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Norwegian Police Officers Experiences from Armed Confrontations

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Abstract
Even though Norwegian police officers' have legal rights to use force, also in armed confrontations, they seldom make use of their firearms. The use of firearms lies at the extreme edge of police work, also in Norway. However, police officers need to prepare also for armed confrontations to maintain safety for themselves during confrontations, but also to ensure the safety of ordinary citizens. Armed confrontations may often be the most challenging, dynamic and stressful incidents police officers face in line of duty. This study undertakes to discuss the relevance of police training in armed confrontations as experienced by police officers that have been in armed confrontations and decided not to shoot the subject. Data stems from 30 semi-structured interviews with Norwegian police emergency response officers who have experienced an armed confrontation with a subject where the police officers perceived to be within the regulations and weapon laws to discharge their firearms against the subject, but for some reason chose not to make use of their firearms. Findings indicate that Norwegian police officers mostly receive their experience in armed confrontations through their training, and not through practical street level experience from armed confrontations. Thus, both the relevance of armed response training and using experiences from armed confrontations as learning opportunities are of the utmost importance for police officers' capacities for handling armed confrontation.

Keywords: Armed confrontation, Experience, Training

1. Introduction

Even though Norwegian police officers' have legal rights to use force, also in armed confrontations, they seldom make use of their firearms. The use of firearms lies at the extreme edge of police work. However, police officers need to prepare also for armed confrontations to maintain safety for themselves during confrontations, but also to ensure the safety of ordinary citizens. It is fair to assume that armed confrontations are the most challenging, dynamic and stressful incidents police officers face in line of duty. Thus, learning for and from armed confrontations are crucial for the reliability of police officers handling of such situations. However, previous studies have shown that the Norwegian police lack a well-developed system for conducting evaluations and ensuring that learning points are put into a system (Henriksen et al., 2022; NOU 2017:9), that incidents where police officers make decisions that can have major consequences both for other people and for the police officers themselves are to a less degree evaluated with the purpose of learning from the experiences (Hellesø-Knutsen, 2013), and that it is a need for a reliable system to map experiential learning and make them available for the rest of the police force (NOU 2009: 12). That said, much research exist on training and simulation of operative police work, experiential learning and simulation-based training in Norwegian police education (Phelps, Strype, Le Bellu, Lahlou, & Aandal, 2018), the quality of firearms training among police officers (Henriksen & Kruke, 2021), learning from armed response (Squires and Kennison, 2010; Squires 2022), Norwegian police training in the use of force (Henriksen, Snortheimsmoen and Kruke, 2018), decision-

making training for frontline police officers (Johnsen, Espevik, Saus, Sanden, & Olsen, 2016) in potentially dangerous interventions (Helsen & Starkes, 1999).

However, we have not found research on police response officers experiencing an armed confrontation with a subject where the police officers thought they lawfully could make use of their firearms against the person but refrained from doing so. Thus, this study undertakes to discuss the relevance of police training in armed confrontations as experienced by police officers that have been in armed confrontations and decided not to shoot the subject.

2. Conceptual framework

It is fair to assume that armed confrontations are hard-earned experiences. Boin and colleagues point to learning as a critical task within strategic crisis leadership (2017). By learning as a critical task, they mean "determining the causes of a crisis, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the responses to it, and undertaking remedial action based on this understanding" (2017:15). Furthermore, they argue for every crisis as a source of potential lessons for contingency planning and training for future crises (2017).

