



# Policing in the Light of Social Dominance Theory and the Social Distance Theory of Power

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## 1 Policing as Social Interaction

Being a police officer is a social profession. It is defined as social in that a large part of its work involves interacting with people. Police officers ask residents for their documents in traffic stops, search people in the park

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for prohibited substances, record witness and injured party statements, accompany demonstrations, or expel violent family members from their homes. The respective research has a lot to offer, including theories and methods on face-to-face interactions (Hadley et al., 2022) and interaction-specific bodies of knowledge, which for example comprise caregiver interactions in emergency situations (Rogers et al., 2019), de-escalatory communication (Engel et al., 2019; Pontzer, 2021), or the dynamics of crowd policing (Nassauer, 2019; Williams & Stott, 2022).

Encounters between the police and the public are not interactions at eye level. For instance, one cannot simply avoid a police interaction. Police encounters are often authoritative situations. From a resident's perspective, every action of a police officer, every approach, every stop, every entry, every question and query, every physical intervention, every ticket, and so on, can be perceived as an individual restriction and behavioural imposition. However, in order to accomplish their mission, the police have statutory and customary authority to conduct the mentioned actions. In social terms, the police are the state-legitimized organization for controlling violence (Luhmann, 1995). As a result, police interaction is fundamentally underpinned by a certain power imbalance.

In recent years, international police research points to challenges that characterize encounters between the police and the public. For instance, interactions that result in the death or serious injury of residents as a result of (excessive) police use of force (Goff & Rau, 2020; Lee, 2021; Tillyer, 2022), or which reveal racial bias (Goff & Rau, 2020; Peebles, 2019; Ross et al., 2018; Verbruggen, 2022), however statistically insignificant their number, clearly indicate a problematic framing of the fundamental power imbalance between police officers and civilians.

Even if the police–resident interaction is not an interaction at eye level, it still leaves room for balancing the power differential with a sense of proportionality, for example by providing a good rationale for the particular policing concern and executing it fairly and transparently (McLean et al., 2019; Nix et al., 2015; Rosenbaum & Lawrence, 2017). In addition, research also indicates concerns associated with the organizational culture of policing. The police are riddled with semantics and practices of a masculinity that sees itself as superior (Gutschmidt & Vera, 2020; Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Rawski & Workman-Stark, 2018), as well as with a lead narrative of a pervasive danger of externally caused violence (Staller & Koerner, 2022; see Chapter 3) and the currently politically relevant topic of racism and racial bias (Behr, 2021; Peeples, 2020; Rohde & Kursawe, 2021).

Police culture and interpersonal behaviour are closely linked. While the conditioning factors for the aforementioned problems are viewed through a wide variety of scientific observational lenses (for racism, see e.g., Polizeiakademie Niedersachsen, 2021), social psychology provides two conceptual frameworks: social dominance theory (SDT) and the social distance theory of power (SDTP). In this chapter, we will argue that they offer a fruitful impetus for reflection efforts within the police, since they relate individual behaviour to its institutional context in a theoretically informed and empirically validated way.

The reference point of both theories is power. SDT states that one's own power is secured through dominance. SDTP, on the other hand, states that dominance is the result of the asymmetrical power relations that are reflected in social interactions in the form of social distance, which in turn can lead to violence. In essence, both theories offer explanations for the police's need to be in control and to strive to maintain (and defend) their individual and institutional position of dominance. This has also been found to be an issue in police science: "Behind racism, right-wing extremism, discrimination, and use of excessive force is the fear of losing dominance" (Behr, 2021, p. 55).

## 2 An Explanatory Approach to Group-Based Hierarchies: Social Dominance Theory

SDT (Pratto et al., 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius et al., 2016) is based on the observation that all social systems are structured as group-based social hierarchies, which in turn have a superior group at the top and other groups in lower hierarchical positions. There is a power imbalance between groups, which is expressed and reinforced through a group-based behaviour of dominance. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) see this as a universal grammar of the social realm. While there are differences in the level of repression (e.g., repression is sometimes more visible, direct, and pronounced in anti-democratic societies than in democracies) structural inequality is considered a universally observable phenomenon in the context of SDT:

Regardless of a society's form of government, the contents of its fundamental belief system, or the complexity of its social and economic arrangements, human societies tend to organise as group-based social hierarchies in which at least one group enjoys greater social status and power than other groups. Members of dominant social groups tend to enjoy a disproportionate share of positive social value, or desirable material and symbolic resources such as political power, wealth, protection by force, plentiful and desirable food, and access to good housing, health care, leisure, and education. (Pratto et al., 2006, pp. 271f.)

