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Keesman, Laura D.; Weenink, Don

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Feel it Coming: Situational Turning Points in Police-Civilian Encounters

Laura D. Keesman & Don Weenink*

Abstract: »Fühle es Kommen: Situative Wendepunkte bei Begegnungen zwischen Polizei und Bürgern«. Studies of antagonistic interactions, specifically in policing, frequently view (de)escalation as a linear process without considering how officers perceive and anticipate interactional processes. We argue however that officers perceive tense encounters with civilians as characterized by a back-and-forth going of various trajectories, goals, and directions. Based on our interactionist and ethnomethodological conceptualization of interactional trajectories, we analyse 25 video interviews and 46 elicitation interviews. Our analysis focuses on officers' interpretations of "turning points," e.g., sudden shifts in their own, their colleagues', or civilians' bodily behaviour that redirect their projected trajectories and which necessitate police action, sometimes violence. This article moves beyond a purely situational understanding of police-civilian encounters by incorporating officers' accounts of their experiences and bodily actions, as elicited by watching video recordings of police-civilian encounters. We argue that our conceptualization of trajectories and turnings points as well as our video-based interview method shed light on the importance of bodily action police-civilian encounters; maintaining public order is to anticipate and redirect perceived turning points that potentially disturb routinized patterns of bodily actions.

Keywords: Policing, situational analysis, turning points, video elicitation, police-civilian encounters, qualitative methods, sociology of violence, micro-sociology.

* Laura D. Keesman (Corresponding Author), Department of Sociology, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; l.keesman@uva.nl.
Don Weenink, Department of Sociology, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; d.weenink@uva.nl.
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1. Introduction

A tradition of US based research has attempted to understand the factors that turn police-civilian encounters into forceful events. Police studies often view these encounters as binary social interactions “that can either escalate towards or de-escalate away from the use of force” (Wolfe et al. 2020). To uncover the factors that predict the use of force (Crawford and Burns 2008),¹ scholars focus on officers’ decision-making processes (Bolger 2015), occupational attitudes and police culture (Terrill, Paoline III, and Manning 2003), and suspect resistance and demeanour (Dai, Frank, and Sun 2011). This tradition has provided compelling evidence that civilians’ resistance is a major “factor” that leads up to police violence (Hine et al. 2016; Willits and Makin 2018).

In a time where highly publicized police brutality cases have caused tremendous controversy and public concern over the past years, the study of police-civilian encounters contributes to answer to the increasing societal demands for more oversight and accountability (Dunham and Alpert 2021). This paper contributes to this tradition in two ways. First, studies of police-civilian encounters tend to adopt a linear way of thinking about escalation, implying that tense situations at some point “change for the worse,” i.e., contain a specific identifiable “turning point” into police violence. Instead, we view these interactions as contingent, characterized by a back-and-forth in different directions, comprising intermittent phases, moments of de-escalation, rising tension, and minor violent acts that may or may not lead to further escalation. Consequently, officers may perceive several, and sometimes contrasting, “turning points,” which can lead to disalignment between officers. Second, the tradition of research into police-civilian encounters mostly does not take into account that officers’ actions consist of a world of intentions, perceptions, and goals, or in other words, that officers give meaning to the situation at hand. Third, the tradition has neglected the role that bodily action plays in police-civilian encounters. This is a lacuna because so much of officers’ behaviour is learnt bodily behaviour (Keesman 2021a).

We consider police-civilian encounters as trajectories. The concept of trajectories captures how officers act upon each other’s and each other’s and civilians’ actions to project a direction for the situation to take. This projecting is part of a communicative process in which each action, as a response to what happened before, is both a retrospective account of the previous action and a projection of the direction for next actions to take. The notion of

¹ Criminological and sociological studies usually prefer the term “police use of force” instead of “violence.” Stoughton (2021, 322) argues “violence” describes more accurately what police officers are expected to do when they must stop civilians from doing something or compel them to do something they are not doing. The officers in this study use the terms interchangeably.

trajectories allows to do justice to the role of interpretative processes and bodily action as well as to the contingent nature of police-civilian encounters. Departing from this, we inquire into the moments at which police officers perceive sudden redirections of the interactional trajectory that require them to take (violent) action. What, according to them, constitutes a “turning point”? And how do officers anticipate and respond to them?

We rely on 25 video interviews and 46 elicitation interviews with mainly patrol police officers. In the interviews, the first author asked officers to describe their interpretations of significant situational changes. The video material captured the officers in action, which enabled us to relate their meaning-making efforts to real-life encounters as they were visible on screen. While the interview data comprises “post-hoc” accounts and impression management plays a role in interviews, we think this method produces a challenging communicative form that provides detailed insights into officers’ perceptions of turning points and gives important clues about trajectories of violence.

2. On Situational Turning Points in Police-Civilian Encounters

Among the most robust and consistent findings of US-based research on police-civilian encounters is that violence by officers is influenced by situational “factors” – most notably civilians’ resistance to arrest and, to lesser extents, the seriousness of the offense, the number of officers on the scene, the presence of large audiences, whether the encounter was initiated by officers, and whether police intervened in a dispute (Dunham and Alpert 2009; Hine et al. 2018). Civilian resistance can take the form of impeding officers’ attempts to gain information, failure to respond, responding negatively to an officer’s commands and threats, or violence against officers (Stoughton 2021, 339; Terrill 2003, 57).

