Creating “Windows of Opportunity”: How Police Officers Sense and Generate Momentum for Gaining Control in Police-Civilian Interactions
Keesman, Laura

published in
Symbolic Interaction
2024

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record
document license
CC BY

Link to publication in VU Research Portal

citation for published version (APA)

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

• Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:
vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Download date: 18. Aug. 2024
Creating “Windows of Opportunity”: How Police Officers Sense and Generate Momentum for Gaining Control in Police-Civilian Interactions

Laura D. Keesman
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

This article examines how police officers generate momentum and create opportunities for gaining control in—what they perceive as—potentially violent interactions. Theoretically, the article aims to add to interactionist sociology by illuminating the mechanisms through which participants anticipate and create shared meanings of future possibilities for an encounter. I build upon insights into the function of social interaction for future configuration proposed by interactionist scholars since the 1960s. The empirical contribution is to challenge explanations of officers’ attempts to gain control as mere cognitivist decision-making, ignoring the embodied dimension of anticipating. Drawing on ninety-four elicitation interviews with Dutch officers on violent events and fieldwork observations of police-civilian interactions, findings show that officers argue they sense opportunities through an awareness of civilian distraction. To create opportunities for actions that enable gaining control, they refocus civilians’ attention. Officers do this by acting in ways a civilian does not readily anticipate through bodily spatial positioning and by using material objects, what I refer to as “positional play.” By detailing how officers act upon momentum, I illustrate that embodied sense-making and attunement toward serendipitous circumstances is key for police action. The article enriches interactionist scholarship by showing the mise en scène of how the police realize control on an embodied level.

Keywords: violence, interactionist sociology, police-civilian interactions, control, embodied sensing
INTRODUCTION

While watching a CCTV video, together with Officer Lee, of an attempt to arrest an individual, I notice that at one point he steps sideways. To understand why Lee does this, I ask him: “Why are you changing your position here?” Lee pauses the video and explains to me while pointing at the screen: “I know my colleague is going to try and grab the suspect in a second. So, the suspect will most likely move forward with his torso. This is why I step aside, so I can immediately grab the suspect’s left arm when my colleague makes the first move.” [field note video elicitation interview]

In this excerpt, Officer Lee speaks to the imperative for sensing what is about to happen in order to gain control of a subject to arrest. He explicates how anticipating involves bodily awareness of himself, his colleague, and the civilian. In his retrospective account, generated by explaining to me what happened in the video, he suggests that initiating (collective) police action requires future-orientedness on a bodily level. Like Officer Lee reconstructs how his bodily comportment makes sense, analyzing recorded situations together with officers in which they participated produces detailed accounts of their actions “getting us closer to the know-how of bodily action” (Keesman 2022b:2).

In daily life, people are future-oriented and “usually have a feel for what might happen next” in everyday interaction (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013:908). This future-orientedness and anticipating is crucial in policing and police-civilian encounters where officers’ main goal is to gain control (Alpert, Dunham, and Macdonald 2004:476; Terrill 2003:60). Losing control can incite feelings of tension, stress, and fear in police officers (Keesman 2022a). Nassauer (2015:9) argues that the slightest opportunity to (re)gain control of immediate situations may thus seem worth taking to officers. Yet, we are still in the process of understanding how future anticipations shape interactions (Tavory 2018:117).

To understand how and when officers attempt to gain control, scholars have generated general descriptions of stages through which police-civilian encounters proceed (Crawford and Burns 2008; Sykes and Brent 1980) or have focused on cultural and situational determinants of coercion (Terrill and Mastrofski 2002). Policing studies now increasingly adopt an interactionist focus (Henry 2021) to grasp both officer and civilian behavior, producing compelling evidence that police use-of-force is oftentimes a response to perceived civilian — or suspect — resistance (Dai, Frank, and Sun 2011; Dunham and Alpert 2009). However, policing studies often tend to view police work as made up of a series of decision-making processes (Bolger 2015; Verhage et al. 2018). They thereby conceptualize police action as “cognitive,” ignoring the embodied dimension of police work. In this article, I address this issue by examining how officers bodily anticipate opportunities to gain control, that is “seize the moment,” in — what they perceive as — potentially violent interactions.

My question is how do police officers argue they sense and create opportunities to gain control? I draw on officers’ accounts of anticipating gaining control. First, I show that control is about securing a future which involves searching for momentum and
demonstrate how officers’ future-orientedness is embodied. Then, I examine what interactional moments officers denote as opportunities, illustrating that they have a temporal character, hence the term “window.” Third, I demonstrate that opportunities are characterized by civilians’ distraction and how officers verbalize sensing them. Finally, I illustrate how officers argue they attempt to manipulate situations to generate momentum and create opportunities by refocusing civilians’ attention. They do this by acting in ways a civilian does not readily anticipate through bodily spatial positioning and by using material objects, what I refer to as “positional play.”

The article enriches policing studies by showing how embodied future anticipations of control are part and parcel of officers’ perception and action. By exploring officers’ embodied ways of anticipating, aligning, and navigating in volatile interactions, it adds to interactional sociology, specifically the interactionist work of Tavory and Eliasoph (2013). Moreover, by illustrating how officers make sense of situations and bodily prepare themselves for gaining control, the article contributes to our understanding of the know-how of producing futures and potentialities for acting (Tavory 2018), shaping police-civilian interactions.

ANTICIPATION, MOMENTUM, AND OPPORTUNITIES

The question of how people anticipate and organize futures has been the center of the interactionist tradition (McCall and Simmons 1966; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013:910; Tavory and Fine 2020). Phenomenologists call the immediate way in which people anticipate their future “protention” (Schutz 1962). As Bourdieu (1990:81) famously posited, “a player who is involved and caught up in the game adjusts not to what he sees but to what he foresees, sees in advance in the directly perceived present; he passes the ball not to the spot where his team-mate is but to the spot he will reach before his opponent a moment later, anticipating the anticipations of the others and (…) seeking to confound them.” To interactionists, future-imaginations structure our understanding of possible courses of action (Mische 2009; Tavory 2018:121). This is because people “implicitly assume they are engaged in a sequence of events, orienting themselves and each other to what comes next” (Husserl in Tavory and Eliasoph 2013:912; see also Katz in Weenink et al. 2020:4). However, ethnographers’ focus on future-making as only created through protention “erased any notion of culture” and culturally shared narratives (Garfinkel 1967; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013:920).

