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Can Police Officers be Trained to "Listen Better"? A Meta-Relational Analysis of Listening in US Police Training and Practices

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Abstract

This article examines police reforms through a meta-relational framework: one that resists resolution and foregrounds the tensions, contradictions, and partial truths that shape institutional life. Focusing on active listening in U.S. police training, particularly the Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics (ICAT) program, it shifts the question from whether such reforms "work" to how listening becomes a site where care, control, legitimacy, and resistance intersect. Drawing on the ICAT curriculum, ethnographic fieldwork at a North Carolina police academy, and interviews with trainees, the article argues that listening is not merely a communicative skill, but a relational technology shaped by institutional logics. Within this frame, reformist and abolitionist perspectives are treated not as opposing endpoints but as partial, coexisting lenses that illuminate different dimensions of the same policing terrain: reform highlights the openings that listening trainings may create, while abolition underscores their structural limits. Through three vignettes: the case of Sandra Bland, a role-play training scenario, and video-recorded police–civilian encounters, the article traces how police listening can both reproduce institutional power ("the trap") and generate moments of relational reconfiguration ("the emergent"). It concludes by arguing that police listening must account for the relational, historical, and institutional conditions of listening itself.

Keywords: Listening; meta-relationality; police reforms; abolitionism.

Introduction

In January 2023, Tyre Nichols was forcibly removed from his vehicle by police officers in Memphis, Tennessee. Despite Nichols being seated on the ground, officers continued ordering him to "get on the ground," with one officer threatening to use a taser. As Nichols attempted to comply, officers escalated their force, issuing contradictory commands while physically restraining him. A visual investigation by *The New York Times* (Stein et al., 2023) reveals that officers issued 71 commands within a 13-minute span, many of which were contradictory or irrelevant to Nichols' actions. Experts suggest this interaction reflects "contempt of cop," where officers impose force in response to perceived disrespect (Stein et al., 2023). Nichols died three days after the incident, from blunt force trauma to the head sustained when officers beat him. This case highlights a disconnect between de-escalation training and its real-world application, where civilian pleas are frequently ignored. The officers involved were part of the SCORPION unit, trained in de-escalation and fair and impartial policing (Gertler, 2023). Their actions exposed the limits of training and de-escalation policies and underscored the broader debate over whether such reforms can ever address police violence (Schumaker, 2020).

Considering such disconnect, this article examines one of the skills taught in police de-escalation training: listening. Specifically, it asks: Is listening possible within an institution built to control, surveil and command? Can police officers be trained to "listen better" as promised by the numerous programs promoting active listening and tactical communications in

police academies? Programs such as the Integrating Communication, Assessment, and Tactics (ICAT) program developed by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), embed active listening within a specific framework of policing aiming to ensure officer safety while building public trust. The goal of the ICAT program is to bridge gaps between communication and tactical responses, especially in incidents involving unarmed or vulnerable individuals. Yet, within the architecture of policing, many would argue that listening is not neutral: it is shaped by spatial arrangements, institutional logics, racialized targeting and affective economies that define what can be heard, by whom, and to what end.

Debates over police reforms and programs such as the ICAT often reproduce a familiar divide between reformist and abolitionist frameworks. Reformist perspectives believe and advocate for institutional improvement: better training, better accountability and outcomes (see Friedman & Ponomarenko, 2015; Meares, 2017; Tyler, 2006). By contrast, police abolitionism is a social movement and political framework advocating for the elimination of police, prisons, and surveillance by transforming society to address the root causes of crime and harm. Abolitionist perspectives interrogate the foundations of institutions like policing, refusing procedural or training enhancements that do not question the structures of domination and discrimination (see, Kaba 2020; Vitale, 2017). While these frameworks offer essential insights and critiques, this article contends that treating them solely as opposing doctrines is limiting. Such a framing restricts our ability to account for the full complexity of police reform, particularly in its implementation within police–civilian interactions, as illustrated in this case study on listening.

