

Narrowing the scope of de-escalation: A grounded theory of police-public interpersonal interaction

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Abstract

De-escalation has become a central objective of police reform, yet policing research and training continue to use the term inconsistently. This article develops a grounded theory of police-public interpersonal interaction that situates de-escalation within the broader professional goals officers pursue during encounters. We analyzed police de-escalation training artifacts and empirical studies that identify concrete officer behaviors. Open coding identified recommended behaviors; constant comparative and selective coding grouped those behaviors by the immediate task they appeared designed to accomplish; theoretical coding integrated the categories into a framework linking officer action, interactional goal and encounter resolution. The resulting framework conceptualizes officer/public safety as the necessary backdrop for all other strategies. It categorizes officer behaviors as investigation, officer self-regulation/rapport, de-escalation, negotiation, coercive compliance, or compelled compliance. It further distinguishes voluntary, coercive, and forcible resolutions. This framework provides a vocabulary for separating policy aspirations from empirically testable behavioral propositions. Rather than asking whether “de-escalation” works as a broad training label, researchers can examine whether specific behaviors achieve defined goals in particular situational contexts. The article outlines implications for police training, policy drafting, and future evaluations of police-public encounters. In doing so, it offers a more precise basis for balancing officer and public safety, lawful enforcement, and legitimacy goals in practice.

Introduction

De-escalation has become one of the most prominent reform concepts in contemporary policing. It appears in policy reports, training curricula, after-action reviews, and public demands for changes to police use of force. The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) called for use-of-force policy and training to emphasize de-escalation, while the Police Executive Research Forum (2012, 2016, 2022) has repeatedly framed de-escalation as a central component of modern police training. Engel, McManus, and Isaza (2020) identify de-escalation training as among the most frequent reforms proposed after controversial police shootings. Yet, the concept has grown faster than the empirical and theoretical infrastructure needed to define it, teach it consistently, and evaluate it rigorously.

The problem is not simply that de-escalation is difficult. It is that policing scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers often use the same word to describe behaviors that pursue different immediate goals. A de-escalation curriculum may include active listening, distance, tactical repositioning, time, empathy, clear instructions, rapport, threat assessment, warnings, compromise, restraint, pointing a firearm, physical control, or withdrawal. Some of these actions may reduce a person's heightened emotional state. Others preserve safety, gather information, persuade, threaten, restrict movement, or compel compliance. Treating all of them as “de-escalation” makes the concept expansive but analytically weak. It also creates a measurement problem: a study cannot determine whether de-escalation works if de-escalation is simultaneously a communication style, a tactical posture, a use-of-force alternative, a lower level of force, an officer safety strategy, and an outcome.

Engel, McManus, and Herold's (2020) systematic review illustrated this problem by finding sparse and mixed evidence and by noting the absence of a uniformly accepted definition in the policing field. The National Consensus Policy and Discussion Paper on Use of Force (2017) defines de-escalation broadly as verbal or non-verbal action during a potential force encounter that stabilizes the situation, reduces the immediacy of a threat, and increases time, options, and resources. That definition may be useful as policy language, but it purports a vague diversity of behaviors within an equally vague context. It is difficult to pin down what actions this definition condones or what situations constitute a "potential" force encounter. Burke (2024) shows the practical consequences of this breadth: officers in one department reportedly described lower levels of force, including handcuffing, weapon display, and grabs or holds, as forms of de-escalation. If coercive and forceful interventions can be described as de-escalation whenever they are less severe than a conceivable alternative, the term ceases to distinguish among qualitatively different officer actions.

The same ambiguity limits evaluations of de-escalation training programs. A lack of precision in de-escalation definitions has led to a diverse array of "de-escalation" training programs that alternatively recommend various behaviors, legal rules, tactical principles, officer safety messages, and communication scripts. As a result, it should come as no surprise that evaluations of de-escalation training have each claimed success by demonstrating meaningful changes across a variety of outcomes. For example, program evaluations have demonstrated changes in force (Engel et al., 2022; Engel et al., 2025), injuries (White et al., 2025), arrests (Engel et al., 2022; Engel et al., 2025), officer attitudes (McLean et al., 2020; White et al., 2021), and communication styles (McLean et al., 2026; White et al., 2023). This evidence base is often characterized as "mixed" given a lack of consistency in demonstrated outcomes, but it is more accurate to see the varied results as a predictable product of a lack of clarity on what is de-escalation.

The discussion of de-escalation is more than an academic exercise. In conversations with police trainers across the country, we have heard de-escalation defined as the avoidance of the use of force, reductions in the level of force, or just communicating before using force. In one notable conversation, a trainer working for a private company argued that using deadly force against a suspect could be seen as de-escalation if it prevented the need to use force later. Regardless of preferred definition, the existence of such varied definitions makes the training and evaluation of de-escalation tactics all but impossible.