Scholars have long demonstrated the fundamental role that the potential for danger plays in police officers’ daily interpretations (Reiner 1985). Officers are largely oriented toward gaining control given the idea that any situation can escalate at any moment and that violence may occur (Sierra-Arévalo 2021). Yet, the actual risk of encountering violence is disproportionally lower than officers’ perceived risk (Cullen et al. 1983). Still, imagining situations can go wrong “in the next turn” of any interaction, supports their feeling of always having to “maintain the edge” (Paoline
Being in control is, therefore, fundamental to officers’ daily routines and structures their attempts to shape interactions. The key to organizing this is anticipating what will happen next.

Anticipating is crucial for officers trained to recognize the role of danger and work in situations where alignment between them can easily break. They gain a “feel” for nextness, pivotal for initiating collective police action, by reading the bodily actions of their colleagues and civilians (Keesman 2022b). More importantly, officers aim to construct particular futures of control. To gain the upper hand, they generally work to ensure initiative is on their side of the interaction (Alpert et al. 2021) and attempt to sense the right momentum to act or not to act. That said, officers can also fail to sense momentum or impose their dominance, especially in cases of police brutality.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of bodily action in officers’ future-orientedness and to parse out how officers sense and create opportunities for gaining control. To examine how officers attempt to bodily choreograph and organize futures of control, I rely on Tavory and Eliasoph’s (2013) anticipation lens as a hermeneutical tool. I show that officers’ accounts indicate that anticipating momentum and creating opportunities require the ability to read and interpret nonverbal cues, such as gesturing and facial expressions, and to respond with their own bodily movements in a way that disrupts the momentum of others.

DATA AND METHODS

Data Collection

I draw data for this article from ninety-four semi-structured elicitation interviews on antagonistic events with officers and observations of police-civilian interactions. The study is part of a long-term, multi-site ethnography on violent interactions within Dutch policing that I conducted from 2017 to 2021. Importantly, it is situated in a context where officers enjoy more standardized levels of training than, for example, their U.S. counterparts, and relatively high levels of trust characterize engagement with the public. Higher-level management granted formal access following a research proposal. Informally, gaining access required continuous negotiation with multiple police teams. As a female researcher, this meant dealing with gendered power dynamics at times. However, my experience as a former social worker benefited rapport-building.

I accompanied officers of various ranks and roles, including frontline, specialized arrest units, and the riot police in two police stations in the center of two large cities, supplemented with teams in other cities and villages. I went along during day and night shifts, ride-alongs, (un)planned arrests, surveillance and training sessions. I took field notes on officers’ physical movements, cooperating efforts, and narratives. During fieldwork, I asked officers to participate in interviews. The dataset is thus a convenient sample achieved through snowball sampling techniques.
I interviewed trainers, frontline, specialized, and community officers, comprising a total of nineteen females and seventy-six males with an average age of 36 and 13 years of employment. I held joint interviews in sixteen cases, enabling officers to reflect upon their shared practices. Interviews lasted 1 hour and 45 minutes, on average and were all voice-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized through the use of pseudonyms.

To elicit more detailed accounts and invoke clarification, I used drawings and videos as elicitation methods during interviews. Officers’ generated drawings helped them to visualize geographical perceptions and me to uncover their taken-for-granted sense of surroundings. This allowed me to gain a sense of how they perceived and used spaces, for instance, why they considered spatial elements as helping or hindering their actions, and the significance of objects. In twenty-six cases, I watched and discussed video footage of antagonistic incidents together with the officers recorded in these events. I used this approach to elicit responses regarding their actions and thought processes. Videos came from various data sources as violence is not regularly caught on camera, and there is no standard practice for archiving videos in the Dutch police. I co-watched incidents of violence against officers and police violence, on a convenience basis, recorded on CCTV, body-worn cameras, and publicly available bystander videos uploaded online. Incidents ranged from arresting situations with resistance, tense interactions where no force was used, to riots and shooting events, occurring both in urban and rural areas. CCTV, with its elevated angle on natural settings, allows officers to review the actions of multiple actors, whereas body-worn cameras record verbal communication, which includes cues about meaning-making such as intonation of speech (Keesman 2022b:9).

In policing studies, video footage is rarely used interpretively to understand the meanings of actions. Most video analyses of policing are behavior-oriented and do not involve the people under study, therefore, lacking insight into lived experiences (Nassauer and Legewie 2021). While officers’ accounts are retrospective and indicative of police meanings, video elicitation creates a specific “communicative situation” that overcomes interview-related limitations because it enables discussions of sense-making of acts, perceptions, and behaviors in greater detail, facilitates a more accurate recall of thoughts and emotions experienced during interactions, and allows challenges of police-accepted justifications (Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2010; Keesman 2022b:3). This offers unique insights into cultural and visceral sense-making (Pugh 2013:50), particularly useful when examining narratives of bodily action and interactional dynamics. At times, disparities arose between officers’ descriptions and my outsider perspective. Videos were crucial for probing further into their accounts of observable behaviors on screen, enabling me to check and compare my inferences with theirs (see also Keesman 2022b). Both video and drawing elicitation interviews helped officers narrate their ways of demarcating workspace and anticipating. This yielded detailed explanations of their future-orientedness and the sequential build-up of interactions.
ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES

During fieldwork and interviews, I noticed that officers frequently used the words “chances,” “opportunities,” and “momentum” when talking about processes of gaining control. Their explanations revolved around a sense of urgency, awareness of timing (a specific sense of going in now), gauging spatial advantages, and assessing body postures. The description “windows of opportunity” is thus not merely a theoretical concept but part of how officers account for their experiences.