Most studies of police violence are based on large-scale observations in which trained observers join officers on their shifts (Todak and March 2021; Terrill 2005). The observers write field notes, which are transcribed following standardized procedures, ultimately resulting in numerical codes. The advantage here is that a-priori explanations can be evaluated in multivariable regression models while large sample sizes enable making inferences about all police-civilian encounters (although this claim needs nuance as many studies rely on a small number of neighbourhoods in just a few cities). While this approach has allowed policing scholars to produce a body of compelling evidence about the importance of what they call situational “factors” – most notably resistance by citizens (Alpert, Dunham, and Macdonald 2004, 477) –

it has come at the price of glossing over the sequential building up of bodily gestures and verbal utterances by participants in a (potentially) violent encounter. Other research has generated descriptions of the stages through which encounters proceed (Sykes and Brent 1980; Crawford and Burns 2008). However, these stages remain too general to understand how participants' behaviour emerges from acting upon each other's actions.

In Collins's (2008) micro-sociological theory of violence, emotional dominance forms the turning point toward violence in face-to-face encounters. The main idea is that people do not easily engage in violent action because they are inhibited by a barrier, consisting of what Collins calls "confrontational tension and fear" (ct/f). The turning point toward violence emerges when, after a building up of ct/f, antagonistic parties gain situational advantages that render one of them emotionally dominant. This happens when one party is vulnerable or passive or when a supportive audience encourages one party. Nassauer's (2019) study indicates that violence between police and protesters erupts after a "situational breakdown," a phase of increasing tension and fear which leaves people confused and overwhelmed. Under these conditions, situational asymmetries, such as opponents being outnumbered and/or falling down, generate emotional dominance which helps one party to overcome the emotional threshold to commit violence (Nassauer, 2019, 6-7, 168-71). In an earlier study on violent confrontations between youth, Weenink (2014) found that situational asymmetries, more specifically opponents falling down and the numerical dominance of one party's supportive group, were strongly associated with the occurrence of frenzied attacks, fierce one-sided violence in which perpetrators are solely focused on doing harm to a victim who is no longer able to pose a threat.

However, recent fine-grained analyses based on video data of violent interactions raise doubts about the role of gaining emotional dominance as a key turning point (Whitehead, Bowman, and Raymond 2018). Furthermore, the ct/f model remains linear, whereas in practice, tense situations can be characterized by multiple turning points that can either move toward or away from violence. Moreover, Collins's approach neglects how the actors involved give meaning to violence, how they project a next of line action, and how they perceive responses to their actions (Wieviorka 2014, 57). This is particularly relevant for police officers because they are bounded by legal rules and regulations, which at the same time provide an interpretative framework.

Given the limitations of prior conceptualizations, we propose a more open-ended approach that allows to do justice to the contingency of violent interactions, which may contain several turning points of various nature. We propose to perceive police-civilian interactions as trajectories. Trajectories are characterized by progressions of actions of a similar kind that are considered intelligible to the participants (i.e., when officers indicate why they start to

engage with a suspect, they start with opening remarks). Officers' acts become intelligible through their situated production: other actions preceded it or are expected to follow "as coming after what happened just before and as preceding what is expected, or proposed to happen just after (Katz in Weenink et al. 2020, 4). The actions of officers and civilians thus project an idea of how the interaction should proceed, and they can be responded to in ways that support or contest that projected future outcome. As Giddens (1984, 56) posits: "it is a necessary feature of action that, at any point in time, the agent 'could have acted otherwise': either positively in terms of attempted intervention [...], or negatively in terms of forbearance." The public order that the police are supposed to maintain is thus accomplished by bodily actions that are oriented toward collective cognitive and symbolic structures, a "shared knowledge" (Reckwitz 2002, 246) of what public order looks like. Trajectories are thus communicative processes; all actions gain retrospective and prospective meanings based on officer's cultural knowledge, which is in large part gained from informal and formal socialization (training).

We are interested in how officers perceive sudden shifts in the interactional trajectories. Abbott (2001, 250, 258) defines turning points as "short, consequential shifts that redirect a process [or path]," which introduce "the arrival and establishment of a new trajectory." He emphasizes that turning points are not necessarily linear and that they allow for potentialities and possibilities (Abbott 2001, 259). Hoebel (2014; see also Aljets and Hoebel 2017) provides a useful conceptualization of turning points, also in relation to trajectories. He notes that the coercive nature of the stability of trajectories in which action options are delimited mostly goes unnoticed, whereas the instability of turning points is mostly observed as abrupt and sometimes chaotic (Hoebel 2014, 449). Therefore, for turning points to be observed as such, they should be contrasted to what happened before and after them (Aljets and Hoebel 2017, 16f.).

Importantly, both the notions of trajectories and turning points are not only conceptual constructs, but they are part of how people experience interactions. Whereas Abbott and Hoebel focus on life courses and macro-sociological shifts respectively, we put their conceptualizations to use as a hermeneutical tool to understand how officers perceive shifts in interactional trajectories. The observation of turning points by participants occurs when they notice a change in the type of actions as compared to the actions that preceded and which they had expected to follow (cf. Hoebel 2014, 451, 455); when they become aware they are confronted with a line of actions that re-orient the interaction markedly from its prior trajectory (see also Weenink, Tuma, and Van Bruchem, forthcoming, 9). This description aligns with Abbott's "consequential shifts" that redirect towards "a new trajectory." Indeed, people "recognize doing segments in a sequence – whether beginnings, endings, turning points, phase progressions, etc. – by treating an act as a change

from a prior and coming before a subsequent action [...]. This moment's action I do as a preparation for the next and as a departure from the last" (Katz in Weenink et al. 2020, 4). Our analysis focuses on how officers perceive such sudden redirections of the interactional trajectory.