The basic assumption of SDT is that social systems (re)organize themselves as group-based hierarchies. Common forms of social oppression, such as sexism, racism, nationalism, hostility towards people with mental illness, physical and mental disabilities, obesity or low social status, all represent specific manifestations of the general social tendency to form group-based inequalities and to reproduce and adapt them through interaction. Social inequality and thus the superiority of one's own group is established along recurring axes of distinction.

## The Three Axes of Social Hierarchy

SDT distinguishes between three different, primary types of group-based social hierarchies:

1. Hierarchy of age: Social systems worldwide differentiate their inhabitants according to age. Correspondingly, they generate a vertically coded hierarchy between dominant adults and non-dominant non-adults, which shapes social processes in many social domains (e.g., consumption of goods, education, school, sports, political decisions). In society, adults claim a disproportionate amount of power when compared to adolescents and therefore assume a position of superiority.
2. Hierarchy of gender: Social systems worldwide differentiate their inhabitants according to gender and organize the distribution of social power predominantly along the distinction of men and women. Although matriarchal forms of society exist in specific cultural spaces, the patriarchal system dominates on a global scale: compared to women, men have more social, political, and military power.
3. An arbitrarily set hierarchy: Social systems worldwide form supplementary categories, in addition to the distinctions according to age and gender, based on group-based hierarchies that are built into the structure of the respective society. Among the arbitrarily set and culturally determined categories are distinctions along the lines of race, ethnicity, worldview, or religion, whose universal function is to structure social processes as in-group/out-group procedures and to enable the corresponding assignment of individuals into said groups. Allocating (a set of) people to one side of the distinction generates a grouping of “us” versus “them”.

Regardless of the category of separation, according to SDT societies are divided into groups that dominate (in-groups) and other groups that are dominated (out-groups). A socially superiorly perceived in-group, as for instance a group of academics, white-coloured people, or Christians, assigns itself as well as the inferior out-groups their respective positions in society, while also possessing a disproportionately large share

of the relevant social resources (e.g., health, income, security, education, knowledge, housing). On the one hand, empirically, there is often intersectionality between elite in-groups, meaning that members of one group, e.g., people of white skin colour, are also members of the other group, e.g., Christians. On the other hand, in-groups can also be in competition with each other. However, their commonality lies in the fact that in-groups establish their dominance at the expense of out-groups.

## **Empiricism of Inequality**

This structural inequality that is centred on social distinctions is confirmed by numerous research findings, for instance, by studies comparing income. Study data for the USA show an unequal distribution of income between population groups along race and gender-related characteristics (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999): the white European American population earns more than America's black population. However, there is an underlying gender effect worth noting: it is the men in the white European American group who earn significantly more than the men in the black American group (incidentally earning significantly more than the women in the country's in-group as well), while the difference in income between the women in both groups is much smaller. Based on their analysis, Sidanius and Pratto (1999) conclude that the reason for the difference in income between the two population groups is that black American men earn significantly less than white European American men.

This finding is consistent with research on victimization in the domain of police violence. Again, the data show that male black American members of the out-group are at a significantly higher risk of being shot by white police officers in ambiguous situations than are the white European American representatives of the in-group and their respective female members of the out-group (Plant et al., 2011). While no differences emerge between white European American and black American women when the officers are unarmed, the risk again increases substantially for the latter group when police officers are armed. The explanation for this lies in stereotypical imputation: in race-based attribution, individuals of

the coded out-group are perceived as more aggressive than members of the in-group (Plant et al., 2011).

