"Talk Them and Walk Them": An Exploration of Police Negotiator Training for De-Escalating Crisis Situations

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Abstract

While police are frequent responders to individuals experiencing psychological crises, they often lack the communication training needed to peacefully de-escalate these complex situations. This article analyses a three-day police communication and de-escalation training program, delivered by experienced police negotiators to general duties officers. To assess the training's effectiveness, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight police officers from an Australian police organisation: three police negotiators who deliver the training and five general duties officers who received it. Applying adult learning theory (andragogy) as a lens, the findings revealed that the police trainees valued the student-centred, active learning approach to training, which differed from traditional rote training. Participants reported long-term benefits, noting the training's effectiveness in peacefully de-escalating crises in practice. Limitations were also identified, including the absence of follow-up, refresher training, and the lack of availability of the program at the police academy and for all frontline officers.

Keywords: Policing; police negotiators; crisis response training; andragogy.

Introduction

Police training aims to equip officers with skills and knowledge that can be reliably recalled and applied in real-world situations (Koerner & Staller, 2021). This is especially important for training officers in complex communication and de-escalation skills to manage individuals in psychological crises who may pose a risk to themselves or others (Morgan & Miles-Johnson, 2022). While use-of-force training generally encompasses hands-on, experiential training methods (Rajakaruna et al., 2017), police communication and de-escalation training is often criticised for its lack of real-world relevance, especially when it relies on teacher-centred, passive learning methods such as theoretical lectures or rote learning (Birzer & Tannehill, 2001; Morgan, 2022). Such pedagogical practices are less likely to result in the retention of critical de-escalation and communication skills that police officers need to apply in situations involving individuals experiencing psychological distress (Marenin, 2004; Morgan, 2022). This study evaluates a police negotiator training program in response to the broader lack of effective communication and de-escalation training in policing – often limited to theoretical lectures and rote learning – by examining whether it reflects adult learning principles (andragogy) and translates into practical effectiveness.

The Default to Force

When someone poses a risk to themselves or others, community members often turn to the police for resolution (Bittner, 1990). This reliance arises, in part, from the fact that police are uniquely "equipped, entitled, and required to deal with every exigency in which force may have to be used, to meet it" (Bittner, 1990, p. 256). Thus, police are extensively trained in use-of-force tactics (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010).

Not all crisis situations to which police are called are necessarily suitable for resolution through use of force. Concerns have been raised at coronial level in Australia regarding the frequency with which police responses to crises involving individuals with mental illness result in the death of the person in crisis (Dodd et al., 2025; Dodd et al., 2024). Independent formal reviews have highlighted opportunities for police organisations to enhance their learning from critical incidents and strengthen their training programs accordingly (Law Enforcement Conduct Commission, 2023; McLeod & Beazley, 2024). These findings align with reports from police officers who have expressed feeling ill-prepared by their training to peacefully manage such episodes (Morgan & Miles-Johnson, 2022). Additionally, evidence shows that in some police organisations, more time and effort are dedicated to firearms training than to mental health response training (Morgan, 2022).

Concerns regarding the unnecessary or disproportionate use of force are central to a concept known as the "use of force continuum". Police organisations have a responsibility to train officers in the use of force to mitigate risks to officers and the public when force is relied upon (Bronitt & Gani, 2012). Typically, use of force training follows an interactive 'continuum training' method, where officers begin with verbal communication and escalate through the continuum to physical force as the situation intensifies (Bronitt & Gani, 2012). However, since most police officers in Australia receive only basic communication and de-escalation training for crisis situations (Clifford, 2010; Morgan, 2024), risk assessment when dealing with individuals in psychological distress is often left to the officer's discretion, where the officer could default to more forceful tactics in the continuum.

In crisis situations, police tend to default to familiar tactics – those emphasised in training. This raises enduring questions about the "use of force continuum", particularly whether minimal physical contact or verbal commands constitute "force" and should be its conceptual starting point (Henriksen & Kruke, 2020). Australian police agencies increasingly prioritise communication as the primary response within this model (Morgan & Miles-Johnson, 2022). However, the term "force" itself is problematic, as its directive tone implicitly excludes non-forceful resolutions. In contrast, the College of Policing (2020) in England and Wales, foregrounds "conflict management" and "de-escalation" – including situational and emotional awareness, self-regulation, active listening, and negotiation – over force-based guidance.