Existing theories of police-public interaction only partially solve this problem. Use-of-force theories have long recognized that police use of force is sequential and interactional. Binder and Scharf (1980) conceptualized violent police-citizen encounters as developmental processes shaped by successive decisions. Alpert and Dunham's (2004) authority maintenance framework emphasizes reciprocity and the breakdown of an authority ritual. Klinger (1994) emphasizes citizen demeanor in police decision-making. These frameworks are valuable, but they are centered primarily on force, arrest, or violence. They are less able to classify the full set of non-force actions that populate routine encounters and that may prevent force from becoming relevant.

Conversely, theories focused on citizen satisfaction, legitimacy, procedural justice, and communication often foreground how people perceive police behavior without regarding the profession's law enforcement objectives. Tyler's (1990) procedural justice perspective explains why respectful, neutral, trustworthy, and voice-giving processes can affect legitimacy and compliance. This theoretically shapes the use of force as non-compliance may create the necessity of force (i.e., procedurally unfair officer behavior increases the likelihood of non-compliance thereby increasing the likelihood of force needing to be used). Communication accommodation theory similarly directs attention to how speakers adjust, converge, diverge or manage identity through interaction (Giles et al., 1991). These perspectives are useful for understanding public trust, cooperation, and perceived fairness, but they are lacking when the officer's immediate professional objective is not only to produce satisfaction but also to protect people, gather facts, enforce a law, assess danger, or decide whether voluntary compliance is feasible.

This article develops a theoretical framework that treats de-escalation as one part of a broader system of police-public interpersonal interaction. The framework provides a meso-level conceptual map for distinguishing officer behaviors by the immediate professional goal they appear designed to accomplish. It narrows the concept of de-escalation to behaviors intended to reduce the intensity of a person's heightened emotional or psychological state. Other behaviors often taught under the de-escalation label may be important, but they should be categorized more specifically in alignment with their immediate function or goal of safety, investigation, officer self-regulation, rapport, negotiation, coercive compliance, or compelled compliance.

Whereas other recent conceptualizations of de-escalation, like Van Lith et al.'s (2025), synthesize the components, techniques, and effectiveness measures associated with de-escalation, the present framework places de-escalation within a broader architecture of officers' immediate professional goals. Many theories of policing describe what officers do, why citizens respond as they do, or how public assessments of police legitimacy are formed. Those are explanatory tasks. The policy and training problem addressed here is slightly different: what should officers do in particular interactional circumstances, and how can those recommendations be operationalized as falsifiable propositions? A goal-oriented framework allows researchers to ask whether a specified action, under specified circumstances, makes officers more or less likely to accomplish a defined intermediate goal. This approach can separate a policy preference from an empirical claim. It can also show that a behavior may be effective for one objective but counterproductive for another.

A goal orientation also helps reconcile two concerns that are often treated as oppositional. Reform discussions frequently frame officer safety and public safety as competing priorities, while many officer or agency cultures and trainings frame communication as a constraint on or alternative to decisive action. The framework treats these as empirical and tactical questions rather than as fixed ideological positions. A tactic may protect officers and subjects simultaneously, may protect one at some cost to the other, or may produce different effects depending on timing and context. By requiring each behavior to be tied to a specific immediate goal, the framework makes those claims observable. It asks what the

action was meant to accomplish, what happened next, and whether a less coercive or more effective alternative was feasible under the circumstances.

The article therefore asks four research questions. First, what immediate goals do police pursue at varying points during encounters with members of the public? Second, what specific behaviors are currently recommended as means of achieving those goals? Third, how do these goals and behaviors relate to one another during the broader context of an encounter? Fourth, how do they relate to the achievement of voluntary, coercive, and forcible resolutions?

Materials and methods

Research design

The study used a grounded theory design to build a conceptual framework from extant policing materials. Grounded theory is appropriate where existing concepts are underdeveloped, inconsistently defined, or insufficiently connected to observable practice (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The aim was to identify behavioral recommendations that policing sources associate with de-escalation, compare them across sources, and integrate them into a theory capable of guiding subsequent empirical testing.

The analysis is a theory-building study of documentary and training artifacts rather than an evaluation of officer performance. The unit of analysis was the recommended officer behavior. A behavior was included when a source described a specific action, tactic, communication practice, posture, decision, or strategy that could plausibly be observed, coded, or taught in relation to de-escalation or the resolution of a potentially elevated police-public encounter. General values, such as professionalism, legitimacy, or respect, were retained only when the source connected them to more concrete officer conduct.

Materials

The materials consisted of police training manuals, lesson plans, curricula, and empirical academic articles that operationalized de-escalation behavior. To be included, an artifact had to focus on policing; describe behaviors intended to de-escalate, stabilize, or resolve police-public encounters; and be publicly available or currently in use by more than one police agency. The review ended when additional sources produced repetition of already identified behaviors and no longer added substantively new behavioral categories. The working corpus included nine artifacts: four police training documents and five empirical or research-oriented sources.

The four police training sources are anonymized for the purposes of this article. The empirical sources included Bennell et al. (2021), Davies and Dawson (2025), MacIsaac et al. (2025), Todak and James (2018), and White et al. (2021).