In the domain of arbitrarily set hierarchies, SDT as a whole assumes a gender effect that has been empirically confirmed many times: male individuals are significantly more likely to use distinctions of race, ethnicity, worldview, or religion to establish group-based dominance than female members of the same group (Pratto et al., 2006). Further, male members of the out-group are more likely to be the target of discrimination than female members of the out-group. Thus, according to SDT, the establishment of social dominance is a primarily male phenomenon in which the use of violence—especially male-to-male—plays a central role (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius & Veniegas, 2000). But how do group-based social dominance hierarchies explain themselves?

## Mechanisms of Group-Based Dominance Hierarchies

Social dominance hierarchies serve to maintain and consolidate asymmetric power relations in favour of a superior group. SDT takes the approach of specifically identifying and understanding those mechanisms that are responsible for the genesis, establishment, and modification of group-based social hierarchies. To do so, it takes a variety of different types of analyses into account, ranging from individual psychological preconditions, relationships of individuals to other individuals within and outside their groups, institutional practices, and cultural ideologies, all of which interact with one another (Pratto & Stewart, 2012; Pratto et al., 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius et al., 2016).

Group-based social hierarchy arises by virtue of the dominant group's discrimination against the subordinate group at a variety of levels. More specifically, SDT distinguishes the following mechanisms (Pratto et al., 2006) that are intertwined in the creation and affirmation of group-based inequality:

- **Individual discrimination:** At the individual level, discrimination manifests itself as an orientation towards dominance, as well as in the behaviour of individual representatives of the in-group. For example,

individuals whose appearance makes them part of the out-group are denied information, while other people are discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientation and are therefore excluded from participating in conversations.

- According to SDT, individual behaviour is woven into legitimizing myths. Legitimizing myths describe an ensemble of shared convictions, beliefs, stereotypes, and worldviews of the dominant in-group. In so-called hierarchy-legitimizing myths, the inequality in question and the accompanying discrimination imperative are justified as fair, normal, moral, and/or as naturally given (Pratto et al., 2006, pp. 275f.). Hierarchy-legitimizing myths “not only organize individual, group, and institutional behavior in ways that sustain dominance, they often lead subordinates to collaborate with dominants in the maintenance of oppression” (ibid., p. 276).
- Individual behaviour is framed by practices and structures of institutional discrimination. Here, SDT points to hierarchy-promoting institutions that ascribe positive social values to the dominant group, while devaluing the orientations of the subordinate group. Prisons, for example, embody structures of institutional discrimination. By “housing” numerous members of the inferior group, they represent the dominance and controlling power of the superior in-group (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The mechanism of institutional discrimination is highly effective for several reasons. First, when compared to individuals, institutions have more resources. Institutions also form their own internal norms. They exert strong influence in society and can control deviant behaviour of in-group members. Finally, institutions are more robust to external expectations of change (Pratto et al., 2006).
- Group-based discrimination plays a central function in establishing social dominance hierarchies. Among the inter-group processes that generate inequality, asymmetric group behaviours are of specific interest. These include the preference for one’s own group over the subordinate out-group and, conversely, the subordinate group’s preference for the dominant group, which is based on legitimizing myths (Pratto et al., 2006, p. 279). It also encompasses the self-disempowerment of the inferior group, for example through drug use and crime.



Societies, according to SDT, tend towards inequality, thereby allowing superior power to reproduce itself through dominance. Once a hierarchy between a dominant and a subordinate group is established, social inequality and repression is promoted, protected, and exacerbated by different processes at multiple levels. At the individual level, for example, both members of dominant groups and members of subordinate groups are motivated to justify the system and thus participate in its maintenance (Pratto et al., 2006). According to SDT, members of the dominant group are motivated on a psychological level to maintain their higher social status. At the same time, members of subordinate groups tend to consciously or unconsciously acknowledge the structures of their own oppression in order to satisfy the need for a predictable and controllable world.

A crucial advantage of SDT is that it helps us to understand the manifestations of social dominance hierarchies, not only at the individual level but also at the systemic level: it explains the dominance of in-group members, for example addressing their use of violence, as it constitutes itself as being built on underlying social structures. Individual behaviour is a result of the interplay between the institutional, social, and group levels. According to SDT, an end to social inequality and dominance hierarchies cannot be expected. Dominance hierarchies are universal. Despite the normatively clear position of contributing to the reduction of social inequality and oppression by analysing their mechanisms, SDT claims that structural inequalities and asymmetrical power relations cannot be eliminated. They are thought of as aspects that have complex psychological and social functions. Although their basic existence is undisputed, the many forms and shapes they take are subject to debate (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). However, social inequalities can be gradually shaped.

