

Instructor, Trainer, Sifu, Coach or Professor? – Reflections on the Use of Terminology in Police Learning Settings Dealing with Physical Conflict Management

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Abstract Police training and learning settings focusing on physical conflict management skills regularly comprise at least two parties: on the one side the individuals learning and developing their conflict management skills and on the other side the individuals in charge of planning and delivering the training sessions. While the first category refers to learners, the latter category is referred to, among others, as *instructor, trainer, coach, sifu or professor*, depending on contextual constraints. While it seems arbitrary to use different terms for describing the learner's counterpart in a learning setting, we argue for a sensible consideration of manifest and latent implications of how these individuals are referred to – and how they perceive their role. Drawing from autoethnographic data in various conflict management training settings, we identify functional, dysfunctional and irritating aspects of different terms used. By reflecting through the lenses of functionality from a systemic perspective, we aim at providing insights towards a more nuanced understanding of contextual constraints and reflexive use of these terms.

Keywords: police training, use of terminology, pedagogical communication, pedagogical authority.

Graphical abstract



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INTRODUCTION

Police training and learning settings focusing on physical conflict management skills (e.g., officer safety training, police use of force training, self-defence and arrest training, firearm training, tactical training) regularly comprise at least two parties: on the one side, the individuals learning and developing their conflict management skills and on the other side, the individuals in charge of planning and delivering the training sessions. While the first category refers to learners – or depending on their role in the police institution as recruits, students or officers, the latter category is referred to as *instructor* (Morrison, 2006; Murray & Haberfeld, 2021), *trainer* (Staller, 2014), *sifu* (Lo, 2011), *coach* (Koerner & Staller, 2020; Staller & Koerner, 2021) or *professor* (Ruiken, 2016), depending on contextual constraints. While it seems arbitrary to use different terms for describing the learner's counterpart in a learning setting, we argue for a sensible consideration of manifest and latent implications of how these individuals are referred to – and how they perceive their role.

Our argument is based on an autoethnographic analysis of four experiences related to the use of terminology in police conflict management training settings. In order to discuss these different terms used, we neutrally speak of *alter* for the trainer, coach, etc. and *ego*, when we talk about the learner, student or recruit. We start by presenting our autoethnographic accounts that relate to the use of different terms for *alter* before turning to the function of police conflict management training as a basis for framing the functionality for the use of different terms. We then identify four different functions of the use of terms for *alter*. Based on this analysis, we conclude by arguing for a sensible use of terminology, that allow for the differentiation between *alter* and *ego* and simultaneously limit the authoritarian status of the *alter* to a minimum.

EXPERIENCES OF DIFFERENT TERMINOLOGY

Anecdote 1: Trainer or Instructor?

The first anecdote took place in 2005, when I (MS) was working in the Department of sport and operational training (“Sport- und Einsatzausbildung”) at the German Federal Criminal Police Office. At this time, the training department was restructured increasing the focus on operational competencies beyond firearms training, compared to the dominant focus on sport and fitness at the time. As such, training started to include more tactical behaviour (entering and clearing rooms), and physical conflict management, like self-defence and use of force training.³ With the restructuring of the training department, the question of how the *alter* (the person delivering the training) should be referred to arose.

Our team consisted of four individuals: Me, Udo, Franz and the superior Volt (names are anonymized). The question was posed by Volt, because he wanted to change the door signs on the office doors. Till that time the *alters* like myself were referred to as *sport and operational instructors* (“Sport- und Einsatzausbilder”). With the focus on operational competencies, the new title should also reflect this. Volt told us that he wanted to change the office door signs to “operational instructors” (“Einsatzausbilder”). I asked the team if

³ De-escalation training or verbal communicative behaviour did play a larger role at the time.



the term “*trainer*” (“Trainer”) would be an alternative. I based my argument on my (subjective) experience in high performance sports at this time. “My trainer helps me to reach my goals, but he does not necessarily instruct me what to do. He is more of a manager of my performance.” While I cannot remember the exact lines I told, I am confident about the core of my argument: I wanted to have a role on the side of my students, not above them. For me, this was related to either instructing (I tell them what to do) versus training them (I design learning environments). While I had clear roles associated with the different terms, my colleagues also did. All three heavily put forward the argument that an instructor has more authority than a trainer. Volt also spoke to himself, testing the sound of the title: “Trainer, trainer, operational trainer...instructor, operational instructor. No... instructor sounds much better. We tell them what to do.”

The discussion left me wondering about my role within the department. I – at least that I would think of myself – was concerned about my relationship with the police recruits. It was important for me that they value the training I designed for them. On the other hand, there were my colleagues; and it seemed that they were more concerned about the power relation between police recruits and them. They wanted authority. However, reflecting on this episode, I have to add, that at this point during my time as *alter* I also was intrigued about the authority I had with “my” recruits; but in comparison to my colleagues, this seemed to be far less prominent; and I tried to gain this authority through good training.