Coding and analysis

Coding proceeded in three stages. First, open coding identified 134 behaviors that sources explicitly or functionally associated with de-escalation. Examples included active listening, paraphrasing, emotional labeling, avoiding interruptions, controlling voice, maintaining distance, using cover, introducing oneself, building rapport, gathering information, explaining actions, offering choices, compromising, slowing the encounter, requesting backup, identifying pre-assault cues, and transitioning to force options. Because many behaviors appeared under different labels across sources, the coding process treated linguistic variation as analytically meaningful but not necessarily as a new behavior. For example, “paraphrasing,” “restating,” and “summarizing” were retained as distinct entries where sources treated them separately but were compared as related listening behaviors during category development.

Second, constant comparative analysis was used to compare each behavior with previously coded behaviors and to identify the immediate task that the behavior appeared designed to accomplish. The analytic question was “What interactional goal does this behavior pursue?” This distinction allowed behaviors commonly grouped under de-escalation to separate into categories such as safety, investigation, officer self-regulation, rapport, de-escalation, and negotiation. For example, increasing time may reduce urgency and support safety; open-ended questions may gather information; avoiding condescension may support rapport; addressing fear may reduce emotional intensity; offering options may support negotiation; and pointing a conducted energy weapon may coerce compliance. Treating these as separate goal-directed behaviors makes later empirical testing more precise.

Third, selective and theoretical coding integrated the categories into a framework. Selective coding refined the central categories and clarified their boundaries. Theoretical coding then examined how categories relate within an encounter. Because the analyzed de-escalation sources focused mainly on communication, safety, and tactical stabilization, they did not fully describe force or physical control. Two additional categories, coercive compliance and compelled compliance, were therefore added as theoretical complements. Their inclusion does not imply that force is de-escalation. It recognizes that a general theory of police-public interpersonal interaction must include the situations in which voluntary strategies may be unavailable, unsuccessful, or insufficient to resolve an incident.

The final coding product is a framework rather than a closed typology. Many behaviors can serve more than one function. Active listening may gather facts, communicate respect, build rapport, and reduce emotional intensity. Distance may promote officer safety, provide time, and lower perceived threat. Explaining an officer's actions may support procedural justice, rapport, and negotiation. The framework handles this overlap by assigning a behavior to the most immediate observable goal in a given context. The same behavior can therefore be coded differently across incidents if its evident function differs.

Results

De-escalation as a container concept

The first analytic result was that the term de-escalation functioned as a container concept. Many sources recommended broadly similar behaviors but did not define the term, while sources that did define it tended to include a wide range of communication, tactical, and force-related actions. Multiple training sources provided no definition for de-escalation, while Davies and Dawson's (2025) definition explicitly includes situationally appropriate skills, tactics, strategies, and techniques, including verbal and non-verbal communication, active listening and, when required, reasonable and necessary physical force options. This breadth reflects the practical complexity of police work. It also makes the concept difficult to operationalize as a single independent variable.

The behavior entries reflected this breadth. Some entries concerned listening and emotional responsiveness, including active listening, paraphrasing, emotional reflection, reassurance, empathy, and verbal affirmation. Other entries concerned officer demeanor, including voice control, patience, body stance, movement, professionalism, avoiding judgment, avoiding threats, and avoiding condescension. A further set concerned safety and tactics, including distance, cover, recognition of weapons, observation of the environment, backup, officer positioning, identifying pre-assault cues, and transitioning to force options. Still others concerned influence and resolution, including logical persuasion, compromise, concession, offering choices, identifying hooks, setting limits, and testing understanding. These behaviors may all be useful during elevated encounters, but they do not all perform the same interactional work.

Escalation, non-escalation and de-escalation

The analysis also highlighted a recurring distinction between de-escalation and non-escalation. In social and political conflict theory, escalation and de-escalation refer to changes in the intensity and scope of conflict (August, 2025). Applied to policing, this means that de-escalation should involve a downward movement from an elevated state. A behavior that merely avoids making the encounter worse may be important, but it is not necessarily de-escalatory. For example, avoiding condescension, avoiding unnecessary touch, using clear language and maintaining calm body posture may prevent officer-generated escalation. These behaviors are professionally important because they reduce the chance that the officer becomes a cause of additional conflict. Yet if the person was not heightened, or if intensity does not decrease, such behaviors are better described as officer self-regulation or non-escalation.

This distinction matters for evaluation. A training program may reduce force by teaching officers to avoid provocations, slow decision-making, maintain distance, or identify signs of danger earlier. Those are valuable outcomes, but they would not all demonstrate that de-escalation caused the reduction. Similarly, an encounter may end without force because the officer never created unnecessary tension, because the person was already willing to comply, because the officer negotiated effectively, or because coercive warnings produced compliance. Without distinguishing escalation prevention, actual psychological de-escalation, and compliance production, researchers risk attributing every desirable non-force outcome to de-escalation.

The framework therefore treats escalation as an observable change in the encounter. Escalation may arise from subject behavior, officer behavior, environmental conditions, third parties, legal requirements, or the interaction of such variables. A person may become more agitated after a lawful announcement of arrest because the legal consequence itself is distressing. A crowd may increase perceived threat even when the officer communicates respectfully. An officer's tone may intensify resistance even when the underlying command is lawful. The analytic task is to code the sequence and mechanism rather than assume that all movement toward force reflects a failure of de-escalation.