3. Methods: A Video Elicitation Approach

3.1 Data Collection and Sampling

Data for this article are drawn from 25 video interviews and 46 elicitation interviews with mainly patrol police officers who were recorded participating in a violent situation. The study is part of a larger ethnographic study into antagonistic interactions in Dutch policing, conducted by the first author. The main research sites include two police stations in two large cities, and several stations in less densely inhabited, i.e., rural areas. During fieldwork, access to watching videos was established. Videos included body-worn camera footage, CCTV, local media coverage, and bystander videos uploaded online. There is no standard practice for storing video recordings of violent situations within the Dutch police organization, which means some police stations had videos available on site on computers while others did not. As a consequence, interviews occurred with videos from various sources because the availability varied depending upon the police station. The first author selected videos based on whether the officers interviewed were recorded in them. Thus, in all but one interview, officers watched themselves on screen in situations they experienced. By accompanying officers during their daily work, the first author was able to build enough rapport, which allowed for discussion of recordings. Following this, the first author conducted video elicitation interviews with 28 officers, 3 females and 25 males, with an average age of 32 and 9 years of employment. Additionally, 49 officers, 14 females and 35 males with an average of 13 years of employment, were interviewed about specific violent events using other elicitation methods such as case-files. Of the 25 video interviews, six were joint interviews, with two or more officers. Joint interviews (Polak and Green 2016) are enlightening because they match the social relationships through which officers experience events. Police officers usually encounter situations in pairs, and joint interviews enable them to reflect upon shared practices and the thoughts and actions of their interaction partner. Joint interviews thus appeal to officers' collective efforts. Interviews lasted about 1 h and 45 min and were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms, voice-recording, and transcription.

The proliferation of cameras, be it CCTV, mobile phones, or body-worn cameras, has given ample opportunity to study the visual recordings of human behaviour. The use of video has thus become a widespread practice for

social science researchers (Mondada 2015), and studies into violence and de-escalation (Mosselman, Weenink, and Lindegaard 2018; Levine, Taylor, and Best 2011). However, video data analysis provides only limited insights into social meanings (Nassauer and Legewie 2018) and runs the risk of oversimplifying real-life (police) action processes into static “factors.” This study moves beyond this methodological problem by incorporating officers *in situ* collective meaning-making efforts in video elicitation interviews. Videos were used to encourage officers to explain their behaviours. The objective was not to collect comparable violent incidents or limit sampling to a specific type of source. Rather, the intention was to broaden the scope of violence caught on camera to elicit reflections. The videos used in this study thus range from tense situations that de-escalated and minor physical intervention to excessive police violence, riots, and shooting incidents. Discussing a variety of violent incidents coming from differing sources allowed officers to explain their perceptions from several angles and perspectives. For example, whereas body-worn camera footage foregrounds behaviours and movements of individual officers, CCTV captures natural settings and spatial areas. Videos encouraged officers to articulate and narrate about how they sensed situational turning points coming. Previous analysis of this data revealed that officers formulate their embodied know-how by re-performing their actions seen on video (Keesman 2021a). Moreover, video elicitation methods work well because it connects to officers’ sociability; it matches the showing and watching of videos as a frequent and natural occurrence in their daily work (Keesman 2022).

Another elicitation method that turned out to be helpful for the study of “turning points” is the use of situational drawings. The first author asked officers to draw situations to understand how they took into account their surroundings. The drawings enabled officers to explain and reflect on how they moved in space during the interaction, how they formed bodily-spatial arrangements such as taking strategic positions, and pinpoint at which locations they felt situations shifting, for example when they noticed civilians came together or dispersed. Both video elicitation and situational drawings yielded detailed accounts of officers’ perceptions of the temporal course of the situation and the emergence of turning points.

3.2 Analytical Strategy

To understand how police officers recognize, anticipate, and respond to “turning points,” we paid specific attention to significant shifts in behaviours as observed in the videos and officers’ experiences thereof. During interviews, the first author explicitly asked officers to reflect when they sensed situations “shifted,” “changed,” “turned,” or “transformed” away from the previous state of affairs. For example, situations were considered “quite

calm,” with “nothing out of the ordinary,” or “manageable,” and then officers argued something occurred that generated escalating or de-escalating processes. Common interview questions included “when did you feel the situation went in a different direction,” “what was or were the situations’ turning point(s) to you,” and “when did the situation (de)escalate according to you?” Officers also made unsolicited comments on this.

The analysis began with identifying interactional moments that officers selected as “turning points” or “triggering.” The first author coded “turning points” in the data in Atlas.ti whenever officers explicitly mentioned them and when it was clear a situation changed away from previous conditions, even though officers were not able to voice their perception of, or identify, “turning points,” while the video data indicated there were shifts in trajectories to be found, e.g., when force was initiated or, conversely, when suspects calmed down. Specific attention was paid to utterances such as “this is when/where I thought the situation was getting out of hand,” “this completely changed the situation,” “here it turned into a non-safe situation,” “when I grabbed pepper spray I noticed he became cooperative,” “when this happened I knew the situation took a turn for the worse.” Following this exploration, the first author generated a list of recurring occasions, types of situations, and interactional moments that indicated “turning points.” In the coming sections we demonstrate how officers define “situational turning points” and how they anticipate them.

