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## Original Article

## The influence of police officers' decision-making style and anger control on responses to work scenarios

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## ABSTRACT

Decision-making within police work is a global concern. Our research attempts to contribute to the literature regarding how police officers make decisions. We examined the interactive effects of decision-making style and anger control on decision-making using a sample of 120 police officers. Police officers were presented with a realistic decision-making scenario, and asked to choose their intended action. Results suggest that analytical and intuitive cognitive processes have an interactive effect on decision-making. Results are discussed regarding the implications on officer decision-making training.

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## 1. Introduction

During 2014, at least three incidences of public protests were reported in the media which occurred as a result of what appeared to many people as being poor police decision-making. In Ferguson, Missouri, for example, residents demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the shooting of Michael Brown with active protest activities for at least four months. Similar recent incidences in the media have been observed in Europe and Middle-Eastern countries as well as other regions of the world. The issue of how police officers make decisions is a very important topic and has far-reaching implications on the public. The recent cases of which the public has been highly critical regarding police officers' decisions, highlights a need for attention to this topic, both by practitioners and researchers. The judgment and decision-making literature has made notable progress toward understanding how decisions are made in high risk or crisis situations such as those faced by police officers. Therefore, we attempt to explore this domain further by focusing on the specific context of police work.

Within the judgment and decision-making literature, the dual process model has been frequently utilized to explain the nature of the decision-making process. Specifically, this dichotomy in reasoning has been labeled System 1 and System 2. System 1 refers

to thinking characterized by automatic, principally unconscious, and effortless processing, while System 2 denotes controlled, largely conscious and effortful processing (Stanovich & West, 2000). While this dual-system approach has received significant attention among decision-making researchers, some have been critical of its propositions. For example, Systems 1 and 2 are believed to be inseparable – especially in complex decision-making contexts (Keren & Schul, 2009). In fact, some have proposed a unified framework with the suggestion that both Systems 1 and 2 involve similar rule-based judgments (Kruglanski & Gigerenzer, 2011). Yet, the approach does seem to provide a useful classification and has significant research support (Evans, 2008; Kruglanski & Orehek, 2007). For example, the dual-process theory has been applied to probability judgment to demonstrate that biases, often linked to System 1 processes may be ameliorated by System 2 thinking (Kahneman & Frederick, 2005).

Considering the value of the dual-process model to decision-making, we apply this framework to understand the specific decision-making experience of police officers. Explicitly, our primary concern relates to the management of anger and its effects on decision-making. Police officers report that anger, as well as the control of anger, is a key emotional experience within police work (Daus & Brown, 2012). Thus, we seek to examine how police officers' inclination toward engaging in intuitive and rational decision-making and their tendency to control their anger are related to the decisions that they typically make. Hence, rather than restricting our attention to cognitive processes alone, we also explore the effect of emotion, which is often linked to System 1 processes (Epstein, 1994).

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Therefore, the following research seeks, first, to understand better the extent to which the tendency of controlling the expression of anger influences decisions to act within the context of police work. Additionally, we hope to demonstrate that anger control can act as a buffer in situations of impulsive decision-making when an anger-inducing incident is presented. Second, we explore System 1 thinking, which involves intuitive and emotional processes, and provides a fitting representation of police work. Given that police officers often rely on intuitive reasoning in crisis situations (Patton, 2003), our study will help to clarify how such reasoning occurs while providing a better understanding of the role of emotions in police officers' decision-making. Third, our research provides some implications for action avoidance. Within the context of police work – a high stress profession (Finn & Tomz, 1996) – a tendency toward avoidance may represent a coping strategy (Anshel, 2000). Therefore, exploring the processes leading to such decisions (i.e., the decision not to use force, for example) may provide some insight into how decision-making processes may aid the demands of police work.

In the following sections we provide a review of the literature and support for our hypotheses. First, we discuss the role of emotions in the decision-making process with a specific focus on anger. Next, we introduce the decision-making styles and provide an overview of the intuitive and rational styles. In this discussion, we propose a mapping of these two decision-making styles onto the dual-process framework with intuitive decision-making style being more typical of System 1 processes, and rational decision-making being more typical of System 2 processes. Additionally, in our study, we examined the effects of decision-making style and anger control on reported decisions to either discharge a weapon or issue a speeding ticket (details to follow); we refer to decisions in favor of these options as action.