Evolution in Police Training

Police training has traditionally relied on in-house design and delivery, featuring rote classroom instruction in law and procedure, occasional scenario-based exercises, physical training, and parade drills (Bradford & Pynes, 1999). By the late 20th century, both practitioners and educators recognised these methods as inadequate for contemporary policing (Bradford & Pynes, 1999). The emphasis on militaristic and behaviourist approaches began shifting toward an education-oriented philosophy (Birzer, 2003), reinforced by the growing role of academic institutions in probationer training (Cordner & Shain, 2011; Macvean & Cox, 2012) and a broader push to professionalise policing through enhanced education (Fielding, 2018).

Recent research suggests that police training in Australia, as well as in other Anglophone countries, still have significant progress to make in transitioning from traditional and behaviourist training models (Daly, 2012; Miles-Johnson, 2023; Morgan, 2022). For example, Australian police trainees in Miles-Johnson's (2023) research noted that there was "insufficient guidance and lack of preparation. It was learning in a vacuum" (2023, p. 219), and that "the training at the academy is behind the times, it's not keeping up with what's happening" (2023, p. 222). Consequentially, Miles-Johnson (2023) concludes that Australian recruits should begin their training with hands-on, workplace learning instead of classroom-based instruction, as this is likely to enhance their professionalism, better prepare them for the realities of police work, and improve their ability to perform all aspects of policing. Morgan (2022) agrees in his study of an Australian police academy, noting that too much time is dedicated to paramilitary-style training, such as marching and parading, while communication and de-escalation training is underemphasised in comparison to firearms training.

The limitations in traditional police training delivery have also been recognised by educationalists. Commenting on peace officer training in Idaho, United States, Werth (2011) contends that modern policing demands a shift from traditional lectures to methods that cultivate self-directed learning, problem-solving, decision-making, critical thinking, and interpersonal

communication. In Australia, Shipton (2022) agrees, arguing that police academy teachers need to move "outside the comfort zone to try new teaching ideas and critically reflect on their effectiveness to facilitate deeper learning" (p. 79).

If historical police training methods owe much to pedagogic thinking, the ideas being explored by Werth (2011) and Shipton (2022) owe more to andragogic theory. Andragogy, otherwise known as adult learning theory, emphasises mutual involvement of teacher and student in the learning process, promoting a more student-centred approach to learning (Marenin, 2004). Knowles (1978) established key principles of andragogy, emphasising that adults, in contrast to children (pedagogy), bring valuable real-world experience to their learning, which they can apply. According to andragogy, adult learners are driven by goals and will lack motivation if they cannot perceive the relevance of the material, understand the desired outcomes, and see how the learning will benefit them after the course (Knowles et al., 2015). Thus, learners construct their own knowledge by engaging in task-oriented, real-world, purposeful activities that reflect their life aspirations (Knowles et al., 2015).

Scholars argue that professionalising policing requires a shift from traditional pedagogy to a andragogical approach to training (Birzer, 2003; Birzer & Tannehill, 2001; Marenin, 2004). Birzer and Tannehill (2001) argue that andragogic methods are especially appropriate for training in areas such as cultural diversity, community relations, problem-solving, interpersonal communication, and conflict resolution. Communication and conflict resolution skills, in particular, are crucial for effectively de-escalating crisis situations (see Belur & Bentall, 2024; Gilbert et al., 2013; Koerner & Staller, 2021). Despite growing recognition of the importance of communication and de-escalation skills in policing, there remains a significant gap in the availability and quality of training programs that effectively develop these competencies — particularly in the context of negotiator training.

Police Negotiator Training

Societies overreliance on police to respond to individuals experiencing psychological distress has led to widespread endorsement of police de-escalation training by politicians, academics, expert panels, and the public (Engel et al., 2020). In Australia, and many Western police agencies, police negotiators are a specialised cadre of officers extensively trained in de-escalation communication techniques (Steele et al., 2023). They respond to peacefully resolve crisis situations involving individuals at risk of suicide, self-harm, or causing harm to others, as well as barricaded individuals or hostage situations. They often provide leadership and guidance in these cases (Vecchi et al., 2005). Like other Australian state and territory police agencies, the Queensland Police Service (QPS) employs police negotiators who work to ensure peaceful resolutions without loss of life, injury, or property damage (Queensland Police Service, 2021). Since QPS negotiators cannot respond to all crisis incidents statewide, they offer specialised communication training to limited cohorts of general duty officers who choose to enrol in specific training activities (Queensland Health, 2017).