The analysis began with identifying interactional moments that officers selected as opportunities. During interviews, I asked them to define and explain what they viewed as an opportunity without offering a definition. Following officers’ explanations, I typically asked them to clarify their statements further, for instance, about how they used their bodies. Common questions included: “how did you know this was the moment to go in?,” “why is this a good position to take?,” “what do you mean when you say this is a good opportunity/chance,” and “why this moment?” I analyzed moments of both escalation and de-escalation; however, the selected quotes predominantly emphasize police interference while also showcasing preventative actions.

To organize the data, I used the software Atlas.ti. I coded words like “chance” and “opportunity” whenever officers mentioned them and when it was clear that their efforts were intended to facilitate control. Coding specific explanations and sub-categories as they emerged (e.g., bodily positioning, sensing) and along existing theoretical constructs (e.g., anticipations, future-orientatedness) occurred through a combination of inductive and deductive approaches (Corbin and Strauss 1990). I paid specific attention to utterances such as: “this was our opportunity to go in or do something,” “this is really our chance,” “here we’re trying to create a moment to surprise the suspect,” or “this is the right moment.” I then examined how these utterances related to the circumstances, spatial orientations, and behaviors that were explained during interviews or observed events; for example, how officers’ position-taking related to civilians’ and/or colleagues’ bodily actions. Following this, I generated a list of recurring types of situations and interactional moments. Next, I produced categories to construct an overview of the various strategies officers used, for example, “bodily gestures,” “verbal commands,” and “bodily spatial formations.” Based on this procedure, I reconstructed how officers verbalize sensing and anticipating trajectories of unfolding situations, what they consider an opportunity, and how they create and organize them.

FINDINGS

Future-Orientedness

Police officers continuously try to anticipate what can be expected, what direction a situation may take, and what will happen next. Their accounts indicate that the way in which they future-orient is to a large extent embodied: officers envision spatial and behavioral dimensions of civilians and objects. Officer Gabriel describes:
All you think about is where are my colleagues, where is the suspect, what am I going to do when he does [this]? You prepare, you start playing scenarios. I know there were stairs there; I followed suspects down those before in a pursuit. So, in my mind, I already took into account that escape route. How fast can I descend those steps or jump off them if he decides to run away that route? You think about those kinds of things.

Officer Gabriel explicates that officers process situations in terms of next possible moves (Keesman 2022:6) and reiterates that action is always pitching toward an immediate future (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013:912). Officers often articulate working toward this “nextness” through words like “scenarios.” Officer Gabriel further reveals that officers incorporate environmental elements, here stairs, into their future orientations. Officer Louis explains why this future-orientedness is crucial:

You always have to try to be one step ahead; that’s the art of it. You have to make sure you assess his behavior correctly and then be one step ahead. The moment when he’s assessing the situation [to run away] that’s when you have to intervene because otherwise you’re too late.

Given officers perceived need to “be in control,” they aim to anticipate immediate futures to stay ahead of suspects’ next actions, fitting the “authority maintenance” theory (Alpert et al. 2021) and being “one up” on civilians (Sykes and Brent 1980). This is also why officers argue that civilians, like them, “assess their chances,” for example, to run away or attack (see also Johnson 2015). In their analysis of how police produce narratives of accountability and propriety through referencing videos of their own violence, Watson and Meehan (2021) showed that by using such explanations officers can set conditions about intervening, legitimizing acting in advance of perceived-but-not-yet-conducted action on the part of a civilian. Nevertheless, officers try to foresee opportunities to gain control. In the words of an officer, “you want to be the field director, staying ahead of the marching band.” The point is that anticipating is a form of dominance and a way to maintain control.

Officers’ accounts also indicate that they try to attune themselves to the timely character of opportunities. Officer Lloyd notes: “You’re constantly weighing your chances: Would this be an option? Could this be an opportunity?” Officers argue that they try to assess when their action is likely to be most successful and attempt to time their intervention appropriately to ensure minimal damage to themselves and civilians, given their concern about danger and possibilities of harm (Herbert 1998). This concern structures their practices to ensure well-being and designates what is seen as an opportunity. So, what interactional moments during antagonistic situations do officers view as opportunities? How do they verbalize when they sense a “chance” to seize the moment?

**SENSING OPPORTUNITIES AND MOMENTUM**

Officers generally argue that an opportunity occurs when, in some way or another, civilians — just for a moment — lose attention toward officers. For example, when
they “aren’t alert,” “focus totally on the officer who isn’t speaking to them,” or “are momentarily relaxed.” Officer Irving explains, “When they just for a second lower their guard, are distracted, look at someone else.” Officers Eddy and Scott echo this and give specific examples of bodily behaviors that indicate inattentiveness:

Officer Eddy: It’s when someone lowers their arm, when he looks into a different direction for just a moment, when someone turns around. It’s the moment when he wants to pick something up off the ground. It’s when you notice that the suspects’ vigilance and alertness towards you is gone; blinking his eyes could already be enough. It’s when someone isn’t prepared for us. You need to do it in that moment of distraction.

Officer Scott: A bit of inattentiveness of the suspect, when he looks away for a moment, is not paying attention. When you see that they’re thinking. That’s the moment you can intervene. It’s the fraction of inattentiveness that you can act upon, that’s when we have to do it. When his body shrinks a bit, or when he stops using big words.

A common feature of opportunities is civilians’ distraction. Behaviors and positions that indicate momentary distraction or inattentiveness cue opportunities: the body shrinking, facial expressions, blinking eyes, picking up something. Officers thus claim they sense opportunities bodily: through reading civilians’ bodies, gestures, and gaze direction. Opportunities could be enough as “taking a step back, forward or sideways,” “lowering hands,” or “grabbing a cigarette,” says Officer Susie. Officer Igor notices an opportunity when an armed suspect anchors his eye on a fellow officer:

At one point he looked at them, he didn’t look at me anymore. He was focused on another colleague. His face turned towards my colleague and that means he can’t see me. Then I thought well “it’s now or never, this is it.” Now I’m gonna get him, now I can get him. So, I took the chance.