Intermediate goal categories

The second analytic result was the emergence of seven intermediate goal categories. These goal categories are officer/public safety, investigation, officer self-regulation and rapport, de-escalation, negotiation, coercive compliance, and compelled compliance. Table 1 defines these goal categories and provides some illustrative behaviors for each.

Table 1
Intermediate goal categories in the police-public interpersonal interaction framework

Category	Definition	Illustrative behaviors
Officer/public safety	Tactics, strategies, and actions designed to protect officers, subjects, victims, bystanders, or the public from harm.	Distance; cover or concealment; backup; recognition of weapons; observation of environment; pre-assault cues; tactical pause; dispatch communication.
Investigation	Observation and inquiry designed to understand the situation and identify what may resolve it.	Open-ended questions; clarification; gathering information; verifying understanding; assessing crisis stage, bystanders, officer numbers, and environmental conditions.
Officer self-regulation and rapport	Officer conduct designed to avoid unnecessary escalation and sustain engagement with the person.	Calm tone; patience; body language; avoiding interruptions, judgement, condescension, threats, or ultimatums; introduction; empathy; common ground; friendly language.
De-escalation	Behaviors designed to lower the intensity of a person's heightened emotional or psychological state.	Reassurance; emotional labelling; silence; slowing the encounter; addressing fears; showing concern; acknowledging problems as important.
Negotiation	Behaviors designed to persuade a person to perform or cease a desired action without physical compulsion.	Offering choices; compromise; logical persuasion; explaining processes; setting limits; identifying hooks.
Coercive compliance	Threats, restrictions, or pain designed to induce compliance.	Warnings; restrictive positioning; weapon display; threats of consequences; pain techniques used to induce compliance.
Compelled compliance	Bodily manipulation that forces a person to complete or cease an action.	Handcuffing; grabs and holds; takedowns; physical control; forcible movement.

Officer/public safety is the necessary background condition for all other strategies. It includes tactics, strategies, and actions designed to protect officers, bystanders, victims, subjects, and other members of the public from harm. Example behaviors from the analysis include maintaining distance, using cover or concealment, recognizing weapons, noticing environmental hazards, identifying pre-assault cues, requesting backup, communicating with dispatch, and deciding when immediate intervention is required to protect life or safety. The category treats safety as the grounding condition that shapes what other strategies are available, ethical, and legally defensible, rather than reducing safety to officer survival.

Investigation consists of observation and inquiry designed to understand the situation and determine what may resolve it. Examples identified by the analysis include gathering information, asking relevant questions, clarifying, using open-ended questions, verifying understanding, assessing the person's characteristics and crisis stage, considering bystanders, evaluating the number and position of officers, and developing a plan. Investigation is a proactive process that occurs through various interactions with

other persons and the environment. Investigation informs each subsequent choice by identifying the most immediate officer goals. In the framework, investigation is shown as a cycle that loops in the center of other categories because officers may repeatedly gather new information, update risk assessments, revise their strategy as the encounter evolves, and integrate investigative behaviors into co-occurring strategies.

Officer self-regulation and rapport refer to a combination of internally and externally oriented behaviors. Officer self-regulation is internally oriented and refers to actions by which officers manage their own communications, physicality, tempo, emotions, demeanor to avoid the personal introduction of additional volatility to subject encounters. Example behaviors from the analysis include staying calm, modulating tone of voice, avoiding jargon, avoiding unnecessary touch, not interrupting, avoiding judgement, not laughing, not whispering, not giving ultimatums, and not treating non-compliance automatically as threat. Rapport is externally oriented and refers to actions designed to encourage a subject to engage with the officer, with analysis examples including introduction, use of the person's name, friendly language, empathy, common ground, respectful treatment, concern, acknowledgement of problems, and explanation of actions. Though officer self-regulation and rapport behaviors are often recommended for the purpose of building police legitimacy, this framework codes them by their immediate interactional function: maintaining an interaction in which a person is willing and able to communicate.

De-escalation in this framework is much narrower than other contemporary conceptualizations. It refers to strategies, tactics, and actions designed to lower the intensity of a person's heightened emotional or psychological state. A person may be angry, fearful, panicked, confused, agitated, intoxicated, in crisis, or otherwise physiologically or psychologically elevated. Analysis identified behaviors such as reassurance, addressing fear, slowing the encounter, allowing silence, active listening, emotional labelling, and showing empathy may contribute to de-escalation when a person is in such a heightened state. If the person is not in a heightened state, the same behaviors may still be useful but are better conceptualized as rapport, investigation, or negotiation depending on the specific context and use case.

Negotiation refers to strategies, tactics, and actions designed to persuade a person to perform or cease a desired action without physical compulsion. Analysis identified behaviors include offering choices, explaining processes, logical persuasion, compromise, concession, setting lawful limits, identifying incentives or "hooks," focusing on resolution, answering questions, and testing understanding. Negotiation may benefit from de-escalation, but it is not identical to de-escalation. A calm person may still refuse a lawful command, and an emotionally elevated person may agree to a negotiated solution only after emotional intensity has reduced. The distinction helps prevent the common analytic error of treating compliance as evidence that de-escalation occurred.