4. Findings

4.1 Turning Points as Disruptions of the Temporal Structures of Policing

What are situational turning points according to police officers? How do they describe and define them? And how do turning points arise/emerge in their view? First, it is relevant to note that officers use words like “shifts,” “flipping,” “tipping- or turning points,” and “switching” or “flashing moments” to describe their awareness of changing situational dynamics. Furthermore, they describe a variety of moments as turning points. Following our officers, they appear when civilians attempt to walk or run away, engage in damaging property, call officers names, i.e., become verbally abusive, physically attack, or when officers sense an intent to attack. Walking away is considered non-compliance, and thus seen as a turning point because it disrupts officers projected trajectory. Moreover, they think vandalism displays a potential to spiral into aggression geared towards the police. Officers argue turning points arise when civilians are asked to identify themselves, are notified they will be arrested or fined, when a weapon, e.g., knife or gun is pulled, and

when officers make physical contact, that is, touch suspects' bodies, e.g., grab their wrists or attempt to put hand cuffs on. The experience that initiating arrest is often a turning point is widely shared: "the minute when arrests are initiated is always the crucial moment [expecting resistance] (Officer Vincent)." Officer Freddie also argues the situation turned for the worse when he said, "you're under arrest."

He asked, "for what?" "Because there's an order that prohibits you from being here," he asked again "for what?" "Because of the order." And then he already turned around and started walking into the other direction, pushing my colleagues" and my motorbike. When I grabbed him he tried to take off his jacket. Then you for sure know "this is going to escalate."

Freddie regards this as a turning point because his utterance changed the civilians' demeanour into non-compliance. The procedural expression "you're under arrest" proposes a certain line of action and sets in motion a trajectory of proceedings, including particular bodily acts such as handcuffing, that work towards achieving the outcome of completing the arrest. In the words of Officer Craig, "at that moment [seeing his colleague grab hold of a suspect] you know exactly what is about to happen [bodily proceedings towards cuffing]."

Our officers' accounts of "situational turning points" are characterized by three common elements. First, this is the notion of losing control; all turning points were related to a sense that suspects were not responding in the expected manner to officers' projected lines of action; that they were breaking up the routinized temporal structure of bodily actions. Second, and relatedly, all moments that were described as turning points involved perceived non-compliance on the part of civilians. Finally, officers' accounts of turning points indicate the required switching to another line of action is not so much a point of no return where there is no "coming back from." Therefore, situations can have multiple – even ambiguous and conflicting – turning points. The commonality between these moments is that they disrupt officers projected lines of action. Importantly, many policing actions are routinized, in the sense that they occur as repeated patterns of similar behaviours that follow up on each other, thus forming a temporal structure (Reckwitz 2002, 255), or, in our terms, a projected trajectory. This structure emerges from shared bodily know-how and know-when. When they fulfil their task of maintaining public order, officers follow this temporal structure, which provides them with a sense of what to do next and how to do it (Keesman 2021a). "Turning points" are then forms of behaviour that are perceived as potentially "breaking" or "shifting" officers' temporally structured action patterns. In terms of projected and then contested trajectories, Officer Reggie succinctly put it: "we wanted something and they wanted something else." This, in turn, necessitates police intervention. In the words of Officer Sidney, "the situation is different than before which means you have to change your approach." Such

utterances indicate that officers experience and process situations in terms of taking a new direction in the trajectories, involving different body actions. They understand that they “have moved out of a former pattern and onto a new trajectory” (Abbott 2001, 243).

4.2 Multiple Redirections of Trajectories and Ambiguous Turning Points

However, the projection of violent action is not a linear process but consists of a back-and-forth going, with various intermittent phases that open up the potential for situations to go otherwise. For instance, officers frequently warn civilians they may get arrested if they continue non-compliant behaviours or repeatedly push them aside in an attempt to steer them away from non-compliance, and thus prevent an arrest. That is also why not all non-compliance behaviours or police interventions, including officers’ use of violence, are considered a turning point into escalation. Instead, arresting someone with force is regarded as regular policing practice and trajectory. For example, Officer Sam argues “escalation” occurs not at the moment of using force during a “regular arrest with resistance,” but when the suspect resists *after* establishing control: “It escalates the minute he’s calm in handcuffs and then something happens, he tenses his muscles again which forces everyone to intervene, to get him on the ground *again*. That’s escalation because then you go back to the place you just came from.” Thus, to some officers, suspects’ resistance and using force does not equal escalation. These behaviours are considered an inherent part of the job, or in terms of trajectories, a commonly projected outcome. Officer Charlie also considers a suspect running away not yet as a turning point into escalation: “it escalated when he started kicking. That’s like a switching moment. The running away, that can happen. But you were cooperating at first, and then you decide to commit violence to try and get away.”

While some beginnings of turning points are instantaneous and immediately clear to officers, e.g., when a gun is drawn, others are more “fuzzy” (Abbott 2001). When talking to Officers Franklin and Tony, confronted with a suicide by cop situation, the first author mistakenly assumed that the acceleration of the suspects’ stride constituted the turning point. Instead, the officers found it occurred when the suspect did not obey to their instructions:

Franklin: If you want to pinpoint a specific moment it’s when we yell “hands up!” and that he puts his hands up but then chooses to reach for the gun. That is the turning point because if he would’ve just put his hands up, then we would’ve engaged in the “dangerously armed suspect” approach which is just a normal arresting procedure. But he decides to grab the gun, we hear shots and then the whole thing escalates because then you have to do something. That’s the turnaround.