While there is limited research on the role and training of Australian police negotiators, Grubb and colleagues have extensively researched police negotiators in the United Kingdom (see Grubb et al., 2015; Grubb et al., 2021; Grubb et al., 2022). This body of research focuses on the traits of an effective negotiator – such as emotional intelligence and decision-making style – and the content of negotiation training, rather than the educational theory underpinning its delivery. Key lessons for police trainers include the importance of focussing on practical skills, communication, cross-disciplinary collaboration – such as coordination with tactical firearms teams – and stress management techniques. Regarding training delivery, realistic simulations and scenario-based exercises are recommended. Ongoing professional development is essential to sustain skill levels and help negotiators to adapt to evolving contexts and emerging technologies (Grubb et al., 2019; Grubb et al., 2021; Grubb et al., 2022).

The Current Study

This study explores both the content and delivery of a three-day police negotiator training program from the perspectives of both the trainers and the trainees. The three-day training program is not intended to fully qualify general duties police officers as negotiators (qualifications require several weeks of intensive training). Instead, the program focusses on teaching officers specialised communication and de-escalation tactics to peacefully resolve crisis situations. General duties police rarely receive this specialised negotiator training in Australia, which is surprising given Australian police generally spend 10-30% of their time responding to psychological crises (Kruger, 2020). Given the rarity and critical importance of police negotiator training, it is essential that such programs are delivered effectively using andragogical principles. This ensures that adult learners engage meaningfully with the material, apply it in practice, and are better prepared for the complex, high-stakes situations they face in the field.

This research presents a unique case study aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of the novel training in teaching police officers skilled communication tactics for use in crisis situations. The central research question guiding this study was: *To what extent does the three-day negotiator training effectively equip police with communicative de-escalation tactics?*

Understanding the benefits and limitations of this specific training package is critical, given the limited research in Australia on the effectiveness of police negotiator training and the growing demand for communication and de-escalation skills in policing. The findings of this research not only provide valuable insights for police organisations on the effectiveness and transferability of negotiator training, but also suggest directions for future research in this area.

Method

Design
A qualitative research design was employed, in which semi-structured interviews were thematically analysed.

Participants
The interviewees comprised eight active QPS officers, including five general duties police officers (the trainees) and three police negotiators (the trainers). All five general duties officers were based in a small, regional city in the Australian state of Queensland. As per the ethics agreement, the location is deidentified to protect the anonymity of the participants. General duties police participants comprised of two females and three males. Purposive sampling was used to select relevant general duties police participants based on the criterion that they all received the same police negotiator training at the same time and location.

Purposive sampling was also used to select relevant police negotiators who are responsible for designing and delivering the training being studied. The negotiators were all full-time police negotiators and were based in a different location to the general duties police. However, they travel to regional and remote areas of Queensland to deliver negotiator training for general duties police. Two male negotiators and one female negotiator participated. In the findings reported below, general duties police are referred to as "trainees" and police negotiators as "trainers".

Measures
Two semi-structured interview guides were developed: one for the general duties police who received the training and another for the police negotiators who deliver the training. To ensure content validity, interview questions were co-designed and piloted with the assistance of key personnel from the QPS, drawing on their expertise and operational insights into negotiator training. While some questions were informed by the andragogical framework, others were co-developed with the QPS to explore the practical effectiveness of the training.

Interview schedule for general duties police
This semi-structured interview scheduled addressed the following areas: (1) length of police service; (2) frequency of responding to vulnerable individuals in crisis; (3) interagency collaboration with the health sector; (4) general perceptions of the negotiator training; (5) perceived improvements to the negotiator training; (6) use, confidence, and efficacy of the training in practice; (7) refresher training.