This article proposes an alternative to this rigid oppositional framing. Rather than promoting the superiority of reform or abolition, I seek to hold the tensions between them as generative sites of inquiry. My analysis of police reforms, especially the use of active listening in police training and practice, illuminates the paradoxes and possibilities that emerge between institutional reproduction ("the trap") and relational possibility ("the emergent"). Listening, in this account, becomes not a skill to be trained in or a tactic to be dismissed, but a site where the paradoxes of institutional reform, abolitionist critique and relational reconfiguration converge. This inquiry is grounded in a meta-relational paradigm (Machado de Oliveira, 2021; 2025), which resists the drive to resolve contradiction and instead invites us to stay with complexity, uncertainty, and ontological tension. Meta-relationality does not treat societal problems as technical challenges to be solved through institutional improvement, but as symptoms of deeper relational and ontological conditions. It shifts attention from procedural reform toward the underlying assumptions that shape how harm, justice, and safety are understood. It asks: Whose realities are centered or erased? What logics sustain institutional responses to harm? And what capacities are needed to remain accountable to relational ruptures without collapsing them into premature resolution? From this orientation, listening becomes more than a practice but a diagnostic site, revealing the conditions under which relationality is made possible, denied, or rendered unintelligible.

Within mainstream policing discourse, listening is typically framed as a procedural tool: a means of de-escalation, a marker of professionalism, or a way to ensure officer safety. In both reformist and abolitionist critiques, it may appear as either a well-intentioned practice to be improved or as a superficial gesture that masks structural violence. A meta-relational approach reframes listening not as a tactic or intervention, but as a site of ontological encounter: a moment when divergent worldviews, institutional logics, and historical wounds come into contact. Rather than seeking to improve listening within existing systems, this orientation asks: *What forms of listening are even thinkable inside institutions structured to dominate and contain? What knowledges are heard, distorted, or dismissed? And how might listening simultaneously reproduce and rupture carceral logics?* Crucially, it also asks what becomes of what is heard and how institutions metabolize (or refuse) pain, dissent, and complexity. Thus, for meta-relationality, "good police listening" is not about officers listening better in a technical sense, but about recognizing the relational, historical, and institutional conditions of listening itself and cultivating practices that refuse containment, stay with paradox, and open space for new relational possibilities.

Reformism and Abolition: Seeing Differently, Missing Differently

I begin by mapping the analytic terrain shaped by reformist and abolitionist frameworks and question: what do these lenses illuminate about listening within policing and what do they obscure? The reformist and abolitionist perspectives on police reform, including on active listening training, reflect radically distinct orientations towards the role of policing. Each framework operates within its own diagnostic lens, enabling certain insights while foregoing others. Reformist logic, such as that offered by scholars like David Weisburd and Cynthia Lum, emphasizes the enhancement of communication strategies, community engagement, and evidence-based policing practices as a pathway toward legitimacy and harm reduction. Listening, within this frame, is understood as a technical skill that can be deployed to produce better outcomes, reduce use of force incidents, and increase public trust (Lum & Koper, 2017).

By contrast, abolitionist frameworks begin from a structural diagnosis, that policing is not a neutral institution capable of rehabilitation, but a historical apparatus of racialized control, settler colonial domination and capitalist regulation. Abolitionists

approach new methods such as active listening with skepticism, understanding that the aesthetic of reform can obscure ongoing harm. Marianne Kaba (2020), for instance, emphasized that reforms which grant more legitimacy, funding, or functionality to police structures are fundamentally antithetical to abolitionist goals, even when framed as measures of harm reduction. For abolitionists, the focus is not on making institutions more humane or functional but on creating conditions for their obsolescence. Yet, abolitionist critique in its vigilance, risks missing the flickers of relational possibility that emerge in institutional spaces. Focusing solely on structural flaws can make it easy to overlook emergent relational practice, such as listening that, while not transformative on their own, can open vital sites of potential.

One can only recognize this complexity by moving beyond the impulse to frame reform and abolition as inherently antagonistic. This move has already been undertaken by various legal and policing scholars, including Akbar's (2020) work on developing an "abolition horizon for police reform," Simonson's (2021) analysis of police reform through a power lens, and Stoughton's (2024) piece, which explicitly acknowledges that "abolitionists' critique of reformism elevated attention to a lack of analytical rigor underlying many aspects of traditional approaches to addressing abusive policing" (Stoughton, 2024, p. 228). These authors leverage the generative tension between these paradigms to think creatively about the next steps in the future of public safety.

In a similar way, a meta-relational approach does not seek to reconcile reformist and abolitionist logics into a unified position, but to hold them as partial, generative, and entangled. Meta-relationality foregrounds the relational field in which these frameworks operate, the ways they illuminate different aspects of harm, justice, and repair, and the ways they also enact their own blind spots. Reform may miss the deep ontological critique abolition offers; abolition may miss the subtle shifts in relational practice that can emerge even inside systems built to dominate. This article does not position itself above these paradigms, but within the tensions they produce, tending to both the risks of institutional reproduction and the openings for relational reconfiguration. Listening in policing, viewed through this lens, becomes a site where these tensions are not resolved, but made visible, and where both critique and possibility can coexist in meaningful ways.