While SDT is concerned with securing one's own power through dominance, SDTP also focuses on the maintenance of not only individual, but also institutional, positions of dominance. It focuses primarily on social interactions in which power relations are gradually structured by social proximity and distance.

### 3 Social Distance Theory of Power

SDTP is based on the core assumption of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) that individuals tend to fit into groups that are important to them, for example because of their gender, ethnic, or professional identity. This creates a binary structured orientation between oneself and others as well as between one's own and others' group identities (Magee & Smith, 2013, p. 159).

#### Power and Social Distance

When we encounter individuals from other groups, identification with a particular group can lead to distortions in perception, evaluation, and social behaviour. According to SDTP, this is especially important when the relationship between members from different groups is characterized by a power imbalance: that is when the powers and abilities are unequally distributed in favour of one party and allow them “control over valued resources” (Magee & Smith, 2013, p. 2) that are unequally distributed in favour of one party. When a power differential is involved, social distance is perceived differently. Social distance is not to be confused with physical distance. In SDTP, social distance refers to the degree of subjectively perceived closeness or distance to other individuals and groups (Magee, 2019). In this respect, one may well be physically very close to another person, yet socially very distant at the same time, and vice versa.

SDTP assumes that the possession and attribution of power moderates social distance. Individuals and groups with power perceive a greater social distance between them and individuals and groups with less power (Magee & Smith, 2013). Individuals with attributed power over important social resources expect submission and exert more influence over the course of their interactions with inferiors. Therefore, they are less motivated to join out-group individuals and expect individuals with less power to join them or to comply with their demands.

## Empiricism of Interaction Design

Numerous studies point out problematic aspects of how interactions unfold under the condition of a person or group-related power differential. For example, individuals with greater attributed power that perceive the social distance between them, and individuals or groups with lesser power as increasingly large, tend to:

- Make cynical attributions;
- Show less empathy for the needs, feelings, and behaviours of the interaction partner;
- Display negative emotions such as contempt and anger;
- Articulate stereotypes, prejudices, and negative images of society;
- Demonstrate their expectation of submission and compliance;
- Show an increased readiness for aggression (Lammers et al., 2012; Magee, 2019; Magee & Smith, 2013; McCarthy et al., 2020).

The superior party is far more relevant to individuals with less power than the other way around (Magee, 2019). The extent of perceived social distance is measured by how members of the in-group perceive the identity and status of the out-group. For individuals and social groups who are perceived as different based on certain characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, or appearance, in-group identification is low and perceived social distance is correspondingly high. Conflicts are especially likely when individuals with lower power do not live up to the expectations of individuals with higher power, for instance by not following instructions or showing an insufficient amount of respect. In hierarchical relationships, social distance is associated with violence and aggression by the superior group when their expectations are not met (Magee, 2019). Violence and aggression serve the purpose of restoring power and thus the primacy of one's personal and group identity, as well as the corresponding social status.

## Mechanisms of Power: Submission and Violence

SDTP thus provides an approach that can explain the emergence of violence as a mechanism for maintaining asymmetrical power relations between individuals and groups. It is interesting to note that the power, identity, status, and primacy of the superior group, along with the accompanying cognitive and normative orientations, are stabilized by specific interactions with the out-groups that lead either to the proactive subjugation of the inferior group or to resistance on their part. Resistance indicates a temporary crisis of power before a violent response demonstrates the superiority of the group in power all the more forcefully, thereby further consolidating the hierarchical dynamic. The need for control seems to be of great importance when seen from the point of view of superior persons and groups. While submission still allows for the fictitious freedom to decide the level of recognition individuals attribute to their inferiority, violence fulfils the control function in a more direct manner and leaves a deep impression in the subjugated persons' minds.