Crisis response is in many ways an attempt to influence the development of the situation at hand. The main characteristics of crisis, threat, uncertainty, and time pressure, make relevant crisis response difficult, but also that crisis response is a very good learning arena. You need to learn how your approach to crisis management influences the situation at hand. Thus, crisis management is an experiential learning opportunity. We see the relevance of experience both in Endsley's model of situational awareness (1995) and in Klein's research on recognition-primed decision making (1989), both of which focus on experience, experience that in turn is important to bring back to the training in the next pre-crisis phase (Kruke, 2012). But our learning from previous events may necessarily not give us everything we need to handle the *next* crisis (Kruke, 2012). You can never be fully prepared for a contingency. Thus, flexibility, bricolage, adaptation and improvisation will also be required strategies in addition to implementing your modus operandi from training and experiences. That said, we need to learn from our experiences. Dewey argues for learning taking place in actual practice, as an active individual process, as "learning by doing" (1938), that "there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education" (Dewey, 1938:20). Kolb describes learning as a process by which people need both to integrate new knowledge in existing knowledge and exchange knowledge with new knowledge. In this way learning is "…the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984:38). Knowledge gained in the classroom might then be tested against real life experience. According to Kolb, *concrete experience*, i.e. the world experienced through our senses, undergo *reflective observation*, i.e. meaning of ideas and situations is understood by carefully observing and impartially describing them, before an *abstract conceptualization*, i.e. constructing general theories using logics, ideas and concepts, and, finally, *active experimentation*, focusing on actively influencing people and changing situations. However, if experiential leaning is not lifted out from where is has originated, it remains as internalised tacit knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), and thus not made available for others that may need this insight. Individual experiential learning may then be tested and reflected upon by others, and form the basis for shared mental models, collective learning, and maybe also organizational learning. Mental models are what individuals use to organize information related to the context in which they find themselves, type of response to handle the situation at hand, but also knowledge about the team, including how team members are interdependent of each other (Zaccaro et al., 2001). Quite often contingencies require a team effort, based on shared mentyal models, but also coordination, understood as "management of dependencies" (Malone and Crowston, 1994). Collective learning could take place through participation in a *community of practice*, "a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger; McDermott; Snyder 2002:4). These groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise are informal in nature and formed by people with a common interest. Thus, learning in these groups may stay within these groups.

Argyris and Schön suggest how to lift learning to an organizational level. They propose

two types of theories of action: 1) espoused theories (Sunday theories), and 2) theories in use (everyday theories). The Sunday theories are normative theories about what we should do, whereas everyday theories are what employees in an organization actually do. Organizational learning will take place when individual organizational members continuously modify their private situational images and public maps and images of the organization (Argyris and Schön, 1996), a process that simultaneously changes the organization's theory in use. Double-loop learning may consider alteration of an organizations "theory of practice", a more critical reflection on the practice and assumptions within an organization, and thus may lead to organizational learning (ibidem).

Finally, a goal of organizational learning may be to become a learning organization. i.e. "an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights" (Garvin, 1993: 3). A learning organisation facilitate experiential learning, make use of the learning that is taking place at all levels of the organisation, and make this learning available for the rest of the organisation.

3. Methods

30 semi-structured interviews with Norwegian police emergency response officers, from 30 armed confrontations, form the main method of data collection in this study, police officers who have experienced an armed confrontation with a subject where they thought they lawfully could make use of their firearms against the subject but refrained from doing so. Informants were recruited both through an article in the Norwegian police magazine "Politiforum" and through snowball sampling (Neuman, 2000).

Experiences from armed confrontation could be a sensitive thing for police emergency response personnel to discuss. Thus, to gain access to relevant informants, the research team consists of an experienced police officer and a researcher from the Norwegian Police University College (PHS), in addition to a researcher from the risk and societal safety milieu in University of Stavanger, Norway.

Before the semi structured interviews, we tested the interview guide twice. Two police officers were invited to a simulated armed confrontation at the PHS training simulator and then interviewed according to the interview guide.

All the interviews were taped. The informants were first invited to give a free description of the confrontation before we followed up with specific questions. Even though some of the armed confrontations took palace several years before the interviews, the informants could give extremely detailed descriptions of the confrontations. We then transcribed the interviews by using transcription software (TSD) and read through the transcripts for quality assurance before we conducted thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012) supported by NVivo 14. We then re-read the themes and the original transcriptions to increase the validity of the interview data.

4. Results

According to the Norwegian National Police Directorate (POD), the police should be a learning organization with a strong learning culture (2020). Furthermore, since daily activities provide good learning arenas, all police personnel are obliged to contribute to the development of a good learning culture with good learning arenas, small talk between colleagues, including the identification and facilitation of opportunities for learning (ibidem). However, without reflection and conscious evaluation of experiences, experiential learning will be random (POD, 2020). Informal experiential learning that takes place, also as small talk between colleagues, at all levels of the organization, may contribute to innovative thinking and new knowledge, which should be captured, evaluated and formalized to achieve systematic learning and thus leading to knowledge from experiential learning formalized through new instructions, guidelines, curricula, study programs, etc. (POD, 2020). That said, the Norwegian police struggle with establishing a system for systematic mapping of experiential learning (Henriksen et al., 2022) and a learning system at individual and organizational levels (Wathne, 2012; Hoel and Barland, 2020; Edvardsen and Hoel, 2021).

The Norwegian Police University College provides a three-year bachelor education giving the students a standard basic education as police emergency response personnel. Personnel is then divided into categories based on their competence level and differences in annual training:

- IP1: Service personnel in the Police Special Intervention Unit.
- IP2: Service personnel in Dignitary protection.