My analysis draws first on curriculum materials from the ICAT training, with particular attention to the "tactical communications" module and its active listening component in both the 2016 and 2022 versions of the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) training. To support more embodied forms of understanding, I also conducted fieldwork in North Carolina, observing two full days of ICAT training in June 2022. During these sessions, both classroom instruction and scenario-based exercises, I participated as an external observer, taking detailed notes as trainees moved through their training. I was permitted to use my camera not to record video but to take still images to capture the configurations of police–civilian simulations. Following this observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three focus groups composed of four to six trainees each, asking them about their experiences applying active listening techniques during the training scenarios. Sample questions included: "How focused on listening were you throughout the scenario?" and "What challenges did you encounter while trying to apply these techniques?". Because this article analyzes listening training and skills for police officers broadly, rather than evaluating the ICAT listening training specifically, I also incorporated a video analysis of two police–civilian interactions as vignettes for a more embodied and applied examination of this skill- or the lack thereof. The first is the video recorded by Sandra Bland of her arrest, the second is a video from the ICAT curriculum depicting an officer engaging with a suicidal subject. Finally, to further contextualize these observations, I held conversations with racial justice community advocates as well as police trainers in North Carolina.

I approached this inquiry not as a neutral evaluator nor as an embedded partisan but as a relational participant attentive to complexity, paradox and institutional framings. I write from a complex positionality shaped by intersecting cultural, ancestral, and geographic entanglements, including relationships to Western Europe, North Africa, and the experience of migration. While I am often read in ways that afford proximity to whiteness, I carry inherited histories shaped by coloniality, displacement, and epistemic multiplicity. These complexities inform my engagement with policing not from a position of neutrality, but from a commitment to relational accountability, and the ongoing tension of speaking from both inside and outside dominant systems. I am committed to relational accountability: to those harmed by police structures, to the relational openings observed within police settings and to the broader field of historical and systemic harm. I wrote this piece from the Global North (the United States), presumably for an audience of the Global North. The relevance of this work for other contexts is most appropriately determined by those working within those contexts.

I open with an analysis of the active listening module in the ICAT curriculum, where listening is framed simultaneously as a tool to enhance police performance and as a practice that gestures toward deeper relational transformation. This dual framing surfaces a core tension: listening as an instrument of institutional reproduction versus listening as a potential site of emergent relationality. To examine how this tension materializes in practice, I turn to a series of "vignettes" drawn from police training sessions and police–civilian encounters. These vignettes trace how listening is enacted at the embodied and applied levels,

revealing both its contradictions and its fleeting openings. In the first set of vignettes, I foreground abolitionist concerns by attending to the politics of who is permitted to be heard, and to the subtle forms of erasure that can occur even within practices of listening. In the latter examples, I explore more ambiguous moments, both in training and in recorded police–civilian interactions, where instrumental, outcome-oriented forms of listening meet tentative efforts to express care.

Curriculum Analysis: Listening and the ICAT Tactical Communications Program

The ICAT presents listening both as a tactical tool and as an ethical imperative woven through police decision making processes. The Critical Decision-Making model (CDM) (in Figure 1) serves as the backbone of ICAT's approach to listening, foregrounding proportionality and respect for life as guiding principles (PERF, 2016). According to the ICAT training manual, the CDM facilitates structural thinking by supporting officers through a set of guiding questions at each stage of an encounter (PERF, 2016). Rather than following a linear, action-driven sequence, the CDM promotes a reflective mindset in which listening and thoughtful engagement become integral to policing.

Figure 1

The CDM Extracted from the ICAT's Training Guide (PERF, 2016)

Each stage of the model, as depicted in Figure 1 - gathering information, assessing risks, considering options, acting and reviewing the outcome, requires officers to listen not only to subjects and bystanders but also to their own embodied responses and environmental cues. In the tactical communications module on active listening, officers are encouraged to use non-verbal and verbal behaviors that convey stability and empathy. The curriculum recommends steady tone of voice, patient listening, open body language and reframing adversarial questions into collaborative prompts (PERF, 2016; PERF, 2022). In practice, officers are advised to replace "what's your problem?" with "what can I do to help you?" in order to reduce defensiveness and build rapport. The ICAT is an attempt to move away from rigid "Ask, Tell, Make" escalation models, using listening to build rapport. In this expanded frame, listening becomes a multisensory practice, one that includes bodily perception, spatial awareness and environmental scanning.