Coercive compliance involves threats, restrictions, or pain designed to convince a person to comply. Analysis identified behaviors include threats of lawful consequences, restrictive positioning, the display or pointing of weapons, and pain-based force used to induce compliance. Coercive compliance can

resolve an encounter, but it does so through force or coercion rather than voluntary agreement. For that reason, it should not be collapsed into de-escalation simply because it may cause no injury or be less injurious than a higher level of force.

Compelled compliance refers to bodily manipulation that physically makes a person complete or cease an action. Handcuffing, physical control, takedowns, holds, discharging a firearm or conducted energy weapon, and other forms of bodily manipulation are all examples of compelled compliance. Importantly, coercive compliance and compelled compliance do not differ based on the level of force used, as is the traditional conceptualization maintained by many policies and legal distinctions. Rather, they differ in the mechanism that achieves compliance.

The level of force or degree of injury potential may be useful for establishing the legal appropriateness or proportionality of a use of force, but it provides little information within the context of officer goals. The level of a use of force as placed on a continuum of injury potential does not establish the circumstances under which that force may or may not be effective. Higher levels of force do not guarantee compliance. In fact, in many circumstances, lower levels of force are more effective than higher levels of force. The compelled versus coercive mechanism sheds light on why this may be the case and under which circumstances one may be more effective than the other. Coercive compliance relies on persuasion or changing the mind of a subject, whether through threats, restrictions, or pain. As such, a person unable or unwilling to weigh options, think logically, or internalize consequences may not respond to this mechanism. Compelled compliance uses forcible measures to directly change a person's behavior, bypassing the subject's volitions. This distinction allows for a more precise operationalization of force options that can distinguish between legal and mechanistic misalignment.

Resolution categories

The third analytic result was the emergence of three resolution categories: voluntary resolution, coercive resolution, and forcible resolution. These resolution categories sit in contrast to the goal categories, as these do not dictate officer actions but rather distinguish outcomes. A voluntary resolution occurs when the situation ends without coercive or forcible compliance, such as when a person obeys verbal commands, accepts a negotiated outcome, or no police intervention is required after assessment. A coercive resolution occurs when compliance is achieved through threats, warnings, restrictive positioning, weapon display, or other coercive pressure short of direct bodily manipulation. A forcible resolution occurs when pain, injury or bodily manipulation is used to mandate compliance. These are not moral rankings. They are analytic categories that allow researchers to observe how an encounter ended and distinguish this outcome from its process.

The framework therefore proposes a need for a distinction between intermediate goals and eventual resolutions, clarifying why the goal categories are not considered resolutions in and of themselves. An officer may de-escalate a person's emotional intensity but still need to negotiate compliance. An officer may negotiate compliance without de-escalation because the person was never emotionally heightened.

An officer may effectively use coercive compliance without de-escalation. An officer may attempt to de-escalate to no avail but achieve a lawful resolution through force. Distinguishing these possibilities is essential for research because each implies a different mechanism that should be measured differently. Conceptualizing resolutions as goals inappropriately limits the officer decision-making process and eliminates the contribution of subject agency to police-public interactions. For example, having voluntary resolution as a behavior directing goal instead of a measured resolution limits an officer to de-escalation and negotiation, regardless of investigative results, and incorrectly assumes that these tactics can overcome the free will of a non-compliant subject. The reality of law enforcement is that subjects have the personal agency to decide whether they will comply or resist.

The integrated framework

At this point, we are left with a variety of behaviors and outcomes prescribed by various training programs. To make sense of them all within the broader bucket of de-escalation, we present an integrated framework (see Fig. 1). The framework combines the intermediate goal and resolution categories into a cohesive unit that grounds officer action in professional objectives while treating police-public interactions as dynamic rather than linear (Alpert & Dunham, 2004; Terrill, 2005).

Consistent with legal standards, officer and public safety forms the background condition upon which the framework rests (Stoughton et al., 2020). It is the initial consideration and the backdrop of each other goal category. The intermediate goal of the officer/public safety component is to minimize the risk of harm to the officer and others. As the background condition, it is pulled to the forefront and prioritized whenever its goal is not met. The officer/public safety condition drives both calculated and sudden transitions across the framework back and forth from the investigation cycle to the force/self-defense axis.

The left side of the framework displays the investigation cycle and the non-force intermediate goal conditions. The investigation cycle rests in the middle of these other interaction conditions because it is not independent from them. Rather, it is integrated into its surrounding components, running concurrently, identifying which intermediate goals take priority or have been accomplished while maintaining a long-term focus on resolution. The goal of this condition is to obtain information useful or necessary for accomplishing the other intermediate goals. In this manner, the investigation cycle can be thought of as similar to “sensemaking” as officers gather information to manage the situation and determine an appropriate course of action to achieve their resolution goal (see e.g., Klein et al., 2007; Mangels et al., 2020; Suss & Ward, 2018).