Interview schedule for police negotiators
This semi-structured interview schedule addressed the following areas: (1) length of police negotiator service; (2) levels of success as police negotiator; (3) avenues of negotiator support for frontline police; (4) transferability of negotiator skills; (5) andragogical training practices; (6) availability and frequency of negotiator training

Procedure
Ethical approval was obtained from the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref. 2023-3235E), and permission was granted by the QPS Research Committee (QPSRC Ref. 0623-3.03). Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. As discussed in the findings, the research site was selected due to it being one of the few QPS districts that offered the novel three-day negotiator training package in 2023. A QPS Research Liaison Officer worked with the researcher to identify participants who received the training so that they could be invited to participate in the study. A six-month period following the completion of the training was intentionally left before inviting participants to participate in the research, giving them ample time to apply the training to real-life policing situations involving vulnerable individuals in crisis. Of the nine officers identified as having received the training, five participated in this study. The Research Liaison Officer also assisted with selecting the

relevant police negotiators who have extensive experience of delivering the training. Interviews lasted between 20 and 42 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and redactions were made to remove identifiable material.

Analysis

All the transcripts were uploaded into NVivo software to facilitate thematic coding. A modified grounded theory approach (Kinoshita, 2003) was used, incorporating both deductive and inductive methods of analysis. This flexible approach allowed existing theoretical concepts to guide the coding process while remaining open to new insights emerging from the data.

A priori coding was informed by the andragogical framework, which emphasises adult learning principles such as encouraging dialogue, setting clear learning objectives, fostering motivation, ensuring real-world relevance, creating a safe learning environment, supporting self-esteem, and valuing the learner experience (Knowles, 1978). These principles shaped the analysis of how the training was delivered.

While this structured method supported consistency in coding, the researcher remained open to identifying emergent codes, particularly those related to the practical effectiveness of the training. This flexibility enabled the capture of insights not anticipated in the initial framework. Due to resourcing constraints, coding was by a single researcher. While this limited opportunities for intercoder reliability checks, consistency was maintained by using a structured codebook and iterative review of the data.

A two-stage analytical process was followed. In the first stage, open coding was used to identify key concepts from the raw data. In the second stage, these concepts were grouped into broader themes through selective coding, allowing for a more focused interpretation aligned with the study's theoretical framework and research aims. As a result, three salient themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) The appeal of andragogy, (2) Efficacy of negotiator training, (3) Improvements to crisis response.

Findings

The Appeal of Andragogy

When asked what they enjoyed most about the three-day negotiator training program, all the trainees described the program's delivery as engaging and motivating. Motivation is a key principle of andragogy, driven by intrinsic factors such as self-directed learning, relevance to personal life or career, and the ability to immediately apply learning to real-world situations (Knowles et al., 2015). Motivation can be increased when educators promote group work, like role-play scenarios, as they allow learners to exchange ideas, draw from real-world experiences, and use these insights for problem-solving (McGrath, 2009). Several trainees noted that the abundance of role-play scenarios enhanced the class's motivation to learn and apply the principles to real-world scenarios:

> I thoroughly enjoyed it. I thought the structure of the training was really well done because there was a lot of freedom to discuss with the group in the material… then, try to actually put [it] into practice, and I think having multiple turns at that is really handy as well. When you actually try to put it into a practice scenario, you'll get different scenarios where things won't work or other scenarios where things will work. (Police Trainee 4)

The trainers agreed with this notion, commenting that collaborative scenario training is the fundamental learning tool in the negotiator course. It allows skills to be applied in practice, which in turn builds camaraderie and self-esteem. To add real-world context, all the scenarios were based on real-life negotiator situations:

> … get them on the tools as we call it… they're not just sitting in the classroom for eight hours looking at a PowerPoint. Yeah, I don't learn like that. I don't know too many adults that would. (Negotiator Trainer 2)

> We've always found scenarios to be the best way to train a communication skill … It is a matter of teaching it and then being able to apply it in the right time at the right moment… (Negotiator Trainer 1)

Both trainers and trainees noted how scenario training is most effective when accompanied by peer-assisted feedback, which fosters dialogue. Knowles (1978) argues that dialogue is essential for creating active learning environments for adult learners, enabling them to gain a deeper understanding of concepts through interaction, critical thinking, and fostering a sense of belonging:

> It's fair enough to be teaching people basic principles of what we're trying to instil in them, but unless you can put them into a practical scenario, observe them doing that, provide live real time feedback on their performance, and then give them another go at it after providing them some feedback … that live time assistance, to improve their skill set, you can't do that through an online learning product. (Negotiator Trainer 3)

> … when you're actually there and getting critiqued, you can only get better by doing it that way. (Police Trainee 3)

In Knowles' view, dialogue transforms the traditional pedagogical approach by easing power imbalances through collaborative relationships, allowing the educator to guide rather than manage the learning process (Maheshwari & Thomas, 2017). This approach encourages students to take a more active role in their learning, as reflected in the trainers allowing learners to apply their own real-world experiences to scenarios. For example, one trainer explained how they create a more authentic learning experience by not modelling any of the skills, but instead letting the learners apply the content with their own communication style:

> We don't actually do demonstrations because then people try and mimic. So, we kind of leave them out. So, it's an explanation of the theory behind it, and then let people practice their own skills. Because you have to be genuine. It has to be you. It can't be a great impersonation of me. (Negotiator Trainer 1)

Several trainees appreciated this active approach to learning, often contrasting it with the more traditional, rote style of police training they had received:

> I've done lots of other training courses that can be quite content heavy, and it was a completely different way to engage in the training. At no point did it feel like other training courses, where like 'ohh, can't wait for this PowerPoint to get through' or gotta wait for so this and that... So yeah, for those reasons, I really liked it. (Police Trainee 3)

Most of the trainers and trainees highlighted the key andragogical principle of "real-world relevance" as central to nurturing a student-centred, engaging learning experience. Knowles (1978) emphasises the importance of real-world relevance in adult learning, arguing that learners need to see the relevance of their learning and how it benefits their lives and personal goals. For example, one trainer mentioned tailoring aspects of the course to meet the specific vocational needs of the trainees by asking students which aspects of negotiation they would like to learn:

> '…search your minds and what is it that you think you would want to know from me, given whatever the scenario is you have in your head that you think I can help you with at your day-to-day job to make it easy.' So, all the topics that I have will be ones that have been generated from the student body. Automatically, it helps create a buy-in, gets people learning that because they actually want to learn… it resonates with people because they pick their own content. So, they're already invested in it. (Negotiator Trainer 2)

Providing a more student-centred learning experience grounded in real-world relevance allowed the trainees to see the significance of their learning and how it would benefit them when communicating with individuals in crisis. For example, Police Trainee 3 mentioned that they saw the purpose of the training as making their life easier in de-escalating crisis situations, *"It's just teaching you how better to do the job and make it easier for you"* (Police Trainee 3).

Other trainees valued the credible, real-world experience the negotiators brought into the classroom, especially since the trainers are all active negotiators and not just teachers:

> Overall, I think the best thing was probably the credibility of the presenter. He presented as very credible, and he presented as someone with real world experience … It was refreshing to see someone who had that wealth of on road experience regarding this exact topic and he was very believable. (Police Trainee 1)

This same trainee contrasted the real-world credibility of the trainer to that of trainers who do not have real-world experience and only possess theoretical knowledge.

> You believed him when he said the things he said … we will be given courses that are generally, they [trainers] just found their way into that instructor role because they're not the best police officers, unfortunately, because it's a way to get off the road … I think that's a bit of a police specific problem. (Police Trainee 1)

This quote highlights the importance of bringing real-world experience to the classroom, as it allows learners to visualise how the content applies in real-world contexts. The following section presents findings that suggest whether the training is practically applicable in real-world contexts.