## 4 SDT and SDTP: Police Perspectives

These introductions to SDT and SDTP already show that both approaches unfold high explanatory power for the contemporary challenges the police are facing, as mentioned at the beginning. When seen through the public's eye, police violence can be understood as a problem of an excessive claim to power that favours social distance and dominance towards persons and groups that are described as being of lesser power (Goff & Rau, 2020; Lee, 2021; Tillyer, 2022). These problems that are associated with police culture are rooted in: the widespread cult of masculinity (Gutschmidt & Vera, 2020; Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Rawski & Workman-Stark, 2018), narratives of omnipresent danger (Staller & Koerner, 2022), as well as the structurally applied, arbitrary hierarchy of ethnic and racial discrimination (Goff & Rau, 2020;

Peebles, 2019; Ross et al., 2018; Verbruggen, 2022). Consequently, the concepts of SDT and SDTP provide a valuable analytical framework and orientation for the further professionalization of police practice (Koerner & Staller, 2022).

## **SDTP and the Police**

In a democratic society, the police hold the monopoly on the legitimate use of force and have been endowed with corresponding authorities by the state. Research on SDTP indicates that an exaggerated focus on power can lead to a more assertive and excessive use of that power, which can in turn result in dysfunctional consequences in police–resident interactions. The likelihood of aggressive behaviour towards the policed civilian or group increases as the perceived social distance on the part of the police officers increases. If the expectation of submission and compliance is unexpectedly not fulfilled, violence negates the threat to police-related identity, power, and status, which is perceived as being inherent in the residents’ rejection, and thus restores the presupposed order.

## **Problem Analysis**

SDPT offers an explanation of the police use of force at the individual and at the group level. Violence is directed against individuals and groups who are perceived as having less power and therefore to be socially distant (Lammers et al., 2012). The relationship with them is, correspondingly, socially distant as well. Study data show that police violence is superabundant as well as severe toward individuals and groups perceived as criminals (Alpert & Dunham, 2004), socioeconomically disadvantaged (Lee et al., 2014; McCarthy et al., 2018; Terrill & Reisig, 2003), or ethnically different (Lautenschlager & Omori, 2018; Lee et al., 2014). Perceived social distance from the out-group influences cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses (Magee & Smith, 2013):

- On a cognitive level, social distance suggests greater use of stereotypes;
- At the emotional level, social distance leads to a more intense experience of socially dismissive emotions such as anger and contempt, with a concomitant lower experience of pro-social emotions such as empathy and guilt;
- Behaviourally, social dominance is associated with increased aggression.

SDTP also makes it clear that distance is not equal. Social distance can be accompanied by physical distance or physical closeness—each expressing a dominance orientation. Social closeness can be accompanied by physical closeness or physical distance—each expressing recognition (Magee, 2019). The social distance or closeness felt in each case is heavily influenced by one's own as well as the police culture's identity and status beliefs. It is concretely reflected in interactional behaviour. This is important to mention when addressing the police's point of view, because it generates important insights into the topic of officer safety.

Officer safety is strongly dependent on how police officers view themselves, others, and the world. For instance, whether physical proximity or distance is seen as the right choice in police interactions with a person in an acute mental health crisis can significantly depend on the police officer's perceived social proximity or distance. SDTP shows how the general and often oversimplified recommendations for officer safety (such as distance) are formulated. Functional officer safety requires first and foremost reflection and (re)calibration of one's own power ambitions.

From a police psychology perspective, social distance moves in a problematic circle: social dominance is a prerequisite as well as a consequence of dysfunctional worldviews and interaction strategies. It is the reason for social rejection of one's own person (Magee, 2019), which, in turn, favours an immersion in or a withdrawal into the appreciative police bubble (Behr, 2021). From there, the position of power receives further reinforcement, which, in turn, increases perceived social distance. This is then reflected using correspondingly aligned worldviews and interaction strategies, forming new prerequisites for dominance-heavy behaviour. Accordingly, SDTP also offers a possible explanatory

approach to structural and institutional racism in the context of the police (Christe-Zeyse, 2022; Rucker & Richeson, 2021). Initial analyses for the German police force indicate that police work is “generally accompanied by circumstances and preconditions that have a favorable effect with regard to various radicalization factors, ensuring that (especially) right-wing extremist tendencies can potentially better develop” (Rohde & Kursawe, 2021, p. 168). The internal interpretation of social distance within the police could be an important anchor point for further research.