Yet, this new tool remains embedded within structures that prioritize crisis management over relational transformation. Listening is framed to manage risk, de-escalate conflict, and maintain public trust, but not as practice capable of repairing historical grief, systemic abandonment or relational rupture. When examining the curriculum more closely, PERF's adaptation of active listening reflects this institutional logic, wherein listening is harnessed as a mechanism to extract information, ensuring police effectiveness, as well as mutual understanding. The ICAT guide exemplifies this orientation by encouraging officers to use listening strategically to "gather intel," framing the interaction to collect actionable insights on the civilian's history, mental health, or potential behavioral triggers (PERF, 2022, p. 68). The updated training guide also suggests using silence to their advantage as "silence may prompt the subject to talk more and reveal information and intelligence that you can utilize" (p. 68). Finally, the guide suggests that "even with the contact officer providing a line of communication, all officers involved need to be listening. The goal is to gather as much information and intelligence as possible" (p. 71). This instrumentalization of listening positions officers to treat civilians as objects of surveillance and control, limiting the intended receptivity of active listening.

This tension may be rooted in PERF's (Police Executive Research Forum) efforts to maintain legitimacy within policing culture to ensure their impact. PERF's commitment to a curriculum "for cops by cops" situates its training within the lived realities of police officers, reinforcing an ethos of internal legitimacy:

> At its core, this ICAT Training Guide is focused on protecting officers in non-firearms incidents… This is accomplished by equipping officers with the tools and techniques needed to slow down some situations… to help officers avoid reaching the point where… lethal force [is necessary]. In addition to protecting officers from physical harm, providing officers with more options can minimize the risk of emotional turmoil and legal and media scrutiny. (PERF, 2016, p. 11)

Here, the ICAT curriculum reveals its focus on policing efficacy, minimizing scrutiny while ensuring officers' security. Although the curriculum introduces "listening" as a performance skill, its stated mission is oriented towards maintaining officers' psychological well-being and legitimacy first. This focus may explain why listening is framed not only as a relational practice but also as a tool for categorizing subjects and guiding police responses.

From an abolitionist perspective, however, listening cannot be reduced to an auditory skill that police can deploy instrumentally; it is a cultural act, steeped in power relations and institutional logics. As Ratcliffe (2005) describes through the notion of the "listening ear," hearing is never neutral but always filtered through racialized, gendered, and classed assumptions (Ratcliffe, 2005; Stoever, 2016). Within policing, this means that both what is spoken, as well as pauses, hesitations, tones, and silences, are not interpreted in a vacuum but through institutional and social scripts that prioritize risk and precaution for police officers. Even programs like PERF's ICAT, which promote active listening, embed these practices in a framework oriented toward control, legitimacy, and dominance. Listening, though often perceived as passive, actively shapes how officers understand others, and in this context, can become a technique for managing subjects rather than engaging them in reciprocal relation.

At its core, policing is designed not to hear in a transformative sense but to assess, classify, and respond. Officers are trained to interpret speech, tone, and gesture through the lens of risk and control, and are socialized into what Sierra-Arévalo (2021) calls the "danger imperative." As Tejeiro et al. (2024) observe, police regularly confront unpredictable, high-stakes incidents that demand quick responses, where hesitation is framed as dangerous or even fatal. This imperative produces a relational narrowing: the urgency to act decisively overrides the possibility of deep attunement with civilians and their relationship to harm and pain. For instance, when someone in crisis speaks through words, silence, gesture, or affect - the officer may be listening, but always within the logic of crisis management. As the ICAT curriculum itself suggests, listening is framed as a means of "gathering intel". Within this frame, subjects are positioned as potential dangers, officers as stabilizing forces, and ambiguity or delay as liabilities. Unsurprisingly, studies show that people in mental health crisis are often perceived as non-compliant and resistant (Kesic et al., 2013), with officers more likely to resort to coercive tactics to secure compliance.