Efficacy of Negotiator Training

Six months after receiving the training, all general duties police agreed that the training has provided long-term benefits to their communication skills in policing situations. This is an important finding, as all the general duties officers stated that responding to individuals in some form of crisis is a daily occurrence:

> I have tried them [communication skills] multiple times and I've been very surprised how well they work because it's one thing hearing the theory and him telling you stories, but then you go and talk to people, and you just do these really basic skills with them and … I was quite surprised by how much they work. (Police Trainee 1)

Several police trainees highlighted specific communication skills from the curriculum that worked well in practice, such as validation. Validating the crisis of someone experiencing it was said to be very effective for de-escalating the crisis:

> I think it was good teaching you ways to validate people and acknowledge how they're feeling. That was like the biggest thing I've taken away from it. I remember one particular situation where I was talking to a guy who's just hammered, super drunk and he just had a mad blowout with his misses. He just wanted to explain, and acknowledging all those things with him helped a lot, showing him a bit of validation and acknowledging [sic] meant that we resolved the whole thing peacefully. (Police Trainee 2)

Emotional labelling was another skill that was noted by the general duties officers as an effective technique for validating the emotions of individuals in crisis:

> Emotional labelling, it's essentially labelling their emotions that they're going through. So, if you see someone like that, just saying, you know, you look really angry … I think the main thing is the emotional labelling seems to work really well. (Police Trainee 5)

However, effective communication skills were argued to not be entirely verbal, as several interviewees emphasised the importance of active listening skills that were taught in the training. Interviewees described active listening as being patient, listening intently, acknowledging what has been said through verbal cues and body language, and avoiding interruptions:

> … a lot of people mistake what we do as negotiators for being good talkers, it's the ability to listen and pick up on body language. (Negotiator Trainer 3)

> I'm understanding what those silences are … it used to be that was just a wall and that wall wasn't gonna get overcome. And sometimes that's the case, but sometimes they need actual time and you just gotta sit there with them in silence. (Police Trainee 1)

> So [if] you just wanna resolve it quickly, or you know, you're rolling your eyes, they can pick up on that you know, behavioural cues and things like that. So, it's not helping their situation. (Police Trainee 5)

A salient theme in the data was that the training, along with applying these communication skills in practice, has the potential to make the professional lives of responding officers easier by therapeutically de-escalating a crisis instead of resorting to force:

> … 'talk them and walk them'. That was a phrase that we used to use, and if you could do that, you would save grief for yourself, you'd save grief for your partner, you'd save time … so you could get into a fight every second job if you really wanted to, but it makes you incredibly inefficient as an operational officer. So, your ability to influence people, you become highly efficient at your duties. (Negotiator Trainer 1)

> … why are we trying to rush through incidents and jobs to move on to the next one? Like do the first job properly and I think you're gonna have more of a response and more of a better future outcome through communication than what you would through use of force. (Police Trainee 5)

> Several interviewees also mentioned the transferability of these skills, noting that they can be applied in any interaction with the public, not just with those in crisis:

> … knowing how to talk to someone and knowing how to empathise with them is more effective in actually extracting the information that we need in order to investigate things across the board. (Police Trainee 3)

> … 100% of jobs that require a police response will involve communications, whether that's the old lady that's been broken into … or whether that's the person in a full-blown crisis threatening their own lives or the lives of others. So, yeah, in my experience, very, very transferable across. (Negotiator Trainer 2)

Improvements to Crisis Response

Participants were asked if there were additional resources that could better assist the police in responding to crisis situations. Several general duties police suggested that the three-day negotiator training package should be implemented into the academy, so recruits receive it at the start of their careers. These participants were critical of the academy training, asserting that it does not adequately prepare recruits to communicate with individuals in crisis:

> I definitely think it's something that should be rolled out to the academy, like that's key, what we teach those guys, yeah, I just don't agree with the way the academy's done. (Police Trainee 5)

> This could be very useful having the three-day [negotiator training] at the academy. The amount of shit, I mean the stuff that could be cut out at the academy is ridiculous … you spend days with the academy learning the different types of burglary, how often do you charge someone with burglary? (Police Trainee 1)

Others cautioned that it would be difficult for recruits to contextualise the negotiator training at the academy, as they lack experience of managing crisis situations in practice. The same logic applies to officers who have not responded to crisis situations in their career. Most officers suggested providing the three-day training package for police officers shortly after completing academy training and making it mandatory rather than voluntary:

> … like we have people in our course that had like 30 years of service going 'I can't believe I'm only just learning about this now.' Like you know, to hear that you go yeah, well, how different the last 30 years could have been if you had known how to do this. (Police Trainee 3)

> I 100% think everyone should do this training. I mean, it shouldn't just be a select few people … you can't have people out there, they need better tools for communication. (Police Trainee 5)