Anecdote 2: The Sifu and the Special Operations Unit

The second anecdote refers to an experience at an open day at the Federal Criminal Police Office in 2010. A special operations unit prepared a hand-to-hand-combat show for the public audience. The lead part of the show was exhibited by an external (civilian) hand-to-hand combat *alter*, who taught the police trainers of the special operations force – a Wing Tsun *sifu*. After the show, the leading police *alter* and two colleagues showed the external guest around. While they were walking around, the *sifu* was in the middle, one step ahead of the *alters*. The police *alters* tried to avoid walking in front of the *sifu*. I was stunned by the look of the *sifu* and his entourage, which reminded me of the movie Ip Man at the time. As they approached me for some small talk, the leading police *alter* introduced the *sifu* to me: “This is *sifu* [anonymised name]”. Also, after the *sifu* was gone, the trainers of the special operations unit also referred to their trainer not by the name, but by the title: *sifu*.

Anecdote 3: The (Non-)Professors

In 2020 we (SK/MS) conducted a two days coaching clinic for police *alters* at a German police academy. Even though the both of us work as professors, we did not pay attention to pointing out our title when engaging with the police *alters* of the academy. We were just Swen and Mario, who conduct research within the area of police training and provide coach development courses. On the second day, we were approached by a police *alter* asking us if we know *professor* [anonymized name], a black belt in Brazilian jujitsu. The police *alter* regularly referred to the individual by the full title of *professor* [anonymized name] – not just his name. While we did not give this event much consideration at the time, a short while later, this event left us wondering which knowledge structures police *alters* adhere



to – the academic professors or the martial arts professor. Also, the question for us arose: Who do they trust when it comes to communicating knowledge?

Anecdote 4: Coach or Instructor/Trainer?

The last anecdote relates to an experience we (MS/SK) had as the authors of manuscripts we submitted to academic journals. Within the manuscripts we referred to the *alter* in the context of police conflict management (e.g., self-defence training, firearms training, tactical training, arrest and use of force training) as *coaches*. This was flagged as “interesting” by a reviewer for a manuscript we submitted in 2021: “Interesting that the author(s) have reframed this group as ‘coaches’ rather than trainers or instructors [...], and training as ‘learning’. Some exploration around this and the argument for doing it is required. This is an important distinction and arguably necessary for the development of the field.”

In 2020 we received feedback on another manuscript stating: “The article is premised on the idea that [police use of force] trainers are coaches, and engage in coaching, without establishing that this is the case. [...] What is provided seems to be an idealistic description of how coaching might be applied to [police use of force] training, with reference to articles focused on coaching in sport. This is problematic as the description does not match the reality of PUOF training, at least not in [anonymized country]. [...] it cannot be assumed that this is the case across the world [...]. For example, in [anonymized country], [police use of force] training occurs within a training academy. Individual trainers are required to deliver a standardized training course, developed by the agency. “

Both comments left us wondering, if the distinction between *trainers* and *coaches* is that big. However, it seemed to be big enough for us; otherwise, we could easily change the term to *trainers* and avoid that kind of irritation by using the term *coaches*. But we stayed with the term *coach*. When reflecting on why we keep putting forward this idea – and submit manuscripts referring *coaches* instead of *trainers* – we argue that what those individuals do is more like coaching than training learners (of course we have to provide an argument for this as the reviewer stated).

THE FUNCTION OF POLICE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TRAINING AS THE CONTEXTUAL FRAME

The described anecdotes indicate that the used terminology for *alter* matters: sometimes more than in other instances and for others as well as for us. The diagnosis “it matters” refers to the function of the terminology. By communicating what something is, and what it is not, individuals explicitly or implicitly ascribe functionality towards the term. So the question remains: What is the function of the different terms used. What is the function of calling someone (or being called) *instructor*, *coach*, *trainer*, *sifu* or *professor*?

Before answering this question, we first have to elaborate the context in which this question is posed, since the context constrains the function. Our anecdotes – and the context of this papers – refer to the setting of police conflict management training, with all sub-settings, that prepare, train, educate, and develop (here again we can argue about the different terms) police officers to cope with conflict situations. The explicit function of such



settings is clear and spelled out in the respective curricula: developing the competencies for police officers to cope with the demands in the field. However, a closer analytical look at what is done within these settings questions the sheer functional alignment of such programs. Various research endeavours indicated that such settings tend to be self-referential (Koerner & Staller, 2021): it is trained what has to be trained according to the trainers; and concerning these knowledge structures, trainers know what they have been taught by other trainers (Staller et al., 2018). As such, the functionality of terms used depends on the function of the training setting. For our analysis, we normatively set the function of police conflict management training settings to the explicit function. Consequently, the roles and terminology within these settings have to fulfil that function, the function of allowing police officers to learn (and to develop) what is needed in the field. In our understanding this also extends to metacognitive skills, such as reflexivity.