### Potential Solutions

In addition to the merely descriptive insights into the dysfunctions of excessive power and social distance, SDTP also provides the police with tangible points of departure for efforts in reducing the aforementioned issues. For example, a recent study by McCarthy et al. (2020) highlights the violence-reducing benefits of community policing. It concludes that “higher levels of community engagement by officers are associated with a lower propensity for coercive policing, with officers who report more frequent community engagement displaying lower levels of endorsement of coercive policing responses and higher levels of endorsement of non-coercive policing responses” (S. 14). According to the data, socially relating to the community one is policing, especially in “times of nothing” (Rowe & Rowe, 2021) when there is no actual call for service, reduces the officer’s perceived social distance from the community and thus their attitude towards the use of force. Innocuous conversations between the police and residents in which they take a mutual interest in each other and exchange information on current topics and sensitivities, close the social gap between police officers and residents.

Community policing does not mean that the police lose any of their official power. It is only the presentation of the inescapable power differential that makes the difference in this case. Study data by Wit et al. (2017) suggest that it is precisely this shaping of power by those who have power that matters. When, from the point of view of the police, power is interpreted as a *responsibility* rather than an opportunity, it

increases the likelihood of accepting cues from others. This includes empathy and the willingness to accept cues that come from those with less power (Wit et al., 2017). When seen as a responsibility, power also encourages the reflecting individuals to adopt the perspective of less powerful individuals, giving them voice and to be interested in their needs, experiences, and reasons for their respective behaviour (Magee, 2020). When the primary focus is no longer on direct or indirect control over the other, and there is no expectation of submission, conformity, and enforcement anymore, the focus can shift to responsibility. It can then increase the trust and feeling of fairness of police interaction partners. According to SDTP, trust forms the central challenge as well as the key task of modern policing (Magee, 2019). Research shows that procedural transparency, a good rationale for the particular policing concern, and fair treatment are effective tools for balancing the power with a sense of proportionality and generating citizens' acceptance (McLean et al., 2019; Nix et al., 2015; Rosenbaum & Lawrence, 2017).

## **SDT and Policing**

SDT declares the existence of social inequality, and thus the superiority of one group over other groups, to be the universal grammar of social systems. Inequality is based on a power imbalance between the in-group, which perceives itself as superior, and the out-group, which perceives itself as inferior. Hierarchy and dominance are thereby the preconditions as well as the results of discriminatory practices and structures at the individual, social, and group levels. Empirically, SDT shows that dominance orientation is associated with the use of violence, which is rooted, for example, in stereotypical attributions of the dangerousness of members of the out-group.

## **Problem Analysis**

The relevance for policing is obvious. The relationship between the police and the public can be described as a specific manifestation of social inequality, in which the police develop a dominance orientation due to



their power to control violence that has been handed over to them by the state. The superiority of the police as an in-group is grounded in discrimination against others as an inferior out-group, which sometimes takes the form of violence.

Accordingly, research shows the effect of arbitrarily stabilized hierarchies in the police service. In a recent study, Swencionis et al. (2021) demonstrate that white police officers with a high social dominance orientation that is based on a high-status white group identity are significantly more likely to use violence against inferior-status individuals than fellow officers with a less pronounced dominance orientation. Moreover, numerous studies indicate the phenomena of racial bias and racial profiling on the part of the police (Goff & Rau, 2020; Peeples, 2019; Ross et al., 2018; Verbruggen, 2022).

The discrimination enacted in this context is rooted in the culture and organization of the police. As SDT argues, myths that legitimize dominance and hierarchy, group-based interactions, and institutional structures all play a key role. In an international perspective, this coincides with research that addresses the widespread cult of masculinity and danger within the police. It identifies it in informal and formal intergroup exchanges, for example in police training or organizational units, as well as in service regulations, conceptualizations of officer safety, or police violence statistics (Gutschmidt & Vera, 2020; Peeples, 2020; Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Rawski & Workman-Stark, 2018; Rohde & Kursawe, 2021; Staller & Koerner, 2022). SDT can provide a unifying framework for such research.