Yet participants argued that the negotiator training should be followed up by refresher courses and should not be a one-time package. Both trainers and trainees recognised that, without consistent revision and practice, skills perish over time:

> … even if we just had a one-day refresher where we do scenarios at the end, like once a year, like we do with all our other qualifications, that would be good; it probably doesn't have to be as expansive. (Police Trainee 2)

> … having a refresher would be really good for especially general duties officers that are dealing with people in crisis all the time … and you have vulnerable people that you know it can get frustrating, and for certain officers, I think you're gonna lose a bit of empathy and you can't do your job as well and you can't help people as well. (Police Trainee 4)

These quotes reflect a broader issue in policing, where training packages are often offered only once as stand-alone exercises, without follow-up refresher training or staff appraisals (Miles-Johnson, 2016). Participants acknowledged this widespread problem, citing the lack of resources to provide such training to all police officers, along with follow-up refreshers, "…every time you do training, you take police off the road, and you know, that's a logistical problem (Police Trainee 2).

Participants also acknowledged that there are not enough qualified negotiators to train all police officers in the state. For this reason, negotiators prioritise regional and remote areas, where police have fewer staff and resources, and where building trusting relationships with the community is crucial.

While acknowledging that the training would be useful if implemented for all frontline police to manage service demands, participants frequently criticised the mental health sector for its lack of support in addressing community mental health crises. Participants agreed that some crises warrant a police response if there is a threat to the community but feel overburdened by mental health callouts that would be better handled by health-based services:

> I do not think it warrants a police response. It's not a police problem; it's a health problem. But we get called to every single one of them. It's always our problem, and I guess a lot of police don't have the patience to deal with something like that. (Police Trainee 5)

> … there's a lot of pressure on police to fill the gaps that other services don't provide. So, like there is a lot of external agencies, whether it's Queensland Health or ambulance or mental health services that I think play a vital role in vulnerable people with mental health but maybe aren't held to as much account as police to make sure that they're fulfilling those services … (Police Trainee 3)

Police feeling overburdened by having to respond to mental health incidents is a global problem, prevalent across Australia and beyond, with police filling service gaps by providing a de facto, round-the-clock mental health response to crises (Clifford, 2010; Morgan & Paterson, 2017).

Limitations

The research observed only one police negotiator training program, so the findings cannot be generalised to all police training programs within the QPS or to other police organisations across Australia. While social desirability bias may have influenced participants' responses, the researcher maintained institutional independence and had no professional affiliation with the police organisation. Assurances of anonymity and confidentiality likely further reduced pressure to provide overly positive feedback, supporting the integrity of the data. It is also recognised that the QPS police negotiator training may not reflect current practices in training police negotiator skills. While the findings are not universally applicable, they highlight the importance of police training programs that are taught using andragogical teaching methods.

Discussion

While limited in scope, this case study analysis presents encouraging in-depth qualitative data illustrating the training program's effectiveness in equipping frontline police with the necessary communication skills to de-escalate peacefully crisis situations. It is contended here that this effectiveness correlates with the andragogical techniques used to deliver the training, which are consistently argued to result in better knowledge and skills retention for police in practice (Birzer, 2003; Birzer & Tannehill, 2001; Vodde, 2011).

The use of andragogy as a teaching and learning framework is a consistent finding in the data, especially regarding the trainees' enjoyment of the training program. According to andragogy, such enjoyment is correlated with engagement and focus on the content, which is likely to lead to lasting knowledge and skills retention (Lucardie, 2014). When adults enjoying learning, they are more likely to explore new ideas, experiment with different approaches, take risks, and find creative solutions to problems (Knowles, 1978). Our data supports this notion, with several participants noting how they were able to freely apply the content in scenario exercises and discuss it with their peers and trainers without judgement. This type of learning contrasts the more traditional, rote-based police communication training, which relies on memorisation of lecture content, often referred to as "death by PowerPoint" (Buhrig, 2024, p. 344).