The non-force intermediate goal conditions, officer self-regulation/rapport, de-escalation, and negotiation form the bucket of behaviors that are often used as measures of “de-escalation” in prior studies (Engel et al., 2022; Engel et al., 2025; McLean et al., 2020; McLean et al., 2026; White et al., 2023). These behaviors form a triangle of two-way movements, showing how an officer may shift between each as an encounter evolves. The left to right positioning of these three elements is relevant, as the left-most components are generally prerequisites to their right shifted counterparts. It is difficult to successfully

de-escalate or negotiate without first self-regulating and establishing rapport. One cannot negotiate while a subject is escalated or unwilling to communicate. De-escalation rests at the top point of the triangle to indicate its conditionality and priority. Since de-escalation as an intermediate goal is only relevant when the subject is in a heightened emotional or psychological state, it is a conditional detour, not applicable to every interaction. However, it rests higher than the other two intermediate goals, as it should take priority when required due to its accompanying increase in subject volatility. The goal of the officer self-regulation condition is to ensure the officer has cognitive control over their behavior and has established a reciprocal channel of communication. The goal of the de-escalation condition is to return a subject in a heightened emotional or psychological state to one more amenable to logic, compromise, and consolation. The goal of negotiation is to obtain a voluntary resolution.

On the right side of the framework is the force/self-defense axis. Officer goals and behaviors should shift to this axis when voluntary strategies are unavailable, unsuccessful, or insufficient to protect people or enforce lawful obligations. The opposing arrows indicate that force-related strategies are not isolated, linear stages. Officers may move between coercive and compelled mechanisms, return to voluntary strategies, or use several strategies simultaneously as an encounter develops (Krajewski et al., 2024; Piza et al., 2023; Tillyer, 2022).

The force/self-defense axis is made up of two intermediate goal conditions: coercive compliance and compelled compliance. The goal of both coercive and compelled compliance is to achieve a resolution, but they are distinguished by their underlying mechanisms. Coercive compliance relies on threats, positive punishment, or negative reinforcement, in behaviorism terms, to convince a subject to comply. Coercive compliance still depends on the subject's own action: the subject must understand the demand, be capable of performing it, and decide that compliance is preferable to non-compliance (Demir et al., 2020; Foster et al., 2024). Compelled compliance relies on mechanical interventions to force a subject to comply without depending on the subject's cooperation. For example, an officer pointing a firearm at a subject holding a gun and ordering them to put the weapon down is coercive compliance, whereas an officer physically restraining the subject's arm, removing the weapon from their control, or shooting the subject to prevent firing is compelled compliance.

Importantly, it is not the mere use of force or a tool that distinguishes the two concepts, but rather whether the force or tool is used to coerce or compel an action. For example, a conducted energy weapon may be used as a coercive pain compliance tool. A conducted energy weapon may also be used to induce neuromuscular incapacitation, compelling the subject to remain still while an officer applies handcuffs. Field research on conducted energy weapon deployments suggests that effectiveness varies by contextual and subject-level factors, including drug or alcohol use, violence, body weight, and distance, reinforcing the need to distinguish tool type from mechanism of action (White & Ready, 2010). This differs from traditional use of force continuums, which typically place all conducted energy weapon deployments at the same level of intermediate weaponry. Continuum-style classifications generally organize force options by type, severity, or proportionality rather than by the mechanism through which the intervention is expected to produce compliance (McLean et al., 2023; Terrill, 2005; Terrill & Paoline,

2013). Classifying a conducted energy weapon as “intermediate force” may identify its relative severity, but it provides limited guidance about the mechanism through which the intervention is expected to work or the conditions under which it is likely to fail. The model’s distinction between coercive or compelling mechanisms aids in identifying situations where a particular use of force may be effective or ineffective. For example, a subject whose pain perception, command processing, or risk appraisal is impaired by intoxication, crisis, injury, or extreme arousal may be less likely to respond to coercive pain-based force (Arnsten, 2009; Starcke & Brand, 2012; Thompson et al., 2017; White & Ready, 2010). The model implies that different actions should be understood by their immediate function and by the conditions under which they can plausibly work, not merely by the risk they pose to subjects.

On the outside of the intermediate goal category backdrop are the resolution categories: voluntary, coercive, and forcible. These are placed outside of the rest of the framework to emphasize the distinction between process and outcome and how each should be analyzed. Unlike the overlapping, interactive components of the intermediate goal categories, the resolution categories are independent and rest on a continuum of increasing force which progresses from voluntary to coercive to forcible. Again, this is not a moral or ethical hierarchy, but rather an objective labeling to clarify analytical boundaries.

Discussion

In times of crisis, the urge to “do-something” can be incredibly compelling. In many ways, this push can be helpful for encouraging organizations to adapt, reform, and try innovative approaches to solving entrenched problems. At the same time, the fits and starts of this type of reform can result in putting action ahead of evidence. The concept of de-escalation in policing both typifies and rejects this truism. On the one hand, the push to incorporate de-escalation training in police departments across the country is clearly an example of this type of crisis-spurred reform. On the other hand, scholars have put in considerable work over the past several years to create an evidence base for understanding the effectiveness of these programs. The body of research generated by this work is frequently described as mixed with evaluations often finding significant changes in officer behaviors, but with significant variation in the specific behaviors impacted.