Even as programs like the ICAT encourage officers to practice active listening and empathic communication, the institutional context fundamentally limits what kind of listening is possible, shaping a version of active listening that remains steeped in a "subject-object" relationship between police officer and civilian. The problem is not only one of training efficacy but of institutional function. Police listening cannot be disentangled from the broader paradigm of order, compliance, and control. Then, the failure to truly hear is not a failure of empathy but a structural feature of the role itself. At best, curricular reforms expand the capacity to listen within the boundaries the institution can recognize and reward. At worst, they reinforce the very dynamics they claim to soften: listening that grows, but only within the frame that forecloses relational possibility.

Thus, the curriculum itself surfaces a tension and a paradox between a view on active listening that attempts to humanize policing and improve police-civilian interactions, and another that situates it within a paradigm of control and crisis management that prevents true relational transformation. In the following section, I explore how this tension expresses itself at the embodied level for police officers through three vignettes: I begin with the Sandra Bland case, which illustrates how the very capacity to listen is defined along racial lines, exposing the trap of the racialized listening ear. I then move to the ICAT curriculum, where the scripts seek to cultivate a different orientation to listening but remain tethered to institutional structures. Finally, I turn to my fieldwork in North Carolina classrooms, where listening unfolds in messy, embodied practice, simultaneously constrained and yet occasionally unsettled by moments of relational ambiguity. Taken together, these vignettes show how efforts to foster "better listening" are at once captured by the gravitational pull of policing's logics and yet haunted by subtle, fleeting possibilities of something otherwise.

Vignette 1: The Politics of Being Heard

The first vignette turns to the death of Sandra Bland, a moment that crystallizes abolitionist critiques: In this vignette, dominant listening paradigms, rooted in racialized and gendered norms, prefigure who gets to be heard, how, and at what cost in police-

civilian interactions. The tensions between expressed pain, historical memory, and institutional expectations reveal the subtle yet profound ways policing may still enact relational ruptures, even within the language of listening. Stoever (2016) brings this into focus through the tragic account of Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old African American woman detained by a white officer for a minor traffic violation. Bland's visible frustration and defiance, which she documented on video, elicited an immediate escalation from the officer, who labeled her "non-compliant" and resorted to force (Investigative network, 2019). Bland's subsequent arrest and death in custody three days later became a pivotal moment in the Black Lives Matter movement, prompting legislative responses like the Sandra Bland Act, mandating de-escalation training for officers (Montgomery, 2019).

The incident illustrates how expressions of frustration or resistance by Black individuals are often misinterpreted as aggressive or "non-compliant" by law enforcement, who operate within a framework that stigmatizes certain emotional expressions as oppositional or dangerous. As Stoever (2016) explains, "dominant listening practices discipline us to process white male ways of listening and sounding as default, natural, normal and desirable, and deem alternate ways of listening and sounding aberrant" (Stoever, 2016, p.12). This "sonic color line" privileges a white, male-coded auditory norm that marginalizes Black voices by framing their emotional expressions as "improper" or "excessively sensitive." In this paradigm, dominant modes of listening act as covert tools of social control, encoding and enforcing racial and gendered biases in seemingly neutral interactions. Bland's experience epitomizes this disconnect, where emotional expression not aligned with these dominant auditory standards becomes a justification for punitive action, reflecting a racialized listening bias within policing practices. This asymmetry is not only about how Black civilians are heard; it is also about how police listen from within an institution historically rooted in racial domination through slave patrols and colonial surveillance. While the affective weight of past trauma is often more visible on the side of the civilian, the institutional memory of policing, the habits, assumptions, and logics inherited from these origins, also enters the interaction, shaping what kinds of listening is possible.

Building on Sarah Ahmed's (2004) exploration of pain and memory, Black civilians' reactions to police encounters often carry the weight of these historical injustices. Ahmed articulates how pain is shaped by "past impressions" that surface in present interactions, which often include traumatic memories linked to systemic violence against Black communities (p. 25). This affective legacy is especially pertinent in policing, where images of Black bodies being subjugated or controlled have become ingrained in public consciousness and shape contemporary encounters. A community leader from the Racial Justice Coalition in Asheville captures this vividly:

> I think it's imperative that officers understand the history between Black community members and law enforcement. Your organization was created from slave catchers, and that's what you've evolved from. … When I interact with police, I don't see them as upstanding community members; I see them as potentially just as shady as anyone else. (Humphris, 2023, fieldnotes).

Their insight underscores that history is not a distant or resolved experience for Black communities and police officers. Instead, it is continually activated and reinforced during encounters with law enforcement, influencing how Black civilians interpret and react to police authority.