### 1.1. Emotions in decision-making

Attention to the consideration of the role of emotions in the dual process account of decision-making has been called for by researchers (e.g., Evans, 2008). Emotions are linked to System 1, or experiential processes, with reasoning being categorical, unreflective and action-oriented. Further, thinking is believed to be more self-evidently valid when individuals are highly emotional (Epstein, 1994). That is, when emotions are strongly felt, individuals are more likely to engage in actions based on broad generalizations and have greater trust in the legitimacy of these actions. Therefore, emotions may play an important role in judgment and decision-making processes. While emotions are more closely tied to the experiential system, they are not considered to be the *foundation* of the system's decision-making processes. Rather, emotions function to support the acquisition of information to aid decision-making (Epstein, 1994). In novel situations, emotions are relied on significantly for their informational role, and as behavior becomes more proceduralized and thus automatic, emotions are less required (Smith, 1984). This distinction is relevant to police decision-making given the situations within which police officers make decisions. While the need to decide to use some form of force is commonplace, the actual deployment of force is quite rare. For example, the use of a gun as a weapon across six different jurisdictions has a frequency of only 0.1% during arrest situations (Garner & Maxwell, 1999). This implies that decision-making in such high risk circumstances may not have the opportunity of becoming proceduralized for police officers, which may suggest greater reliance on the informational support of emotions in these decision-making processes.

This influence on the decision-making process reflects the idea that in many cases, decisions are guided by factors that depart from the traditional 'rational path' expected of the decision-making process (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). In fact, others propose that the

departure from classical rationality, such as the use of fast-and-frugal algorithms, is superior to previously held rational norms (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996). Emotions may play a similar role as these alternatives to controlled and calculated thinking (Epstein, 1994; Evans, 2008). We believe that the emotion of anger will have an effect on the decision-making process as police officers make an active effort to *control* this emotion.

### 1.2. Anger and decision-making

Affect (i.e., emotions and mood), impacts decision-making by guiding *what* decision-makers think (i.e., the content), as well as *how* they think (i.e., the process; Forgas & George, 2001). In this study, we focused on the emotion of anger – specifically, its regulation or control. This provides implications regarding the experience of anger – absence of regulation – and the suppression of anger – result of successful regulation. That is, on one hand, we believe that when expressed, anger may affect police decisions by means of the information the emotion contributes to the evaluation of alternatives. On the other hand, when anger is being controlled, this functions against the automatic response inherent in System 1 thinking. Given that both the expression and suppression of anger occur frequently in police work (Daus & Brown, 2012), it is valuable to consider how this emotion impacts decision-making.

Anger, a negative affective experience, has unique effects on cognitive processes such as judgment when compared to positive or other negative affective states. Anger may trigger intuitive processes and, relatedly, increase the desire to reach a decision (Sinclair & Ashkanasy, 2005). Often, harmful situations elicit anger and require quick and adaptive responses (Bodenhausen, Sheppard, & Kramer 1994) which occur by means of System 1 or more intuitive processes. This suggests that the experience of anger should strengthen the effect of intuitive thinking on decision-making, while the control of anger should act as a conflicting force.

### 1.3. Anger control

The control of anger, a form of emotional coping, requires the reappraisal of an otherwise stressful emotional event to reduce experienced distress (Lazarus, 1993). Anger control is also a form of emotion regulation that involves the modification of the experience and expression of an emotional response (Gross & John, 2003). Emotion regulation has been conceptualized within a dual-process framework. Specifically, it has been proposed that emotion regulation can be conceived either as deliberate, response-focused regulation (explicit regulation; Gyurak, Gross, & Etkin, 2011; for example, see Bonanno, Papa, Lalande, Westphal, & Coifman 2004) or automatic, largely unconscious regulatory processes (implicit regulation; Gyurak et al., 2011; for example, see Gollwitzer, 1999). Particularly, the control of anger has been suggested to involve some automatic control (Mauss, Cook, & Gross, 2007); however, evidence also suggests that the control of anger involves some conscious regulation (Martin & Dahlen, 2005), signifying that rational processes are involved in its execution. Since a part of the control of anger is a rational process, this leads us to expect that there will be a positive relationship between anger-control and the rational decision-making style (Hypothesis 1a) and a negative relationship between anger-control and the intuitive decision-making style (Hypothesis 1b). Further, it could be expected that when the anger control tendency is high, police officers will exercise more cognitive control and be less likely to make an impulsive decision toward acting. Therefore, we hypothesize that anger control will be negatively related with action such that the more likely one is to control one's anger, the less likely one would be to report that s/he would issue a ticket or shoot (Hypothesis 2).

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