Officer Igor argues he saw his “chance to intervene” when the suspect’s focus, and thus peripheral vision, was toward his colleague. His “this is it” thought indicates his expectation that the arrest is about to happen and that the opportunity is a timely matter. Officers’ anticipation of being “in charge” thus involves an embodied sense of temporality. Similarly, Officer Sebastian realizes “now we have to act fast” when noticing an individual’s bodily posture became more relaxed when his colleague sat on the hood of the police car with his arms folded:

You have to seize this moment because he sort of surrenders. So, we mustn’t talk for another five minutes because then he might build up his anger and aggression again; we didn’t want that. We have to take the momentum.

Officer Sebastian believes he senses momentum when the suspects’ bodily posture indicated “the tension lowered,” encouraging him to physically approach. He is also aware of how he could lose momentum: to keep talking. Such temporal awareness matters for officers’ attempts to direct situations toward gaining control.
Officer Eva meticulously describes how she tries to recognize civilian distraction and why this is key for maintaining control:

Usually, you look for the moment when his attention subsides for a second. Because as long as he’s focused on you, he can read you too. When you take the initiative, you’re one step ahead because then he has to anticipate your actions. So, what we try a lot is to see whether there is a moment when he loses his attention for a bit. Does he turn around? Does he try to walk away? Is he looking at something? Is he distracted by the plane that flies by? Well, you name it. Those are moments when his attention is gone so then you could grab him. Or you immediately make the first move because then he has to respond to you. Also, with suspects running away. The one that runs has the advantage because we, our brains, have to process it first like “Oh! He’s running away! Oh! We have to go now.” That’s a fraction of a second but a second in which he has a head start. You have to notice someone is distracted; when he puts something away, like a can of beer, then he won’t see you. It’s often those little moments that are an opportunity because his attention is weaker.

Officer Eva explains the urgency to stay ahead as having an advantage. To officers, the advantage is that civilians are barred from reading their bodies through which they can anticipate the police’s intentions. Officers, therefore, regard it as a bad moment to intervene when someone “is really focused” on them as it allows civilians to anticipate their intentions and next moves. For example, setting up an arrest, Officer Lloyd argues:

If I want to grab you and you see me and I see you and you notice that I want to grab you, that’s a bad moment. I wouldn’t talk to someone face to face because then he starts prepping himself for an attack, since he knows the arrest is coming. I don’t want that because then he might hit me when say, for a moment, I’m not paying attention. I’d rather have the lead myself.

Civilian distraction allows officers to maintain a sense of being in control and having the upper hand because it means civilians cannot anticipate their intended futures. Face-to-face intervening is especially risky, “because someone can use all their defense mechanisms as they’re pointed to me, like hands. But if I come on your right then you can’t really use your left properly,” says Officer Sidney.

Civilian distraction is also beneficial, according to officers, because it means they are less likely to sustain and impose injuries on others, regarding their concern for harm. For example, Officer Murray is called to a bar where a man has punched multiple people. Arriving at the scene, he sees this man standing outside with no one around him and argues he immediately notices an opportunity “to grab him:”

This was perfect. This is the moment. He was outside, the rest was inside. There was a doorman who can keep people inside. We were standing relatively away from the glass windows so people inside couldn’t really see us. Ideal. He’s not a threat to those inside anymore, he’s a suspect so it’s clear we’re going to arrest him, and he was shouting at the doorman, so he didn’t have attention for us. Great. There are no people around him. So, no danger in sight.
To Officer Murray, the suspects’ position and inattentiveness indicate a low risk of getting hurt. Three elements cue a window: (1) the suspects spatial positioning of standing alone, (2) his inattentiveness toward the officers, and (3) the absence of onlookers. Additionally, in saying “it’s clear” they’re going to arrest illustrates that officers also future orient toward bureaucratic processes, such as transferring suspects and writing up reports. Such bureaucratic futures are already enclosed in the action.

SHARED SENSING

“A frequent trope in micro-sociological analysis is that successful interaction orders depend on participants’ ability to align in interaction” (Tavory and Fine 2020:336). While Tavory and Fine point to the importance of disruptions for coordinating action, officers need to sense the same projected future or intended line of action in order to act collectively. This requires a shared sense of when an opportunity occurs. Officer Lloyd explains:

Sometimes it’s an opportunity for me but it’s absolutely wrong for my colleague. Say you’re standing in between a suspect and a wall and I’m thinking “I’m gonna push him against that wall,” then you need to pay attention and realize that you have to step away if I push the suspect. If you say: “but you didn’t say that you were gonna arrest him” then you’re not aligned.

Officer Lloyd stresses that foreseeing what others will do through bodily sensing rather than verbal command is crucial to mutually align and act collectively. In our discussion of three officers who attempt to control a suspect captured on a bystander video, Officer Lee argues that not sensing the same opportunity actually disrupts collective action:

L: It’s like they’re not seeing the same moment. At one point the suspect goes after one of the officers even with his arms in the air, and then the other two stand there next to each other just waiting a bit like “what’s he gonna do?” There they could’ve thought “this is our moment; we can go in now.” There’s another moment when one officer is behind a car which he can use as a shield. Then the others could have also gone for him. [continues watching the video]. Look, this could also have been another good moment to say “ok guys let’s regroup and surprise him.” Jump at him or something.

I: Why this moment?

L: Because the suspect is interested in something else here and walks away from them. He’s interested in the bystander who’s filming. At that moment, they could’ve regrouped and tried again.