Audre Lorde's (1981) work further elucidates the power of emotional expression as a response to systemic oppression. Lorde describes her own anger at racism as "anger of exclusion, unquestioned privilege, racial distortions, silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation" (p. 1). Her account highlights how, in social and institutional settings, her expression of anger was met with resistance from white audiences, who preferred a tempered delivery to engage with her perspective. In Lorde's experience, this reluctance to "hear" intense emotions serves to reinforce existing power hierarchies by invalidating expressions of anger and pain that challenge the listener's comfort zone. As she asserts, managing or muting emotional responses in this way allows the dominant group to sidestep the possibility of transformation that genuine listening could catalyze.

This dynamic is mirrored in policing practices where listening can become a tool for maintaining control rather than fostering empathy or understanding. Some Black individuals may modulate their emotional responses, a phenomenon Rashawn Ray refers to as "signaling", to display only "acceptable" emotions, thereby reducing perceived risks (Shapiro, 2020). However, this form of self-censorship does not eliminate the underlying issue; it merely adjusts personal expression to fit within a narrowly defined framework of permissible conduct. For others, authentic expression of anger and frustration becomes an assertion of identity and humanity. Without a true capacity to "hear" such expressions, active listening in police encounters fails to de-escalate and, instead, reinforces the distance between officers and Black civilians.

Understanding this complex, historically grounded power dynamic is critical for fostering communication practices that genuinely engage rather than alienate. Ahmed (2004) eloquently articulates that the refusal to acknowledge a community's pain

perpetuates the original wound. When police training omits the historical and ongoing context of Black pain, it risks "repeating the forgetting" that often accompanies institutional responses to systemic trauma (p. 33). This selective listening not only overlooks Black communities' past injuries but also reduces the potential for training in active listening to function as a restorative practice. In this regard, Ahmed's work suggests that listening, when detached from historical consciousness, becomes a form of symbolic violence: a performance that disregards the emotional weight carried by communities who have borne the brunt of institutional discrimination.

Evidently, few de-escalation or active listening trainings, including the ICAT, embed historical consciousness or cultural sensitivity into their teachings. Yet, through the case of Sandra Bland, we glimpse how the stubborn expression of emotional truths in the form of anger, pain, and will resists these modes of listening. The trap of dominant listening norms confines itself to sanctioned performances of civility, even as affective ruptures continually emerge. From an abolitionist perspective, holding these tensions requires more than technical adjustments to training; it demands a radical reorientation of who, and what, is considered worthy of being heard.

Vignette 2: Tactical Listening and the Choreography of Control

In this second vignette, drawn from my fieldwork, I explore the application of the ICAT curriculum and the tactical communications module at a police academy in North Carolina. While the Bland case starkly illustrates how listening is already racially structured, this vignette reveals the tension between listening within institutional logic (the trap) and moments of relational complexity that do not fully fit the script (the emergent).

In the simulation offered by the ICAT, trainees responded to a call involving a civilian allegedly attempting to slash tires in a parking lot. Trainees were divided into groups of three and instructed to apply ICAT principles in their approach. Their movements immediately revealed the spatial logics of control at work: they positioned themselves in a triangle formation, tactically surrounding the role-played subject from a calculated distance. This configuration was not incidental: It reproduced a trained choreography of power (see Figure 2). The triangle reinforced separation and surveillance, ensuring visual dominance while minimizing risk to the officers. When some trainees attempted to move closer, the scenario scripted their failure; they were "injured" by the role-player, a narrative decision that reasserted distance as safety. In this context, physical proximity was not an opening for relational engagement but a liability. Spatial containment became both the literal and symbolic structure through which listening could occur.

Figure 2

Extracted from the Tactical Communication Modules (PERF, 2022)

Some trainees attempted to listen using ICAT language, saying things like "you have a child, you have plenty to live for" or "I'll be more than happy to do some research for you." While these phrases express concern, they were not fully grounded in mutual recognition or reciprocity. Rather, they were designed to gain control through affect, deployed as scripts meant to pacify, distract, or stall until force could be justified or enacted. In post-exercise interviews, trainees admitted their main concern was determining when to stop de-escalating and escalating instead, framing listening as a procedural checkpoint. Yet, genuine

listening cannot be reduced to a tool for gaining control and compliance. It must be an act of mutual vulnerability, grounded in an ethic of care and an orientation toward healing and accountability.