In this manuscript, we argued that this was largely an artifact of the inconsistent conceptualization of de-escalation in policing. By coding behaviors described in training programs and academic articles on de-escalation, we synthesized a theoretical framework for better understanding de-escalation and the use of force, holistically. In so doing, we broaden the conceptual scope beyond both force-only and satisfaction-only models of police interactions, as called for by recent research (De Buck et al., 2024). Use-of-force theories correctly treat police behavior as sequential and interactional, but they often begin from the moment force becomes salient. Procedural justice and communication theories correctly emphasize respectful and adaptive interaction, but they often treat force as a failure or as an outcome to be reduced rather than as one part of a legally authorized enforcement role. The present framework places force, communication, safety, investigation, and enforcement in a shared conceptual space. It

thereby allows scholars to ask when non-coercive strategies are available, when coercive strategies become relevant, how strategies interact over time, and whether the presently prescribed strategies effectively perform their functions as intended.

The framework implies a set of operational propositions. These propositions link a category of behaviors to an intermediate goal and observable implication. This is the main advantage of the framework. It replaces broad questions like “Does de-escalation work?” with narrower questions, such as:

- Does emotional labelling reduce the psychological arousal of people in crisis?
- Does being truthful increase the quantity or quality of subject responses?
- Does increasing distance change the likelihood of force?
- Does offering choices increase voluntary compliance after controlling for subject emotional intensity?
- What contextual factors alter when pointing a weapon secures compliance or escalates non-compliant behavior?

By narrowing the scope of the de-escalation questions, both police trainers and researchers can more effectively design and evaluate training. That is, rather than posing a broad question about a nebulous concept (does de-escalation training work?), focus can be placed on understanding how specific behaviors increase the likelihood of specific outcomes and under which circumstances they are appropriate and most effective. This research could then be translated into the development of training that optimizes officer performance.

At the same time, the framework does not dismiss de-escalation adjacent behaviors. Active listening may be central to de-escalation in some encounters. In other encounters, it may be investigative, rapport-building, or negotiation-oriented. Distance may de-escalate a subject averse to proximity, but it is also primarily a safety tactic. Warnings may reduce uncertainty, but they may also coerce compliance. Physical control may prevent immediate harm or lawfully overcome the refusal of a wanted criminal to comply with orders. The framework's central contribution is conceptualizing what different police behaviors should be accomplishing in a given context, specifically regarding the occupation's professional objectives.

Implications for police training, policy, and research

For police training, the framework suggests that de-escalation should not be taught as a single toolkit. Officers should learn to connect behaviors to immediate goals: preserving safety, gathering information, regulating their own behavior, building rapport, reducing heightened emotional intensity, negotiating voluntary compliance, coercing action, or compelling action when legally justified. Scenario-based training can then require officers to identify the current goal, select behaviors aligned with that goal, and explain when a change in the person's state, risk context, or lawful objective requires a shift to another strategy.

This framing may also improve practical acceptance. Non-force behaviors are not presented merely as reforms that benefit subjects or public legitimacy. They are professional skills for reducing danger, acquiring information, preserving options, buying decision time, and avoiding ineffective force. It also discourages overpromising: de-escalation is conditional. It is most relevant when a person is heightened and when time, safety, and lawful objectives allow strategies aimed at reducing that state. When an immediate threat, active harm, or calm but deliberate refusal is present, other framework categories may be the proper training focus.

For policy and supervision, the implication is precision. Policies should avoid using de-escalation as a retrospective label for any restrained or less injurious outcome. A more useful policy structure would specify distinct obligations: assess safety, gather information, avoid unnecessary officer-generated escalation, use rapport and communication when feasible, reduce heightened emotional intensity when safe and relevant, negotiate voluntary compliance when tactically sound, and use coercive or compelled compliance only when justified by law and policy. This retains de-escalation as an important objective without making it a catch-all for professionalism, tactical safety, negotiation, and lower force.

For research, the framework directs measurement toward mechanisms rather than global labels. Body-worn-camera studies can code behavior by immediate goal and sequence, along with observable changes in subject state and encounter resolution. This would allow researchers to distinguish emotional intensity outcomes from compliance outcomes and to test trade-offs across goals. For example, distance may improve safety while reducing perceived care; weapon display may secure compliance while increasing fear or anger; and negotiation may preserve voluntariness while lengthening an encounter. Such distinctions are lost when all favorable outcomes are treated as evidence that de-escalation worked.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the framework was developed from training and research artifacts rather than direct observation of all types of police-public encounters. It therefore reflects what selected policing sources recommend and operationalize and is not a complete map of what officers actually do. Second, the corpus was bounded by public availability or current agency use and by saturation of behavior categories. Additional sources, particularly from jurisdictions outside North America, may add behaviors or shift category boundaries. Third, the framework does not establish that any listed behavior is effective. It provides concepts for testing effectiveness.