- IP3: Service personnel in the Police Response Team.
- IP4: Ordinary police emergency response officers, with weapons approval.

Service personnel in the categories IP1 and IP3 undergo far more training and education than IP4. Whereas IP3 service personnel has 103 hours of yearly obligatory training, the IP4 personnel have 48 hours (POD, 2021). The Police Special Intervention Unit has far more training. IP4 is the response personnel that normally arrive first on the incident scene facing an armed confrontation and thus handle confrontations where more experienced personnel would have been preferable (Myhrer 2012).

4.1. *Armed confrontations some statistics*

The response personnel interviewed mean average age was 36 years, and their mean service period was nine and a half years. We interviewed 4 IP1 officers, 15 IP3 officers and 11 IP4 officers. During the confrontations, the subjects were armed with firearms (live firearms/replica) in 11 confrontations, with knife in 15 confrontations, they were unarmed in 3 confrontations (believed to be armed), 1 subject carried a striking weapon, and several weapons on 3 occasions. When the confrontation was resolved, there was an estimated mean distance of 4 meters. 17 confrontations had a durance of less than 1 minute, the rest lasted up to 10 hours

4.2. *Relevance of training*

Many informants talked about the relevance of their training. One informant argued that he always is focused on training, that he has been preparing for years to shoot in armed confrontations. He feels well prepared for such a situation. Another informant argued that you must be prepared for what you encounter, to defend yourself. One informant stated that he "felt that he had done this before." It boils down to training, lots of training, according to another informant and that "the training is something we have in our "backpack of experience", which allows me to come up with the (not to shoot) solution", a result of experience. Another informant stated that "what you conclude is based on experience, both training and life experience, and other assignments." But training is also about seeing opportunities, "seeing the room for action you have, even in time-critical phases". But scenario training does not need to end with a solution – "scenario training needs to give room for reflection related to the nuances of the mission."

One informant stressed the relevance of knife encounter training exemplified by an experience when he jumped out of the car in the confrontation and felt "it was almost like being back on the shooting range, the drill of correctly drawing the gun from the holster, that I was able to stay focused on the subject central to the incident, that is the result of training". Another informant talked about weapon drills in the garage that, even though it is not put into context, gave him a hands-on feeling and thus the competence to automatically handle his weapons with confidence in armed confrontations. Another informant argued that specific training, even over-training, on knife encounters, gave him a lot of self-confidence in the confrontation. In this confrontation" the training beforehand was 90 percent of the work, and the rest was just the finishing touches." However, to train automatic action patterns may also cause problems if the confrontation is different than the drill. Drills with different solutions may open for more refection on how to deal with the situation at hand rather than giving a "correct answer". Another aspect of training is reading a subject's body language, gaze, voice, etc. Some informants argued that the subject's body language is to a less degree covered in training. Some informants also talked about protective equipment used during training causing discrepancies between some training and experiences from confrontations. A subject wearing a scary mask at training does often get shot. But, in confrontations you see a desperate guy in the eyes. That experience gives the little extra that you might not receive during training.

Several informants stated that even though they did not shoot the subject in their confrontation, they would have shot him during training. Much training is conducted on the shooting range or in a simulator, where you have the weapon at your disposal, and thus the response would be to use it. When you come to training and is given a blue weapon [training weapons], "then you know that at some point now, you're going to shoot". In armed confrontations this is different, this is the real thing, you have several weapons at your disposal, you feel that the subject seeks "suicide by cop", or you are worried about the "media-test" of the decision made to use the firearm, etc. Another aspect of training is that the

opponent normally reacts to warning shots, calls or behavior in general, while in many of the confrontations the subjects reacted very slowly, and some not even after warning shots.

Discussions about experiences, assessments and decision-making is a normal part of training. According to one informant these discussions result in "us thinking quite similar, and that we don't have to say as much… to maintain a common mental model" during the confrontation. These discussions are particularly important for newly recruited and inexperienced police officers.

One informant pointed at realistic training, "actually, thinking about it", "to dare to think about what we're going to have to do one day at work, mental preparation" he said. Several other informants also mentioned concrete mental preparations during training sessions.

4.3. *Experience from armed confrontations*

The informants gave many reasons for not using their firearm during armed confrontations:

- They needed time to be certain, to «read» the subject and the situation.
- The first shot is difficult.
- They were worried about killing the subject.
- The subject is not perceived as a serious threat.
- They were afraid of hitting someone else.
- Fear of not being on the right side according to the firearms instructions.