The officers in the video do not interpret the suspects’ multiple moments of distraction as opportunities. Officer Lee, however, notices three: (1) his arms in the air, (2) officers using the car as a shield, and (3) him focusing on the bystander.
While these officers are on the same trajectory and temporal landscape, attempting an arrest, they have different protentions and are misaligned. Therefore, they cannot engage in a joint course of action and instead move in disjointed directions. Keesman and Weenink (2022) showed how misalignment between officers hampers collective action. Such examples illustrate that actors need to have a shared image of a future, at least implicitly, to coordinate action (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013).

Noticing the right time to intervene collectively is thus not just an individualized skill; it requires shared sensing. Indeed, “situated action is a process of mutual ‘sense-making’ which involves bodily know-how” (Keesman 2022:2). Shared sensing is important because some police-civilian interactions are greatly risky and uncertain, and because officers sometimes face unforeseen happenings.

SERENDIPITY

While “any negotiation of the future contains and manages uncertainty” (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013:910), in policing, officers regularly respond to unexpected and rapidly evolving situations. Police work, therefore, provides an excellent case to examine how serendipity plays a role in coordinating action and a course of events. Officer Murray describes how, after minutes of struggling with an individual in a small room, he notices an opportunity for control arises:

Suddenly, he spreads his legs and arms in the doorway, grabbing the frame. He laid like a starfish. Then, and this is going to sound weird [laughs], I put my foot on his crotch and said, “and now you’re going to cooperate or else I’ll squash it” [laughs]. He nods and lets go of the doorframe. His position was just so perfect: one of his legs was practically stuck under the bed so he couldn’t use that leg, and his other leg was close to my colleague. So, I just put my foot on his crotch and told him it’s over you know, “just cooperate.” It was total luck, 100% luck, it just happened this way, the way he laid there was perfect for it. I thought “well this is it” you know, “I’ll give it a go” and it worked.

Such accounts indicate that gaining control requires bodily awareness, attunement toward serendipitous circumstances, and improvisation. Officers need to be creative in addition to following standard operating procedures or tactical protocols. Officer Fred explains that improvisation also means being aware of spatial advantages:

The suspect needed to walk through a corridor towards a desk to then be searched [in the police station]. He didn’t want to and walked towards the door that led to the parking lot. But this is a big steel door which you can’t open without our security card. So, he stood there, pulled off his shirt, big guy yelling: “well come and get me then!” [now uses his hand to waive towards himself like “come on”]. Well, he had nowhere to go because the door is locked and it’s a long corridor. So, I tell my colleagues “you know what, we’re not gonna fight him, grab your pepper spray and spray him.” We warned him that if he didn’t cooperate, we would use it, to which he replied, “well, come on then!” So we spray him and he went down like...
a small child. There’s no better way than this; a small space, can’t move anywhere, no public, you can open the door afterwards to air out the spray, so you can really use this space.

Officer Fred notices that the suspect’s options to act are limited by the corridor. In addition to distraction, noticing that civilians’ acting options are limited can cue opportunities. For officers, certain spaces not only afford opportunities but are constitutive of them. They find that specific environments or locations provide opportunities for certain actions, that is, are made possible by environments (affordances), and that they play a fundamental role in shaping or creating those opportunities (constitutive). Spatial environments that limit civilians acting options can lower the necessity of distraction.

Finally, officers argue they sense opportunities through knowledge of how bodies work. Officer Jake describes how arms work in unison with eyes and may indicate an opportunity:

When you see that someone reaches inside their jacket pockets to grab something that means they will never look up, always down. And when you notice he puts his shoulders up, taking his hands out, that’s when you have to grab him.

Knowing that when someone reaches into their pockets, they tend to look down, Officer Jake recognizes a civilian is visually and manually preoccupied. I witnessed how such bodily awareness is cultivated during training about control tactics. For instance, Trainer Rupert argues an opportunity may occur right after someone has thrown a punch. In those milliseconds, the shoulder bends down and bodily force leaves the fist, allowing an officer to grab that part of the body. Officer Virgil says an opportunity may happen when someone loses balance. Such bodily anticipation and awareness is also found in mixed martial arts (MMA) fighters (Spencer 2014).

In sum, opportunities are characterized by civilian distraction, preoccupation, and limited acting options. Officers argue they sense them through reading bodies, monitoring civilians’ (1) direction of attention by following gazes, facial and emotional expressions, and mode of talking; (2) bodily positions such as orientation toward or away from officers; and (3) spatial positioning and environmental elements. They anticipate through visual, tactile, and auditory techniques focusing on sounds, utterances, and gestures. Recognizing the appropriate time to intervene correctly, legitimately, and safely is not merely a decision-making process but a sensing of when to engage. Indeed, perception is not only a process in the brain, but a skillful activity of the body as a whole (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Noë 2006). To prevent misalignment, ensure initiative is on their side of the interaction, and promote a shared sense of opportunity, officers also attempt to create them.
CREATING OPPORTUNITIES: REFOCUSING ATTENTION

So far, I have shown that officers view opportunities as mostly characterized by civilian distraction, which they then try to sense and take advantage of. Seizing existing opportunities involves reading (bodily) cues of distraction. When civilians are not naturally distracted, officers engage in purposeful action to create opportunities. How then do officers create potentials to act? In theoretical terms, how do they produce futures of control?

First, officers argue that the most efficient arrests are those that catch civilians off guard. Specialized units plan their actions to surprise suspects, for instance, by entering homes in the middle of the night. In doing so, they construct a relatively long window to execute their intended acts. For frontline officers, the act of surprise is more structured around refocusing civilians’ attention. They argue they refocus civilians by asking weird questions: “‘Huh! What’s that? [points at the wall],’ ‘how’s your dad?’ so civilians think ‘what are you talking about?’” or by changing the topic to something unrelated to the situation: “‘You have beautiful shoes,’ ‘what does that have to do with anything?’” In that way you get someone of off that focus of aggression, of off that which someone is heading towards.” Some officers add that females are better at such “verbal creative U-turns,” invoking a gendered lens. Others use physical intervention: “When I try to control someone, I sometimes kick them in the kneecap so they lose their balance. Then they will always have a moment like ‘what’s happening?’ That’s the moment you need to use, that’s your chance to grab someone or to keep control.”