## Potential for Solutions

From the SDT perspective, the police embody a group that is necessarily based on power claims and is therefore built on inequality in a society based on inequality. Furthermore, SDT addresses group-based oppression and the underlying social dominance, which, in everyday life, can manifest themselves as discrimination in individual police behaviour and as a structural effect at the level of the overall police organization while also entailing repercussions on that very structure. From the perspective

of SDT, individual cases, and general structures, perspectives of personalization and “socialization” do not form exclusive reference points in an analysis. Behaviour and context mutually constitute each other.

SDT has practical implications for both the behavioural and organizational level. In essence, these boil down to introspection and reflection on questions such as to what extent existing attitudes, practices, and structures are based on a categorically overused dominance orientation and through which alternatives the resulting inequality effects can be sensitively dealt with. This includes thinking about the basis of common, group-related narratives within the police bubble, for example narratives about petty criminals, gangs of foreigners or clan criminals, and what practical consequences these narratives entail. SDT-informed reflection becomes very illustrative due to its focus on the individual’s as well as the respective in-group’s use of language: Are there terms and phrases in the “language of the police” that reduce persons of out-groups to a certain person-related characteristic, or to characteristics of an entire group? Are there terms and phrases that place them on the “against” and inferior side of the police or address them without any actual factual reason? If so, there is a concrete starting point for resetting the police’s dominance behaviour in gestures and expressions by changing their perception and use of language. Guidelines for this can be found in communication principles such as active listening, which is well-known as a powerful tool for street policing (Vecchi et al., 2019).

## 5 Conclusion

SDT and SDTP are two theoretically grounded and empirically validated approaches with great explanatory power for critical issues in contemporary policing. Police violence, racial bias, police masculinity, and narratives of omnipresent danger are closely intertwined and ultimately “suffer” from an individual and structural overuse of power claims on the part of the police. Dominance and distance are associated with discrimination and violence, which are in turn expressed in individual interactional behaviour, shaped by police culture, and (re-)produced in reciprocal reference. Perspectives on SDT and SDTP not only contribute

to the explanation of contemporary police problems, but offer promising solutions as well. Consequently, more research furthering SDT and SDTP-based insights into policing is desirable.

### **Key Takeaways**

SDT and SDTP, which originate in social psychology, offer great explanatory power both for the basic work of the police as well as for particular challenges and problem areas. They help us to better understand the fundamental power relationship of the police and to recognize its form and function. A strong power imbalance leads to social distance and dominance over individuals and groups, which ultimately promotes violence. By pointing to the mutual salience of individual police behaviour and police context, SDT and SDTP also provide points of departure for further research on police violence and extremism in the police, among others.

SDTP and SDT hold significant implications for police practice and organization. At their core, they relate to attitudes, practices, and structures at all levels of the police (individual, group, and social system).

### **Police Officers**

On the individual level of police officers, and strongly related to the concept of officer safety, the following key takeaways can be formulated:

- Recognize social distance (and closeness) and social dominance as central to your own and your group's behaviour;
- Acknowledge power as a task of responsibility and consciously (re)calibrate social distance and dominance to shape interactions accordingly;
- Reduce the power differential, for instance by literally stepping back or stepping toward the resident;
- Ensure procedural transparency and fairness of police-related actions;
- Put yourself in the place of the other, recognizing their needs and interests, enabling their voice;
- Communicate in a sensible and sensitive manner and avoid gestures and expressions of high dominance;
- Examine your own "police bubble" and question dominant narratives and the images of self, others, and the world these narratives convey;

- Recognize your own and the police's cultural biases (e.g., racial bias, gender bias);
- Use “times of nothing” for active relationship building and active engagement within the community, e.g., through small talk (community policing).

In this context, **conflict management trainers** and **police decision-makers** are challenged:

- To examine the key function of social distance (and closeness) and social dominance for the police;
- To organizationally and educationally promote the idea that police power is interpreted as a responsibility rather than an opportunity;
- To provide the necessary structural conditions for police officers and police organizations to critically and constructively address and redesign the role and effect of social dominance;
- To recognize the “police bubble” and question dominant narratives of the police and the world these narratives convey;
- To thematize the police's cultural biases (e.g., racial bias, gender bias).

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