Decision-making in armed confrontations is often to dare to make that choice to shoot, that such decisions are much more difficult in real life than during training. This decision is, as expressed by several informants, a big hurdle, or "a barrier you need to break when shooting in an armed confrontation". But even though some instructors stress this during training sessions, "it is a difference between standing there in training and say that you are going to do it, and when you are standing there with "life in your hands." However, some informants also argued for a significant difference between the obvious situations, where it is undeniable that you must fire your firearm, and the somewhat "assessment situations" where it is less obvious what to decide regarding use of force to contain the situation.

"The first shot" was another interesting aspect mentioned. During a training session an instructor would tell you what "actions to take to avoid being stabbed." But it is not an entirely accurate answer to when to take the first shot. According to one informant, assessments and decisions not to shoot comes a lot with training and real situations, a lot of assignments with drugs and illness and the ability to "read a face."

After the confrontation, one informant made a Power Point presentation to present his experiences for all sections on his station. Other informants pointed at reports after especially the more serious assignments. Informants talked about experiences noted down in the log after the assignment. One informant did an experience report after his armed confrontation. He was quite surprised by how much reasoning he did in a second or two during the confrontation. In his unit, they spend a lot of time talking about the confrontations, the assessments made and decisions to shoot or not to shoot. Another informant presented his experience in a meeting with his colleagues, in a "fucking honest" way, and received a lot of support afterwards. Another informant mentioned that experiences were included in training sessions and that "there are other things at play in a real mission" indicating the need for discussions about differences between everyday experiences and training sessions and the reality of armed confrontations. Other informants had a quick talk with partners on-scene or with the incident commander before returning to the police station. Most of them had a good discussion with their partner during the assignment before writing their reports. One informant stated that The Norwegian Police University College picked up "his case" and used it in lessons. Another informant stated that his police district is better at using the scenarios from armed confrontations in training sessions.

Many informants argued that it is a lot of focus on solving armed confrontations without the use of firearm, that this is a success. However, as one informant stated choosing not to shoot could increase the risk of a third person being hit by a crazy guy with a gun. Other informants argued that not shooting meant that the risk shifted from the subject onto them as police officers. Several informants, particularly the ones experiencing an armed confrontation with a subject with a handgun, or especially shotgun, argued that the subject in many ways had the initiative and that he could shoot the police officers and maybe continue shooting others in the area, such as bystanders.

Several informants talk about their training skills being very relevant, and that their training gave them a calmness in the confrontation. Furthermore, they argued how much trust they put in their partners and in their equipment (weapons, helmets, bulletproof wests, shields, etc). One informant stated that "with this training and equipment I will be able to handle this confrontation." He was supported by another informant arguing that he was "better trained and better protected than the other party", and that, even though it may sound naive, felt an experience of safety in many missions.

One informant was approached by his IP3-district leader after the armed confrontation to come up with a strategy to use this experience during training sessions "to make others more prepared" including the manager himself.

5. Discussion

Norwegian police officers do seldom experience armed confrontations, even though they are frequently armed. Thus, they do not have much experience in these situations. Consequently, armed confrontations provide good learning arenas. According to POD, all police personnel are obliged to contribute to the development of a good learning culture with good learning arenas, small talk between colleagues, including the identification and facilitation of opportunities for learning (2020). This is in line with a learning organisation that is skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights (Garvin, 1993: 3).

5.1. *Learning for armed confrontations*

Training in relevant scenarios is a main preparedness activity in the pre-crisis phase (Kruke, 2012). This is supported by informants arguing for their dedication for training, that their experience in armed confrontations comes from training, and not from direct experience from real events. One informant stressed the need to "be prepared for what you encounter". Another informant talked about their "backpack of experience" coming from training, that training is aimed at "building up experience". Experience is a fundamental aspect of both situational awareness (Endsley, 1995) and recognition-primed decision-making (Klein, 1989). Learning through experience gained in training sessions, according to informants, allows them to come up with the "not to shoot"-solution, giving a "capacity to feel that intuition", steady focus on the subject in the confrontation because drills at training sessions means that less focus is on own equipment and weapon, giving the ability to handle their weapons with confidence in an armed confrontation. Even though drill during training sessions is not "put into context", the training gives a confidence police officers can bring into a real confrontation. That said, informants also mentioned that drills may lead to inadequate response if the real event is different than the drill. At the same time may drills give a good foundation for different types of approaches, that it is a link between "over-training" and recognition (Klein, 1989) in armed confrontation, that training beforehand is 90 percent of the work in the confrontation, and that the rest is just the finishing touches. Discussions about experiences, assessments and decision-making, also during training, may have the side effect of them "thinking quite similar" during armed response, that these discussions gave them a sort of shared mental model (Salas et al., 2005). Thus, these discussions were particularly important for inexperienced officers.