Although the traditional pedagogical mode of police training may have once met the needs of both police and society, its relevance and effectiveness have been questioned (Vodde, 2011). It is asserted here that creating a socially connected learning environment in the classroom is pivotal for creating a similar environment in the task setting of a police officer. The negotiators in this study argued this point, suggesting that communication skills can only be taught and learnt through role-play scenarios that enable peer-assisted dialogue and feedback. The inverse, where police trainers deliver training in a regimented, lecture-based format with little input from trainees, positions the lecturer as the superior guardian of knowledge, likely reinforcing a similar command structure in practice (Birzer & Tannehill, 2001). Such skills are not conducive to resolving crises therapeutically with tactical communication skills.

The trainees supported this notion, noting six months after receiving the training that it has instilled long-lasting skills and knowledge that they have effectively applied in all communications with the public, not just for crisis situations. All the participants highlighted the transferability of the communication skills in eliciting more peaceful, cooperative, and compliant behaviour from citizens. This finding aligns with extensive procedural justice literature, which suggests that when police treat citizens with dignity and respect, allow them a voice, demonstrate trustworthy motives, and provide neutral treatment, it fosters trusting and cooperative relationships with police (Morgan & Higginson, 2023; Tyler, 2011). The active listening, validation, and emotional labelling skills learnt in the training speak to the efficacy and principles of the procedural justice framework.

Such training not only has the potential to benefit police in their duties but may also lead to safer outcomes for individuals experiencing psychological distress when encountering the police. In Australia, research shows that individuals experiencing mental distress are significantly more likely than the general population to be injured or killed by police during encounters or operational responses (Clifford, 2022; Lyneham & Chan, 2013). These cases often involve high-stress situations where an individual in crisis is displaying perceived threatening behaviour toward the police or others (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2013). In these cases, police are more likely to default to high-level uses of force to neutralise the threat, rather than attempting peaceful negotiation tactics. Training packages, such as the negotiator training, provide an alternative skillset for police that may enhance both the safety of the public and officers. A key finding from this study is the potential value of

de-escalation training, which warrants further development and integration into broader police education – particularly for general duties officers who frequently encounter volatile situations requiring effective communicative conflict resolution.

Critics may question the short-term nature of the negotiator training program, given it only spanned three days. As Skogan et al. (2015) argues, little is known of the long-term benefits of police training of any kind. While these findings are perception-based and do not directly test the effect of the training on police practice, Koerner and Staller (2021) argue that an economic use of time resources in police training depends on the chosen teaching method and its ability to effectively deliver content relevant to the realities of operational environments. Thus, three days of training underpinned by andragogy is arguably a more efficient use of time and resources than extended periods of theoretical pedagogical training with which learners often do not effectively engage (Birzer, 2003; Birzer & Tannehill, 2001).

The participants advocated for this negotiator training to be made available to recruits and officers at all levels within the organisation. To ensure skills do not deteriorate over time, refresher training is essential. Routine training is essential for the operation of any organisation and the growth of its staff, but it must be weighed against the financial and opportunity costs. While advocating for the roll-out of the program, participants acknowledged the limited resources available for delivering police training in general. Abstracting officers from operational duty for training places strain on operational requirements. Therefore, training should be prioritised based on needs to meet service demands (Jones, 1999). Given the community's reliance on police to respond effectively to psychological crises, this article argues that de-escalation and communication training, such as negotiator training, should be a core resource priority for Australian police agencies. Without it, critical incidents between police and individuals in psychological distress are likely to persist.

However, participants in this study argue against police being primary responders to mental health crises, which is a universal issue amongst the policing scholarship (Miles-Johnson & Morgan, 2022; Morgan & Paterson, 2017). While this research identifies the need for police to receive in-depth communication and de-escalation training to manage psychological crises, ideally, this should not occur in a vacuum, given the multitude of other agencies better suited to handle such crises. A more proactive, collaborative approach to mental health incidents is needed. For example, the co-responder model where police and mental health professionals work together to address psychological crises (Furness et al., 2016) or the "right care, right person" strategies now practiced in England and Wales (Metropolitan Police, 2024). While such interagency schemes are widely endorsed for their efficacy in therapeutically de-escalating crises, they lack widespread and around the clock availability (Evangelista et al., 2016). The negotiator training package has the potential to provide police organisations with a larger number of officers with relevant skills in peaceful crisis resolution that may facilitate more trusting and safer responses to crisis situations.

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