For covert officers, creating surprise entails adjusting their own bodies. Officer Gabriel describes how he, in covert outfit, approaches a suspect on the street for an arrest:

You don’t walk with an accelerated pace because you want to have that strong surprise element, so I walked slowly with a stupid grin on my face because it’s not a surprise when they see someone approaching with a tensed look. So, I trudge in his direction while inside I’m getting ready for what’s coming. I even try to keep my head down to come across less threatening because I really want it to be a surprise for him. I shrug my shoulders, look at the ground, don’t seek eye-contact. A bit like a loser. You want to be low in your energy and submissive because that’s un-police like. If I do it in the extreme form, I will turn my toes inwards to get X legs, making me walk a bit weird so suspects sense even less of a threat. Or I’ll play drunk but just anything that’s submissive and doesn’t exude a threat, so suspects don’t take me into account and I don’t stand out.

By adjusting his body, Officer Gabriel deters the suspect’s focus, giving him a sense of control. The emphasis on safe-keeping returns here. To avoid harm through a potential struggle, officers regard the tactic of surprising suspects, notably by approaching them from behind, as a favorable strategy. They list numerous examples of attempting to position themselves behind suspects. Officer Edgar describes how a suspect’s “total fixation” on his colleague enabled him to approach from behind and handcuff him. To officers, the advantage is twofold. First, the
suspect cannot “read” officers’ intentions; Officer Jake says, “if he doesn’t see me, I can grab him and then he has to respond to me. But when I look into his eyes, he already knows that I want him. And then he has control.” Second, officers argue that approaching from behind conveniently aligns with the bodies’ natural urge to move forward. In this way, they can “keep walking,” avoiding a struggle or “dragging” a civilian into a certain direction. Such bodily spatial positioning intended to create opportunities is a form of—what I refer to as—positional play.

**POSITIONAL PLAY**

Positional play refers to the bodily spatial techniques officers use to refocus civilian’s attention and achieve positional advantage. The phrase is not a reflection of lightness or playfulness but indicates the processual and strategic character of police work. While civilians are sometimes “in a perfect position,” for example, with their backs turned or sideways so officers can approach them from all sides, police often attempt to change civilians’ positions to their advantage: “positioning is hugely important for my own safety or the advantage to go for it.” They even compare gaining control to the board game *Stratego* or the tactical game of chess. Correspondingly, Todak and James (2018:513) note that “Like a game of chess, the police officer must anticipate civilians’ moves and respond as best they can to engineer a ‘win’,,” but emphasize that policing is transactional as officers read situations and people, making decisions based on their readings and citizen’s reactions to adjust accordingly. To be sure, it can be problematic when the police view people as opponents.

Officers sometimes gradually move their own position in an attempt to gain an advantage while at the same time trying to minimize or limit a suspect’s space and opportunities to act. Officer Eva explains how she tries to maneuver a suspect’s position to gain control by using her own body:

---

E: We always check what is a favorable position. Is he standing in a good spot? Are we with our backs against the wall and is he standing in front of us? Then we have to change our position because if he comes at us then we can’t escape. So, we often try to drive him in a way so that we have the advantage, for instance, that he’s standing with his back against a wall or is at least hampered in getting away. And not close to glass windows, for example. Those are things you need to position and assess.

I: How do you make sure that he starts moving towards an advantageous position?

E: Sometimes they turn around, move a little or walk towards it themselves. In my case, my suspect was pepper sprayed but didn’t respond to instructions. When I pepper sprayed him again, he turned his head because he tried to fend it off and then I kind of danced around him just as long as I got space somewhere to hit his eyes again. When a suspect stands somewhere we don’t want him, then we ourselves walk around him slowly and usually they turn around with us because they want to keep looking at you. They don’t want you suddenly behind them so oftentimes they accompany our turn. Or one of your colleagues distracts them.
Say if you distract someone, keep them talking and make them face you and turn around, and there’s another pair of colleagues then they can grab him from behind. He won’t expect that.

“Dancing around” a suspect is a form of positional play. In saying civilians need to be “hampered,” Officer Eva reiterates that their lack of acting options provides an opportunity for officers. She also indicates that such techniques are part of police procedures. Other examples include officers forming a “V formation” compelling civilians to focus their attention on one officer, allowing the other to plan or make a move such as positioning behind them, “you force someone to make a choice because they can only focus attention on one person at a time and because of that you have control.” Officers assert that this method is the basic tissue for gaining control. Another common bodily spatial technique is the “bear dance.” Specifically used in domestic disputes, officers position themselves behind civilians compelling them to turn away from each other and face the officers. Ensuring they are no longer facing each other, officers refocus civilians’ attention away from the conflict and aim to prevent them from anticipating police intentions. These techniques are means through which officers generate opportunities. The broader implication is that these efforts are attempts to influence interactional dynamics.

Positional play also aids precise initiation of action. Officer Geoff, member of a specialized arrest unit, explicates the strategic consideration of other actors, spatial elements, and positioning of bodies while arresting someone in a crowd. First, he highlights officers embodied and timely awareness toward signs of distraction:

The best moments are when he’s talking to his mates or when he’s totally focused on the riot police, when he throws something or picks something up lying in front of him to throw it again. Then you wait until his torso comes up again because then he’s focused on throwing and won’t count on you, and we get him from behind. Or some guys like to put their arms and hands up wide yelling “eeeyyy!”, challenging the riot officers by taking a few steps forward, that’s a very good moment. Or when they just took a step forward to throw, then they’re purely focused on the riot police and not on their mates. Then you grab them, speed up, so before they have a chance to react you’ve already moved them a couple of meters towards the “free zone” [space behind the riot police line which is controlled by the police]. When they realize “hey what’s happening, hold on a second,” then two to three seconds have already passed.