Tense interactions are thus made-up of a complex interplay between changing intended outcomes and directions, in which multiple turning points may appear. For example, Officers Lou and Franco argue several turning points unfold when they encounter an armed suspect. A first turning point occurs when they locate the suspect with the gun in his hand, initiating proper proceedings; grabbing their firearm and positioning themselves behind the car door. Then, other shifts follow:

In terms of turning points there were actually two moments, the first was when he pulled the gun out, that to me was like “if he moves it upwards now and starts to aim it then it’s you or me.” The second moment was when he throws away the gun, turns around, looks in our direction and he sees two guns pointing at him. I tell him “get on the ground!” but what he did was laying down next to the gun, almost on top of it. When he lies down he reaches with his hand towards the gun and I thought: “If you grab it now and put it up then I’m going to have to [shoot].” But the moment I think he’s going to grab it he shoved it away from him and towards us. Then I thought: “ok finger off the trigger” [laughs and sighs], the danger was over.

Lou and Franco’s account shows a build-up of bodily gestures which they perceive as turning points. The reach for the gun is considered particularly crucial because they did not expect this. Similarly, Officer Ronnie, engaged in a homicide situation, argues he experienced multiple turning points before finally shooting (and killing) a suspect:

One of ‘m is when Edith [colleague] said “knife!” That was a turning point because then I thought we need to take into account that this man also has weapons. That’s a turning point into thinking “we gotta be more careful.” And there was a turning point when he rolled down the stairs [after having struggled to get him off of the victim he just brutally murdered], because I thought “what in god’s name else can we do?” It was also a turning point because I thought “now we’re not going to fight him anymore because that’s pointless, we have to do something else than pepper spray because we just used that and he doesn’t respond to that, so what’s left?”

Ronnie’s excerpt also shows a sequential build-up. From such accounts it becomes clear that officers process and experience situations in terms of differing or even conflicting trajectories, which can continue after violent action has been used. Officers call this “upscaling” to indicate that direction has indeed been changed, entering a new trajectory after each turning point. Conversely, Officer Jesse holds onto his trajectory when he thinks an individual is out to provoke him into using violence. While watching body cam footage of this encounter, he reflects:

I had the sense that he wanted us to take the initiative to use force. He kept shouting at us, asking us to “hit,” “fight” and “shoot” him. He makes this pseudo-move with his upper body as if he’s going to hit us, challenging us to come at him. But we just stayed standing there.

Jesse thinks that not responding to the suspects' explicit demands was beneficial to (de)escalation. "Not going along" with a narrative of "being angry and reacting emotionally," refraining from yelling "like the suspect," helped to defuse the situation. Officers' accounts show how they are sensitive to potentialities and to civilians' proposals for certain lines of action. In this light, Officers Perry and Alex explain how their own behaviour could have prevented escalation. While watching a YouTube bystander video of their attempt to arrest two individuals, they note that one suspect first listens to the command to "turn around," a turning point towards compliancy. However, to Alex this occurred too "slowly" and he decides to "help him" turn around:

So I grabbed him by the shoulder and I push him. He didn't like that I touched him because he pulls himself loose and at that moment his aggression rises again and he starts resisting again. If I wouldn't have touched him and let him do it on his own terms he'd probably cooperated. But the fact that I touch him, I give him a push, I use force, that's a trigger to him like "hey I'm not having that."

The fragment shows a clash between projected trajectories. Alex voices his intended trajectory by saying "you're under arrest" and as a subsequent step "turn around." The suspect (bodily) resists this trajectory. In hindsight, Alex realizes he could have prevented resistance by refraining from touching him, which means the situation could have gone otherwise.

For Officers Saul and Ollie, a situation turns critical when a group of bystanders try to interfere with their attempt to handcuff a suspect on the ground. People shout, hit, push, and pull them away. A female bystander tries to grab the pepper spray can out of Saul's hands and pushes him, causing him to lose his balance. While falling, Saul accidentally hits another woman in her face with his elbow. This infuriates the crowd even further. A young boy then jumps on top of them with a flying kick, knocking over both officers. While watching a bystander video of this, they argue these moments are all turning points that aggravate the situation, but consider it escalated only when they're pushed towards the ground:

Saul: it escalates when that kid jumps and we're thrown off of the suspect. Then you need to get yourself together. We're both laying on the ground, we're out of the game. Look, Ollie is lying flat on his back here so he doesn't have control anymore either. He's just trying to save himself now and is not busy arresting the suspect.

Thus, multiplicity, ambiguity, and sequential build-up are part of the perception of turning points. But how do officers anticipate them?

4.3 Sensing and Anticipating a Turning Point

We now turn to the question how police officers sense or anticipate a turning point toward violence is on the horizon. To police officers, violence is always a potential outcome of encounters with the public. Hence, officers are largely

oriented towards a “danger paradigm”; the idea that any situation can escalate at any given moment (see also Loftus 2010; and Sierra-Arévalo 2021). In the words of Officer Vincent, “it can *always* escalate *again*.” Officers anticipated futures are thus mostly about gaining control to prevent losing control. Fear of losing control marks officers’ interactional horizon and governs their situational understandings. Maintaining the edge is a function of the danger paradigm inherent in police officers’ occupational environment (Paoline III 2003, 202). Consequently, most actions are directed by the sense that every (bodily) act could turn bad, e.g., incite suspect-resistance. So oriented to a danger paradigm, officers try to anticipate what the other will do by sensing future actions of themselves, colleagues, suspects, and bystanders. Officers continuously try to gain a sense of civilians’ intentions and how they will act, trying to foresee a projected outcome while anticipating towards gaining control. How do they do this?

First, officers argue they sense potential trouble or escalation due to a “gut feeling.” Indeed, “feelings are intricately tied to the anticipation that something may need to be done about this occurrence or situation, although no overt response may ever actually be made” (Emerson 2015, 1). In practice, officers signal specific behaviours that indicate they need to be alert (Keesman 2021a). Officer Edgar unpacks his “gut feeling” on sensing an approaching turning point, by arguing a suspect “did not respond to instructions” and looked around himself “jittery”:

We saw that he pumped himself up, he’s nervous. When we started talking to him I already thought he was going to make a run for it because he was looking around all jumpy trying to find a way out. Plus, when I gave him instructions to grab his license, he randomly grabbed a deodorant from the glove box. Those are things that add up and at some point it’s too much. Then you know “this is going wrong soon.”

