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The exercise of physical coercion by the police in the performance of their duties.

The use of force is perhaps one of the most central and contentious aspects of state policing. Famously, Bittner (1999: 125) defined the police as ‘nothing more than a mechanism for the distribution of situationally justified force in society.’ While in general terms the potential need for officers to resort to physical force is widely taken for granted, the legitimacy of specific acts raises the thorny question of exactly what coercive action is justified. The police often struggle for legitimacy because they are required to undertake acts that would be extraordinary or even illegal if done by others (Waddington, 1999). This is perhaps no more so than in the use of force.

Despite or perhaps because of the contention about the legitimacy of the police use of force, the understanding of it is deficient in key respects. Outside of the use of firearms, historically basic official police service data about the frequency and character of force employed by and against the police has been sparse and assembled according to diverse criteria. In addition, the ‘low visibility’ of many police functions has made it difficult to gather information independent of official agencies. What information has been available though has suggested that in Great Britain and the US, the use of significant force by and against the police has been fairly rare as a percentage of public encounters. Some functions, such as custody arrest, are more likely to involve force than others. With the difficulties associated with studying force in day to day encounters, much of the academic and policy commentary has been given to well-known public order events that turned violent.

What is evident in relation to major public order and other incidents is that assessments of the appropriateness of specific instances of force often vary. While it is routinely said that force should be necessary and reasonable, it is often much more difficult to reach agreement on what these terms mean in practice. Various studies have pointed to the diverse administrative, lay, professional, legal standards employed to make appraisals. Although dispute is not inevitable, no well defined distinctions exist between what counts as necessary and reasonable force and what counts as unnecessary and unreasonable.
force; as well as what distinguishes unnecessary and unreasonable force from outright police brutality.

While determinations of appropriateness often turn on the factual details of particular incidents, what should be included as the relevant facts to any case is open for debate (for instance, in questions about the relevance of wider police relations with ethnic minorities for understanding a specific incidents). Public assessments of police action are highly indebted to mass media portrayals, a condition which raises questions about who gets to participate in producing such accounts (Lawrence 2000). Reactions to the apprehension of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1991 as well as the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes in London in 2005 attest to both the scope for disagreement about appropriate conduct as well as the scope for disagreement about what considerations are relevant to judging police actions. Analyses of public order events or paramilitary policing exhibit such contrasting assessments as well; in particular in relation to whether police actions diminished or escalated conflict (see, for instance, Scarman Inquiry). Given these considerations, it is hardly surprising that much less analysis exists on the extent of police brutality than the use of force in general.

Disagreement about police use of force is often difficult to resolve, in part, because it raises fundamental questions about the role of discretion and rules in relation to police accountability. For many years, analysts of police practices have argued that discretion in the adherence to rules is of central importance in understanding the actions of officers. This recognition has happened in tandem with the importance of distinguishing between formal organisational rules and informal practices. While discretion enables a flexible approach to individual situations, it also provides grounds for criticism regarding the consistency and appropriateness of actions. In relation to the use of force short of firearms, the mix of discretion and rules can be especially problematic. Rules too open ended can invite criticisms of lax controls, whereas rules too prescriptive can be deemed unworkable. Different polices have been introduced to set out advised police responses. In the US most agencies have in place a ‘use of force continuum’, whereas in UK the preference is for a less prescriptive ‘conflict resolution model’.

In recent years, a significant attention has been given to the police use of force in the UK. This has in part stemmed from further high profile cases, the growing importance of health and safety requirements, and well as the finding of key bodies such as the Patten Commission concerned with the ethics of policing. Greater documentation and data of force incidents is taking place and there has been an active search for new tactics and technology to aid officers, such as less lethal weapons (Rappert 2002).

Key Texts and Sources