He then explains how his team collaborates with the riot police to time an arrest:

Often, we wait for the riot police charge. That’s the best moment to arrest someone because then those guys will start running, you grab the guy you need and then you’re sooner at the riot police line, sooner safe and sooner done. If guys are just standing there, the best moment is when the suspect stands all the way in front of the group because then you don’t have to pass a lot of other people. When he’s standing all alone in the front, literally across the riot police line, that’s the best moment because then you can immediately enter the “free zone.” If there
were like four rows of people in front of him before we would arrive there, then we won’t initiate the arrest because we’d have to struggle our way through a lot of people. Then you wait for a charge, they start running, he probably turns around and then you can grab him.

The police’s future-orientedness is evident. The specialized officers determine their positioning based on the prospect of an opportunity arising. They “know” that the riot police charge generates crowd movement which means civilians aren’t focused on officers. It is a reciprocal process: the riot police create an opportunity for the special unit to act upon. In theoretical terms, the officers know “which protentional practices actualize a shift” (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013:924) and calibrate their position accordingly.

NONHUMAN TEMPORALITIES

Positional play also includes the use of material objects, such as squad cars and pepper spray. Nonhuman temporalities are usually ignored by interactionists despite objects’ role for performing futures (Knorr Cetina 2009; Tavory 2018:129). While watching a CCTV video of an attempted arrest, Officer Sam explains how he uses his covert car to startle a suspect. He speeds toward him and uses the emergency break right before his feet:

I did this because I see him approaching and behind him, I see my colleagues walking towards him. I use the car as a deterrent to make sure he’s focused on me. Even if he had a knife I’m safe, he can’t stab through the car. Now you have a moment that you see him responding like “Yo! what are you doing?” At that moment my colleagues behind him have had time to catch up substantially. So, I cause a startle response in him, offering my colleagues more time to catch up from behind. It’s only here [suspect is grabbed by his colleagues] that he realizes “Hey shit! I’m being grabbed from behind.” If I wasn’t in the car, he could have maybe turned around earlier and prepare for the arrest.

Officer Sam says he purposefully positions the car in the suspect’s “walking direction” to calibrate for concerted action with his colleagues who are approaching the suspect from behind. He believes that by narrowing the physical space between them, he produces a surprise and opportunity to gain control. Similarly, Officer Rufus, while watching his body-cam footage, describes how his colleague uses a squad car to stop a suspect from hurting himself with a knife:

R: So first he stops when he sees the suspect standing at the intersection, actually quite close behind the suspect. Then you almost see him realizing like “Hey! This is an opportunity/chance” and he accelerates a little.
I: How did you notice he thought this was an opportunity?
R: Because he really stopped, it was not like he just approached the situation and then it happened. He stopped and saw that the suspect was standing right in the middle of the intersection with no one around him and you see him thinking “Hey! This is a good chance” to scoop him on the hood of the car. When that happens,
he falls to the ground, let’s go of the knife, and we immediately jump towards him to restrain him because that’s our moment; the danger is over.

Officer Rufus argues his colleague notices the first opportunity to startle the suspect when he sees he’s standing alone and is distracted. In scooping him, he creates a second opportunity for the other officers to intervene. Such accounts illuminate ways of collective aligning between officers.

Officers argue that both movable objects and infrastructures help to create opportunities because they can provide time and space to assess situations and organize action. Besides police procedures encouraging officers to use objects as buffers to ensure safety, Officer Lester argues “obstacles,” such as, “fences,” “buildings,” or “tables,” produce time because suspects must go over or around them. He purposefully tries to “create buffers,” for example, by putting his bike between himself and people, so he can push it when someone attacks him. Accordingly, he gains “just two seconds, but it’s two seconds which enable me to do or grab something like my pepper spray, run, call for help, grab him, whatever. Those two seconds can save my life.” In another example, he positions himself behind a car when confronted with an armed suspect:

The car created a distance between us and him. He’s prevented from running straight towards us. He can’t come at me directly with his knife and stab me because there were four meters and the car between us; he would have to go over it or around it to reach us. That also means I can shoot him while he’s running. I can also move backward, change position to another car or go around the car.

Spatial elements and a sense of timing thus intersect: creating space through objects creates time for planning police action.

Lastly, Officers Alex and Luis’ body-worn camera accounts, illuminate how pepper spray can be used to create an opportunity. Officer Alex warns a suspect that if he won’t cooperate, he will use pepper spray. In communicating this, he first invokes a “crossing the line” situation, demarcating the conditions under which intervention will occur and signaling the anticipation of using a violent measure. To Officer Alex, the man’s continued denial crosses the defined boundary and legitimizes using pepper spray. When he sprays, the man puts his arm in front of his face to protect his eyes. Officer Luis re-uses pepper spray when the man tries to punch Officer Alex. The man puts his arm in front of his face again cueing Officer Alex to grab this arm: the suspects’ eyes are closed; he is preoccupied with pain and his arm blocks his view on the officers. The pepper spray as a nonhuman temporality builds a particular future: spraying usually means individuals put their hands in front of their face to protect themselves. Officers anticipate this response and can thus use the spray to orchestrate a moment to intervene.

In conclusion, officers create opportunities by refocusing civilians’ attention, limiting their acting options, and achieving advantageous positions through strategic bodily spatial positioning (i.e., positional play and the use of objects). The difference with seizing opportunities lies in noticing distraction, whereas creating
them requires using strategies to manipulate civilian focus and induce distraction. When this doesn’t work, we see officers changing tactics, positions, deliberating, or re-strategizing to recalibrate their actions and reconstitute alignment. This requires an embodied awareness of producing potentialities to act.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In this article, I examined how police officers argue they sense and create opportunities to gain control. I illustrated that officers are continuously future-oriented to foresee opportunities and that their future-orientedness involves an embodied sense of temporality and bodily awareness. Opportunities are characterized by civilians’ distraction, preoccupation, and an absence of acting options. Officers argue they sense opportunities through reading civilians’ bodies and create them by re-focusing civilians’ attention through bodily spatial positioning and by using material objects. Gaining control, thus, fundamentally relies on officers’ sensitivity toward time, spaces, and bodies. Policing is not merely thinking ahead but sensing/feeling ahead.