Edgar monitors the suspects bodily gestures, hands, arms, and direction of attention by following his gaze. In this way he notices he is going to attempt to escape. Simultaneously, Edgar notices his own heart-rate goes up, experiences a dry mouth, becoming more alert. His “gut feeling” turned out correct, when the suspect failed a Breathalyzer for the second time, he tried to run away. Most officers argue they notice a turning point is on the horizon based on civilians’ facial expressions, gesturing, bodily postures, e.g., turning away from officers with their torso, and flexing or tensing their muscles. Johnson (2015) also demonstrated that officers perceive impending violence through bodily cues such as clenched fists and a fighter/boxer stance, but did not consider these as indicative of shifting situational dynamics. Other observable cues of turning points include loudness of voice, especially in group formations, and highly emotional expressions. Anticipating situational turning points is thus, above all, a sensory endeavour. In the aforementioned account

of Officers Saul and Ollie, they notice the mood changes by high pitched screams:

Saul: you see that everyone gets close to us, then the boy jumps onto us, and seconds later I accidentally hit that woman with my knee. It was like it was a small fire but at that moment they throw a bucket of gasoline over it. You heard the response from bystanders like they all wanted to destroy us [high pitched screaming and shouting]. Then I thought “NOW we have a problem.”

Similarly, Officer Scott “feels” a suspects’ behaviour is indicative of escaping, and thus of losing control, through his eyes and ears. When Scott and his colleague leave the police station to transport a suspect, the suspect starts acting restless, swearing and yelling “I want to get out, I’m not cooperating anymore, I’m not coming with you.” The situation becomes “more serious than normal” when the suspect tries to get up from the back seat. Scott senses an approaching turning point by hearing his colleague raise her voice and noticing his “rear-view mirror is shaking”: “I see him moving in the mirror which is odd because usually a suspect is to my left which means I can’t really see them. Then suddenly I see his head almost coming over my shoulder. That’s when the situation changes.” Like MMA fighters (Spencer 2014), police officers sense violence coming through movement, sight and touch, and anticipate what others will do by sensing their future actions. Officers’ bodies become attuned to civilian behaviours. More specifically, through sensory awareness, they gain an embodied sense of where the situation is going “next.” Anticipating turning points thus means to listen, observe, gaze, touch, i.e., monitor bodily behaviours. It is based on bodily and emotional feedback of other bodies and involves visual, tactile, and auditory activities.

Another technique to signal trouble, suspect-resistance, disruption, and potential turning points is by paying attention to spatial elements. For instance, during demonstrations, officers take strategic positions to maintain overview of a moving crowd within specific spaces. For example, Officer Juan argues that taking a position on an elevated piece of pavement enabled him to sense escalation of a demonstration was unfolding. While watching a media recorded video and reflecting on his drawing, he explains that seeing the procession break apart triggers his awareness on an impending turning point:

I look at deviant behaviour of the group; if the group is walking in a straight formation/line and I suddenly see that here [points at the middle of the procession on his drawing] a hole or gap appears then you know something’s up. I suddenly heard and saw people screaming and this gap emerging. The procession broke apart, the front kept walking but the other group ran towards an adjacent street.

Juan wants to see a constant stream of people. Noticing a gap, groups of people “lingering” or “scattering around,” indicates there’s “trouble” because “it means they’re not united.” Taking strategic spatial positions thus matters for

anticipating turning points because it allows to look at crowds in its entirety and sense whether they are peaceful.

However, the aforementioned techniques do not mean that officers are always successful in anticipating a turning point. They also misinterpret behaviours and projected lines of action. For example, Officer Ellis first considers a group of young boys' behaviours: "being tough, not giving their ID and sticking up for their mates," as normal and, albeit reluctantly, compliant. But, she has mistaken:

Because their behaviour was normal I didn't think "oh it's about to escalate into fighting." But there was a moment, when he [one of the suspects] was standing by the wall and I tell him "you're under arrest." So I ask him: "are you going to cooperate, otherwise violence will be used," "yes I'll cooperate!" So I think "ok great," put the cuffs on, [now pulls her arm back to indicate the suspect did this], I think "ok he's *not* going to cooperate." When he says "I'll cooperate" you think "ok," but the moment that you initiate cuffing and he immediately pulls his arm back that's a 100% the turning point, that's where it went wrong.

While officers display an exceptional sensory awareness towards potential violence, Ellis wrongly interpreted compliancy. Anticipating turning points is thus not utterly devoid of feeling but involves sensing projected futures. Officers sense both "this is where I/we have to intervene" or "now they might get more aggressive" as well as "here is where I'm losing control" and "I have to do something else now." Finally, our interview material indicates officers can have different interpretations of turning points and thus contrasting projected lines of action, leading to disalignment.

4.4 Contrasting Projections

Finally, we describe how officers sensing of a turning point ahead may lead to contrasting lines of action. Whereas they share the same interactional horizon, officers sometimes propose alternative lines of action of how to get there. For example, Officer Gabriel is covert policing in civilian clothing, observing an altercation between several men. He thinks the situation is escalating when they start to push one another and tells his colleagues, also in covert outfits, over dispatch to approach to initiate arrest:

I say: "guys [including two female officers] I think we need to approach, start approaching, start approaching." I said it like three times and started walking already because I thought "we have to break them apart now, we have to stop this because they're starting to fight." To me, the start button has been pushed so I start acting. But when I said: "approach, approach," Hugo [colleague sitting closer to suspects] immediately but slowly said: "wait wait wait."

