions to avoid the development of depersonalization among police officers. Finally, this study has shown that different mechanisms seem to affect the police trainees’ learning in conflict-management training, where personality can be seen as a mediator in these processes. Therefore, one direction that needs to be examined more closely is the links between conflict management and personality.
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