These findings hold several implications for understanding police work and (violent) police-civilian interactions. First, they tell us about forms of bodily cooperation. Due to officers’ perceived need for control and their fear of losing it, it is crucial that they are attuned to the temporal flow of interactions and sensitized to people’s bodily signals and cues. Officers’ accounts indicate that this attunement is to a large extent embodied. Bodily sensing is key in the co-construction of courses of police action and thus in interactional trajectories of police-civilian encounters. Moreover, shared bodily sensing is crucial for collective police action and maintaining control as officers sometimes limit verbal communication to avoid revealing their planned course of action to a civilian. Highlighting the embodied doing of police work enhances scholarly work that narrowly focuses on individual assessment of risk and decision-making, the situational, suspect, and officer-level predictors of police action (e.g., Hine et al. 2018; Hochstetler 2001), or officer performance. Emphasizing the role of sensory perception and timing in interactions also has practical implications for enhancing police training on forms of cooperation, preparation, and decision-making, which, in turn, aids de-escalation efforts and safety for both law enforcement and the public.

Second, this analysis explicated interactional pathways toward gaining control and under what conditions officers engage in action. The findings provide insight into officers’ perception of the temporal dynamics of antagonistic interactions, and how they attempt to gain control prior to using violence or force. While I make no causal claims, this furthers our understanding of interactional dynamics before police violence occurs. Third, by showing that officers’ sense of timing not only propels action but relates to preventing harm and ensuring respectfulness toward civilians (Terrill 2005), this article provides clues as to how the police attempt to negotiate a nonviolent future on an embodied level. That is, in seeking interactional openings...
and orchestrating opportunities, officers attempt to prevent escalation or the use of violence. Noble and Alpert (2021:318) note that “too often, officers create situations where force must be used as a self-defense because they rush into situations and place themselves in jeopardy.” These findings offer a glimpse into how officers try to mitigate this through bodily anticipation. They are, therefore, useful for understanding embodied processes of procedural justice and police legitimacy (Jonathan-Zamir, Mastrofski, and Moyal 2015). On a critical note, establishing embodied dominance could be a way to avoid a dialog of claiming power and authority (Bottoms and Tankebe 2012).

The article extends the interactionist tradition in two ways. Firstly, prevailing interactionist studies on violence have not yet unpacked how the actors involved project their next line of action (Wieviorka 2014:57). Theories of interaction order have, to date, also not fully recognized the role of embodied sense-making and bodily action in potentialities to act (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). This article illuminated the sequential, situated, and embodied dimensions of officers’ understanding and anticipating during interactions (Mondada 2011). Particularly, how officers improvise and negotiate shared meanings on a bodily level, navigate serendipitous circumstances, and achieve a sense of mutual intelligibility. This is important because in novel situations, people don’t always have decision-making infrastructure at hand, and a large portion of police work revolves around solving matters that happen coincidentally. Although officers receive training, a significant amount of their work requires improvisation.

Secondly, the findings illustrate creative moments in cooperation and interaction, that is, “the delicate choreography that maintains actors’ shared orientation toward the future while accommodating motion, ambiguities, and missteps” (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013:909). They illuminate how actors’ embodied anticipation, future-coordination, and improvisation shape interactions. Interactionist sociology may benefit from paying more attention to embodiments as forms of knowledge and perception, often undervalued in sociological theories (Shilling 2012), as much of people’s understanding and acting takes place on a bodily level, especially during serendipitous circumstances.

A shortcoming of this analysis is that I scarcely examined procedurally inspired futures and the gender and racial dimensions of officers’ perceptions. Officers’ actions are embedded in (legal) regulations on proportionality as well as organizational and institutional goals and constraints. They carry modes of experience, sets of expectations, and habits of thought and action produced through training and on-the-job socialization. Some anticipations are patterned because they are enmeshed in police procedures or biases. While this study sheds light on complexities of perception and action, it does not explore when and why the public is problematized, when it is not, and what reasons officers haven’t provided that prompt them to act. Their shared history and ways of acting, as dispositional pasts, may orient them toward certain outcomes of police-civilian interactions, and affect how they interpret bodily behaviors (see Mastrofski et al. 2016; Shearing
and Ericson 1991). However, whereas procedures can be seen as scripted futures, creating a shared future together “must be done” on the level of protention (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003:922). Further, creativity is crucial for alignment (Tavory 2018:119). Sensing opportunities and coordinating action are skilled accomplishments because they require both cultural and bodily competencies. They can, therefore, be seen as a particular mode of police understanding or “professional vision” (Goodwin 1994).

To conclude, this analysis explicates the embodied nature of anticipating, negotiating, and aligning in interactions, and offers novel insights on how police practices and tactics shape interactions by examining them through the lens of interactional sociology. It shows how police-civilian interactions are continuously in the process of making and unmaking themselves (Abbott 2016) on a bodily level, and that the anticipation of futures is produced bodily. Bodily action thus plays a crucial role in the production of futures.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the police officers who shared their experiences of violent encounters and took the time to discuss them. Many thanks also to editor Lisa-Jo K. van den Scott and the anonymous reviewers whose observations and thoughtful commentary improved the clarity of this article. Thank you to Don Weenink and Jeremy Rijnders for their readings of previous drafts. This work was supported by the European Research Council, Consolidator Grant number 683133 awarded to Don Weenink University of Amsterdam.

NOTES

1. This is representative of the Dutch police organization.
2. Chess grandmaster Nimzowitsch (2007) calls this prophylaxis: a move or series of moves to improve one’s position and to restrict or prevent another in improving theirs.

REFERENCES


Creating “Windows of Opportunity”


ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

Laura D. Keesman is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Her work examines the interactional dynamics of violence, particularly in occupational settings, policing and police culture, embodiment, legitimacy, and accountability. She uses both ethnographic and video methods to explore the situational and emotional experiences of violence.