Whereas Gabriel was "in acting mode," Hugo dispatches a contrasting message: to "wait." Seconds later, Gabriel sees one of the suspects jump into the

air with a knife aiming to stab “like Brad Pitt in Troy.” To Gabriel, this is another turning point, urging him to approach:

When I saw the knife, that first snap I had already started and said: “approach approach approach.” Hugo also saw the knife, but he again says: “wait wait wait.” Then I got a bit pissed, what the hell wait? That guy has a knife! Afterwards he explained: “I didn’t know if everyone had seen the knife and didn’t want colleagues to come flying in and then get a knife in their gut.” His consideration was “don’t come flying in because that guy has a knife.”

There are conflicting proposals for action at play here. To Gabriel it’s “the guy has a knife so approach,” to Hugo it’s “the guy has a knife so *don’t* approach.” They both reason from seeing the knife, but with totally different intentions. To Gabriel it’s *approach* because there is a knife, to Hugo it’s *don’t approach* because there is a knife. Whereas Gabriel had already grabbed his firearm and accelerated his pace because to him “the starting shot happened when the one of them was punched unconscious,” this is not considered a turning point to Hugo. Moreover, Hugo’s choice of words: “wait” instead of “knife” is key to their collective action according to Gabriel. This prevents ambiguity on what to do.

Conversely, officers may not have the same interactional horizon at all, nor the same conception of turning points or of lines being “crossed.” This sets in motion different projections for action. For example, Officers Lee and Joe are sent to pick up a suspect for doing jail time. When arriving at the scene, Joe checks the backyard while Lee rings the doorbell. The suspect’s mother opens the door, Lee enquires about the suspect and enters the premises. The young man is informed he is under arrest. The mother becomes angry and starts screaming. Lee instructs the suspect to gather some belongings, but he starts to procrastinate by doing irrelevant things, such as folding his towel. Lee, now irritated and nervous, requests him multiple times to collect his things. When the suspect walks to a room, Lee accompanies him to monitor his behaviour. At that moment, the mother closes the front door and double locks it, locking in Lee: “I thought that door needs to open asap because I don’t know how this guy is going to react to me being alone in here.” The first author witnesses this and warns Joe. Meanwhile, the mother attempts to prevent Lee from opening the front door, but he manages to push her into an adjacent room. When Lee succeeds in opening the door, Joe enters. Lee immediately grabs the suspect and turns his hand behind his back. To Lee, the procrastination and being locked-in are reasons to initiate arrest and he thus begins the bodily proceedings of cuffing. However, Joe does not respond to this which infuriates him:

Joe walked in and told him again “yo man grab your things and then we’ll head out” [calm voice], and then I went livid. Inside I freaked out. I thought “this is fucking incomprehensible.” He should have grabbed that other hand [of the suspect], without that I can’t complete the cuffing procedure. I

told Joe: “this guy has to come with us now” because I had already heard Joe kicking the door to try and open it. When I opened it and he came in, I turned to the suspect, grabbed him and pushed him against the bed. I’m way up high in my emotions because I’m pissed that I was alone in that house and Joe just stayed in the same calm emotion.

To Lee the turning point was that the suspect’s mother suddenly closed and locked the door. But it wasn’t the only one: “When that door closes it’s a full on turning point. But actually when I enter the premises and the guy doesn’t do what I tell him to do, that’s also a turning point. So you have all these little moments, thinking ‘his is not going as smooth as I hoped.’” For Lee, the situation has escalated because he is locked in alone, heightening a sense of losing control. Even worse is that Joe failed to notice these occurrences as significant turning points that indicate the suspect *should now* be handcuffed, irritating Lee: “That’s a turning point to me and it’s weird when that’s not the case for your colleague.” Moreover, Joe kicking the door to open it means to Lee that the talking is over. In an interview, Joe acknowledged that the situation escalated when the front door closed but did not find this sufficient enough to initiate the arrest (contrary to Lee). Their reflections illustrate that the perception of turning points can differ, and that this sets in motion contrasting proposals for action. What fails is a collective transformation of meaning. In his analysis of constructing physical fights, Jackson-Jacobs (2013, 31) describes how achieving a definition of conflict requires a transformation of meaning from viewing a situation as a substantive trouble to viewing it as a ritual insult and fateful existential dilemma – a dare to “do something.” In order to achieve a definition of a turning point in policing, of *having to* engage, requires a transformation of meaning from viewing a situation as troublesome but controllable to viewing it as losing control – necessitating police intervention and setting in motion (bodily) proceedings to gain control. While we have shown that there are both observable cues and “implicit agreements” about when to take action, Joe does not share Lee’s interpretation nor the same image of a future, prohibiting collective action. Although their future-coordination is connected, they thus move in disjointed directions (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013).

Working in tense encounters is a socially sensitive practice: officers experience sensations and respond to emotions and bodily actions by sensing their own, colleagues’, and civilians’ movements and future actions. This implies that they are open to anticipating future orientations of both themselves and others in the face of violence, as opposed to becoming “encapsulated” or losing self-control (Weenink 2014; Collins 2008). However, encapsulation can also occur, as one of us has shown elsewhere (see Keesman 2021b). In general, officers need to flexibly manoeuvre and adjust their (forceful) actions, keeping in mind the consequences of their actions in relation to rules, regulations, and behavioural guidelines imposed by legislation intended to

preserve legal legitimacy. In order for officers to collectively act upon situational turning points thus requires being open to their own and other's actions, bodies, emotions, and experiences to sense future actions and to construct a shared interpretation, for instance of what is considered "crossing the line."