While the critique of control is valid, it also risks flattening the affective and operational complexity faced by trainees navigating a culture of risk management. Policing as it exists is metabolically wired to anticipate harm, and trainees are conditioned to embody that vigilance, spatially, emotionally, and somatically. The ICAT framework does offer some officers a vocabulary for recognizing the insufficiency of force-first responses. It opens a window, even if narrow, into the discomfort many feel when tasked with managing affect while remaining operationally distant. Several trainees expressed this discomfort explicitly, noting that distance "makes it less personable" and undermines efforts to de-escalate. Yet even this recognition was rerouted toward tactical efficiency: proximity was seen not as only as a bridge for deeper understanding but to improve taser accuracy. Thus, the desire for closeness was instrumentalized, rather than relationally reimagined.

This vignette reveals the paradox of institutional listening offered as care yet choreographed through control. Trainees speak in the language of empathy, but their movements: triangular formations, scripted distancing, signal a deeper logic of containment. Even when discomfort arises, it's rerouted toward tactical goals, not relational transformation.

Vignette 3: Listening as Performance vs. Listening as Relational Practice

Building on the analysis above, this vignette examines a real-life application of active listening through a video from the ICAT curriculum. Here, listening emerges with even greater ambiguity, functioning both as a means of relational engagement and as an opportunity for institutional reproduction. The case, drawn from the ICAT Tactical Communications module, is frequently cited as an example of effective police engagement. In a 2019 incident, an officer confronted a suicidal individual holding a knife to their throat. The officer applies techniques from the ICAT curriculum, including paraphrasing, the use of "I" statements ("I will help you"), and code-switching into Spanish to build rapport. He offers water and support (see Figure 3). The subject eventually walks toward the officer and relinquishes the knife. The training module presents this outcome as a testament to the effectiveness of active listening in high-stakes, ambiguous situations.

Figure 3

Extracted from the Tactical Communication Modules (PERF, 2022)

In many ways this video showcases police officers who are better able to reduce harm, build rapport, and avoid unnecessary use of force when they are equipped with communication tools, such as paraphrasing, affirming language, and cultural attunement. The listening here is tactical, pragmatic, and professionalized. It is listening as a technique and a skill deployed to manage unpredictable scenarios more compassionately. In this view, the officer's calm presence, use of "I" statements, and code-switching into Spanish demonstrate affective engagement that facilitates peaceful resolution. Listening is praised not only for de-escalating a potential crisis but for signaling the emotional intelligence that policing may lack.

However, another perspective of this same encounter reveals a different narrative: one in which the individual is still positioned as a threat to be managed, and listening operates as a technology of pacification embedded within a broader apparatus of state control. This vignette is not devoid of care, but the care is constrained, shaped by a structure that renders certain lives more audibly "risky" and in need of management. The officer may be listening, but the institution remains unchanged. The listening is circumscribed and used to de-escalate, but it is also used to restore legitimacy to an institution that routinely causes the very harms it claims to interrupt. In this framing, listening is not just a practice but an apparatus. It is part of the aesthetic of reform: a relational technology that improves optics without disturbing root conditions. As Stoever (2016) notes, sound in institutional contexts becomes a "repository of apprehension, oppression, and confrontation", a means by which power hears and responds selectively, under racialized and classed assumptions (p. 4). The officer's attentive tone and affirming words may soothe, but

they do not erase the fact that the individual was still framed as a threat, and the crisis was still mediated through an armed response. The presence of a weapon, even when used inwardly, activates a threat response within the policing paradigm, a response shaped by legal doctrine, departmental policy, and cultural narratives about risk. This threat is further racialized. Upon learning that the individual is Latino, the officer adjusts his language to include Spanish phrases: an attempt at rapport-building that also signals the racialized assumptions shaping the encounter. Scholars in critical race theory and abolitionist praxis have long noted how racialized subjects are disproportionately coded as dangerous, irrational, or unpredictable in public and institutional imaginaries. As Stoever (2016) reminds us, sound functions as a kind of ambient power: one that travels through affect, tone, and auditory cues that are difficult to contest. The officer's calm voice, the use of affirming phrases, and the switch to Spanish all create a sense of care. But care, in this context, does not dismantle the structure that required the subject to be managed in the first place. The structure remains unchanged: the knife is removed, but not the conditions that made the knife feel necessary.

This vignette reveals the paradox of police listening as both a tool of care and a mechanism of control. The officer's use of paraphrasing, affirming language, and code-switching reflects the promise of police training: communication that de-escalates, builds rapport, and signals emotional intelligence. Yet even this attunement is shaped by a structure that frames the individual as a threat, not a subject of harm. Listening here operates within institutional logics that pacify crisis without addressing its root causes.