There are also discrepancies mentioned between training and real events. Informants stated that even though they did not shoot the subject in their confrontation, they would have shot him during training, because much training is conducted on the shooting range or in a simulator, where it is expected to make use of their firearms. Thus, it is a difference between focusing on a shooting range cardboard target and "looking a desperate subject in the eye".

5.2. *Learning from armed confrontations*

Learning is a critical task, also in the police. It is fair to say that the informants have gained important experience from their armed confrontations, experience transformed into knowledge (Kolb, 1984). Firstly, they provided relevant reasoning for not shooting, such as the needed time to «read» the subject and the situation, that "the first shot" is very difficult, etc. Secondly, some informants reflected that decisions not to shoot could have repercussions because the risk is shifted from the subject to the police officers, and maybe also third persons that happens to be in harm's way. Thirdly, they talked about experiences related to equipment, that initial information from the police operation room might not be accurate, the uncertainty about the development of the confrontation, etc. Furthermore, the informants listed several arenas for experience transfer, a first impression talk with their partner during the confrontation, and

maybe also the incident commander, they filed a report upon returning to the station after the confrontation, reports that to a less degree is evaluated with the purpose of learning from the experiences (Hellesø-Knutsen, 2013). For some of the informants, their knowledge transfer ended there. For other informants they spontaneously took down a more comprehensive report, or they produced a PowerPoint presentation for a presentation to their colleagues, during ordinary meetings at the station or between shifts. Some of these knowledge transfer arenas may be described as communities of practice where people informally engage by a common interest (Wenger; McDermott; Snyder 2002). That said, this example of a collective learning arena did not benefit everyone. Some of these experiences remained as tacit knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) at individual level, or in communities of practice (Wenger et. al., 2002). However, some informants also mentioned their confrontation being presented as a case at district training for all polices emergency response personnel within the district. This is much in line with using crises as potential lessons for contingency planning, organizational reform, policy adaptation, and training for future crises (Boin, et al., 2017). These examples may reflect the learning culture called for by POD (2020), that all police personnel are obliged to contribute to a good learning culture, good learning arenas, small talk between colleagues, identification and facilitation of opportunities for learning etc. (ibidem). Figure 1 shows the process from individual training, via learning in armed confrontation and experience transfer to increased quality in organised training.

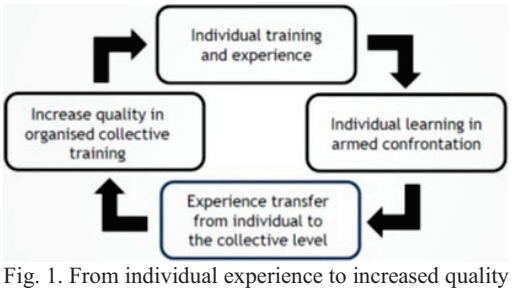

Fig. 1. From individual experience to increased quality of collective training

However, these informal and spontaneous examples of experience transfer from individual police officers to the collective level between colleagues and in communities of practice are not the learning organisation called for by POD (2020), an organisation that make use of the learning that is taking place and make this learning available for the rest of the organisation, to modifying the organisation's behavior to reflect the new knowledge and insights (Garvin, 1993). Several informants called for a learning system within the police force to map relevant experiences and make them available for the rest of the police force, a learning system called for many times before (Henriksen et al., 2022; NOU, 2009: 12; NOU 2017:9).

6. Conclusions

This study show that a lot of individual learning comes out of armed confrontations, and that many police officers are more than willing to share their experiences, for instance in bottom-up spontaneous experience sharing initiatives. However, the study also points to the lack of a comprehensive system to map experiences gained by police officers in armed confrontation. Thus, the police should develop tools that enable continuous registration of experiences from the use of force, and especially the use of firearms, to externalise learning from these armed confrontations aimed at improving the quality of police work through more relevant education and training programs and refined operational protocols. The lack of such a system is unfortunate, because these experiences of not making use of their firearms are very important knowledge that may increase the value of education and training in armed confrontation and increase the relevance of operational protocols. The quality of Norwegian response emergency personnel rests on the quality of training.

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