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that officers perceive turning points when they are confronted with their fear of losing control, suspect resistance, and non-compliance. To further think through our findings, we relate our officers' accounts of turning points to Abbott's argument (2001, 243) that "believing that after a certain point a narrative becomes coercive means believing that a turning point has been passed." However, once we ground social life in social interactions, as we did in our study of tangible police-civilian encounters, it becomes clear that it is not just the belief in a new forceful narrative that shapes the experience of turning points. People can envision their own biographies and retrospectively stamp formative life events leading to their new personality, but these beliefs may be different from how their self-perception is maintained in interactional trajectories. That is, a projected self can be subjected to interactional turning points that may contest such projection. Because trajectories are action sequences in which the direction for the interaction is projected and contested, they are also inherently communicative processes in which these actions are provided with meaning. These meanings are both immediate (how one action follows intelligibly from the other and provides the meaning context for the next action) and transcendental (what a good officer should do, what maintaining public order is about).

The transcendental meanings of police-civilian encounters should not be taken as reifications, but as emergent from routinized action patterns, or temporal structures, which have coercive but unnoticed power because they delimit action options. Turning points, we found, are disruptions of these temporal structures that require action in order to return to the projected trajectory. Officers sense turning points largely, but not solely, based on their perception of civilians' behaviour. In response to what they perceive to be a turning point, they switch to another line or course of action, e.g., using violence. However, while considered a decisive moment, turning points are not always a point of no return. Antagonistic situations are characterized by moments of distraction, withdrawal, varying intensity, and intermittent pauses and can have multiple and conflicting turning points and projections of lines of action. This paper has demonstrated that violence is a sequential achievement and that (de)escalation requires transformative steps in an emergent interactive process, which is loaded with various forms of communication

such as gestures, utterances, and bodily movements (see also Goodwin 2018). In sum, treating police-civilian encounters as trajectories shows that they are 1) situationally contingent, 2) part of meaningful communication, and 3) made up of bodily action.

Our analysis contributes to the existing body of work on (de)escalation in various ways. First, this paper advances prevailing approaches by demonstrating that a linear approach simplifies the complex realities of antagonistic encounters, which may comprise a multiplicity of- and openings for action, including moments of disruption and misalignment. Second, and relatedly, this paper nuances earlier micro-sociological studies on the emotional dynamics of violence by demonstrating that turning points are not dichotomous, leading to either violence or non-violence. Instead, our focus on trajectories allows to study various goals and directions and shows the significance of contradicting projections. Third, our findings reveal why and how projected trajectories can fail due to disalignment. For example, officers moving too fast, being too direct or too aggressive, missing communication, or forgetting to take action or step in on time. However, moments of disalignment are not solely ascribable to individual intentions; they are also situationally contingent both on the officers' and civilians' side. While the police tend to ascribe turning points to civilian behaviour, e.g., "choosing" to grab a weapon, they too are not the mere product of conscious decision-making. The narrative of "they did this or that, so that we had to do this or that" merely sustains the idea of causality, allowing officers to shift their responsibility towards civilians. Fourth, our findings highlight that including bodily action in the analysis is indispensable to understand the interactional resources officers draw upon in general and to grasp (de)escalation processes in police-civilian encounters in particular. This paper shows how they continuously perform and recalibrate their projected lines of action through bodily action and by monitoring the bodily actions of colleagues and civilians. More generally, our study recognizes that bodily action is crucial in how people mutually orient each other towards, sometimes manipulate, and coordinate a possible future together (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013, 910).

Although bodily actions form an important focus of our analysis, we did not use our video material to provide a behavioural analysis proper. Instead, our interest was to get at officers' retrospective descriptions of their actions and experiences, prompted by the footage. Obviously, the interviews cannot grasp their "real experiences." Similar to the trajectories we studied, our interviews are also communicative processes in which officers are asked to describe, explain, and understand their own behaviour in relation to that of others. As they must do so in ways that are socially valid and understandable, our interviews reflect collectively shared ways of describing, understanding, and explaining. One important difference with standard interviews is that the video footage allows officers to talk about important elements of their

encounters with civilians in much more detail, most notably how their bodily actions relate to those of others. For this reason, video elicitation may also be beneficial for training purposes, to encourage reflection on officers' practices.

Finally, we note two shortcomings of our study. First, our analysis provides an image of how officers perceive and respond to turning points. However, we do not know to what extent and how they actually aim to manipulate civilian behaviour, rather than just responding to what emerges interactionally. By putting the interactional dynamics centre stage, we may have ignored how officers actively design responses from civilians. Given that the projected trajectories of officers are routinized temporal structures, officers could use their practical knowledge to steer the behaviour of civilians much more than they may be aware of. Future studies could take up this issue by probing how officers try to steer the behaviour of civilians. The inclusion of police trainers in such a study could be particularly beneficial in this respect. A second limitation is that we did not consider how and to what extent officers' perceptions of the bodily actions of civilians are related to how they categorize them; their perception of what makes for a turning point does not occur in a social vacuum and probably relates to broader social divisions related to age, class, gender, and ethnicity. Such differential perceptions of bodily actions are hard to capture using the kind of interviews we conducted, not only because of the sensitivity of the topic but also because officers might not be aware of their differential perceptions.

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The Emergence and Unfolding of Violent Events: A Transactional Approach.

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