What Could be Practiced

This tension between listening as a tool and listening as relational transformation is not just a technical one, but a relational struggle: a space where one kind of listening is practiced, but another kind is longed for by those facing police officers. Officers may sense this themselves, feeling the inadequacy of their tools in the face of human suffering, but without an alternative paradigm or relational infrastructure, they are left to resolve civilian and collective pain through procedural means.

Exploring what could be practiced in this moment is significant. Below, I explore openings for institutional imagination by centering listening practices in an ecosystem of care instead of using them only as tactical tools. First, listening could be practiced as shared vulnerability. Rather than listening primarily to manage risk, officers could listen to co-witness pain. The goal could shift from de-escalation alone to mutual transformation. This would render listening less one-directional and more relational: not only soothing enough to secure compliance, but also inviting co-presence where pain or fear might be metabolized within a wider holding field. During the Oakland City Police Commission meeting on December 12, 2024, community members called for restorative justice practices to address conflicts between police officers and community members: "Hearing people's stories and getting to the bottom of what happens can foster better relationships and understanding," stated one community member during the meeting (Citizen Portal, 2024).

Second, institutions could practice building conditions that make relational listening sustainable. This would mean cultivating infrastructures for accompaniment, follow-up care, and community accountability. Listening could become ongoing rather than event-based- remaining in relationship beyond the moment of crisis. Programs like CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) in Eugene, Oregon, model this by embedding crisis responders, medics, and mental health workers within communities. Instead of a one-time intervention, they connect individuals to ongoing supports, demonstrating how listening can extend into accompaniment (Davis et al., 2025). Police could either delegate to such programs or learn from them to grow ongoing care in their approach to civilians.

Third, listening could be practiced within collective context. Rather than isolating distress as an individual incident, institutions could attune to its roots in social, racial, and economic dislocation. Several Indigenous or partnership-based police services in Canada have built "contextual listening" into their models. For example, the Tsuu T'ina Nation in Alberta established its own court that blends provincial law with traditional peacemaker circles. This court uses Tsuu T'ina cultural ceremonies (e.g., sage smudging) and involves local peacemakers and Elders alongside judges and lawyers. Victims, offenders and their families sit together in a circle and draw on community values to find resolutions. In effect, every case is explicitly connected to Tsuu T'ina history and traditions, linking the response to collective healing (Clark, 2019). Reflexive listening could generate collective self-questioning: Why was this our responsibility? What could have supported this individual before reaching this edge? Police academies could learn from these models, not to replicate, but to reshape their own training toward humility, accountability, and embeddedness within living histories.

Finally, a relational ethic grounded in mutual co-responsibility could be practiced. This requires not just more empathic officers, but different relational conditions altogether: spaces where care is not synonymous with control, where crisis is met with community rather than enforcement, and where listening participates in a larger metabolism of repair. In places like Denver's

STAR (Support Team Assisted Response) program, crises involving mental health, poverty, or substance use are responded to without police at all, embodying a vision where community care replaces enforcement.

In mapping these possibilities, the point is not to romanticize individual actors but to surface structural conditions and epistemic shifts that could expand what listening might become. By naming existing experiments alongside imagined practices, we can see that these shifts are not only aspirational but already underway.

Conclusion

This article has traced the contours of a tension that cannot be resolved by training alone: the gap between listening as performance and tool and listening as relationality. Through vignettes, theoretical framings, and moments of institutional analysis, we have seen how police listening can rub against logics of urgency, legibility, and control. It is not just that officers are trained to listen within a crisis paradigm, but that the institution itself is built to filter, redirect, and contain the very possibility of deeper listening.

From a meta-relational perspective, then, the question is not whether police can be trained to "listen better," but what "good listening" might mean under such conditions. It cannot be reduced to technique or function: whether an officer calms a situation, collects information, or signals empathy. Rather, good listening involves attending to the relational fields in which voices are made audible or inaudible, staying with contradictions instead of resolving them, and opening possibilities for recognition that exceed institutional scripts. In this sense, good listening is less a skill to be mastered than a practice of dwelling with paradox, of hearing what institutional forms cannot contain.

Then, the question for police officers is not whether they can or want to listen better, but whether they are willing to listen otherwise: in ways that exceed function, refuse containment, and orient toward more accountable and entangled forms of care.

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