Fourth, the category system necessarily simplifies dynamic encounters. Interactional goals can shift rapidly, and one behavior can serve multiple functions. The framework handles this by emphasizing the immediate goal in context, but empirical coders will need detailed decision rules. Fifth, the categories of coercive compliance and compelled compliance were added as theoretical complements because de-escalation materials tended to underrepresent force behaviors. Their inclusion strengthens the comprehensiveness of the framework, but future work should examine whether the boundaries between coercion and compulsion require further subdivision.

Conclusion

Police reforms will remain difficult to study as long as they combine and conflate diverse recommendation avenues like training philosophy, communication style, tactical approaches, force avoidance, policy demands, outcome expectations, and legitimacy into overly broad, ill-defined concepts like de-escalation. This article offers a grounded theory framework of police-public interpersonal interaction that narrows conceptual definitions, distinguishes linked but independent components, and establishes a model for operationalizing and testing policy and reform recommendations at a granular level. The framework provides a practical vocabulary for classifying what officers should try to accomplish at different moments of an encounter.

The framework's practical value lies in its testability. It invites researchers and trainers to specify the behavior, the immediate goal, the context, and the expected observable result. It also invites policy-makers to avoid vague mandates and instead identify concrete professional objectives. A theory of police-public interpersonal interaction should recognize that people have agency. As such, officers may need to assess safety, gather information, communicate, persuade, restrain, or sometimes compel with force. It should also recognize that these activities are not the same. Clear conceptual boundaries are a prerequisite for better training, more precise research, and more accountable policy.

Declarations

Author Contribution

C.M. and K.M. jointly conceptualized the study, developed the methodology, conducted the data coding and analysis, and contributed to the interpretation and formulation of the results. C.M. wrote the initial manuscript draft and prepared the figure and table. K.M. contributed substantive writing to multiple sections and critically revised the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for the work.

Data Availability

The anonymized behavior-coding spreadsheet is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. Some underlying police training materials cannot be redistributed because of copyright or agency restrictions.

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Figures

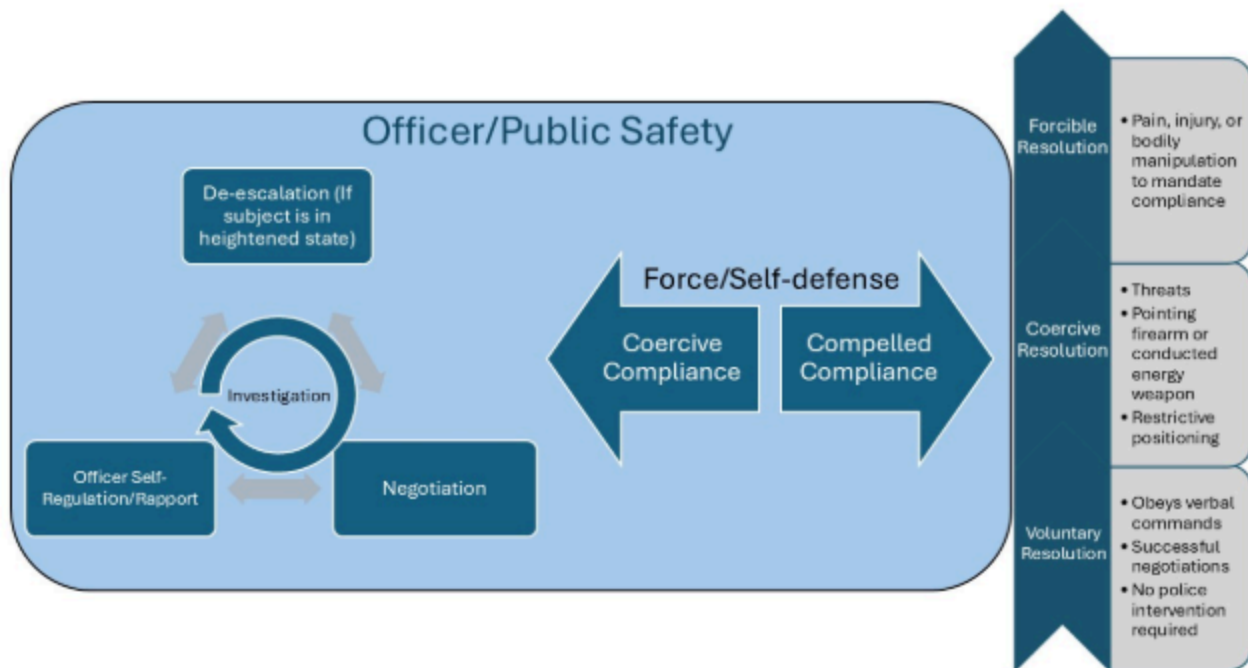


Figure 1

Professional goal-oriented framework of police-public interpersonal interaction, showing officer/public safety as the background condition; the investigation cycle connecting self-regulation and rapport, de-escalation, and negotiation; the force/self-defense axis distinguishing coercive and compelled compliance; and voluntary, coercive, and forcible resolution categories