THE FUNCTION OF USED TERMINOLOGY

Since we have set the context, we can now turn towards the function of the terms used in our analysis. Based on our reflection of the described anecdotes, we see four different functions: differentiations, description, relation and (pedagogical) authority.

Differentiation

The core process taking place within police conflict management training settings is a pedagogical one. In line with modern social systems theory, pedagogy can be identified operatively as a distinct form of communication (Luhmann, 1990). The model of pedagogical communication (Körner & Staller, 2018), based on work from Kade (2004), takes the following dimensions and underlying assumptions into account: (1) In the social dimension, pedagogical communication is constituted by *alter* and *ego*, usually related to one another as someone who knows and delivers (*alter*) and someone who receives and learns (*ego*). (2) In the factual dimension, pedagogical communication revolves around information, qualified either as knowledge or value. At this point, a double selection is made by '*alter*': what information is to be transmitted (this/not that) and how (oral, written, gestural, medially supported, etc.). (3) In the temporal dimension, pedagogical communication is constituted by two interrelated operations: transmission of information (by *alter*) and acquisition respectively learning (through *ego*). (4) The process of pedagogical communication is underpinned by two premises. It assumes (a) an asymmetry of knowledge and ability: someone (*alter*) presently has knowledge and/or ability, whilst the other party (*ego*) does not yet. Pedagogical communication is driven (b) by the assumption of a potential for change: something inside or about '*ego*' is not as it should be, but could be. Transforming individual potential into reality, learning by *ego*, is pedagogy's main goal (Figure 1).



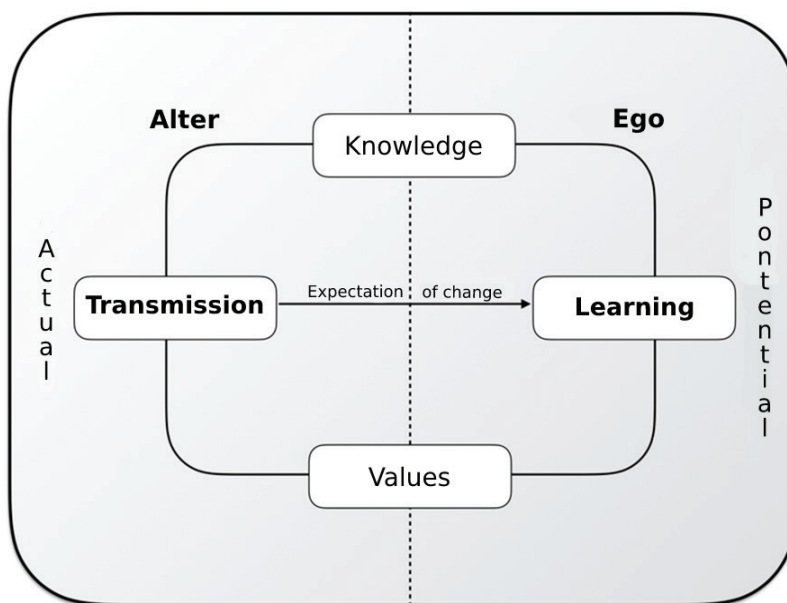


Figure 1. *The model of pedagogical communication*
(Körner & Staller, 2018)

Based on the model of pedagogical communication and its underlying assumptions, the terminology used differentiates between *alter* (*coach, trainer, instructor, etc.*) and *ego* (the learner, student, recruit, etc.). The introduction of two new terms (*alter/ego*) indicates that how *alter* is called does not matter; it is about the differentiation from the “other side” – *ego*. Based on this function, the use of terminology in anecdotes 1–4 serves to delineate the *alter* from the *ego*; however, extant discussions about which term to use (anecdote 1 and 4) would be dysfunctional. The terms used would be synonyms for *alter*.

Description

The process taking place in the learning setting of police conflict management training is linked to what *alter* does: training, instructing, coaching, and/or also helping, motivating, telling, showing, and so on. Under this function the terminology used for *alter* would be a description of *alter*’s behaviour. Different understandings of what the *alter* is supposed to do in police conflict management training is suggested by anecdote 1. “We tell them” seems to refer to direct instructions, prescriptive teaching und ultimately leads to the question about the role of *alter* in police learning settings (Basham, 2014).

Also, there is a factual difference between what *alter* is doing depending on the country or jurisdiction, which becomes evident in anecdote 4. Our description of what *coaches* are supposed to be doing in Germany (e.g. coaching) did not match the reality of police use of force training in other countries. We have to add that this is also not the case in Germany, but by providing an idealistic picture of the actual behaviour of *alter*, we have hoped to provide a linguistic frame of what *alter* is doing: coaching – and not only instructing.

While we did not provide enough information about the difference in anecdote 4, the first reviewer exactly pointed towards this issue: “Some exploration around this and the



argument for doing it is required.” In other words, interpreted from the perspective of the descriptive function of terminology, if we are reframing the terminology used (e.g. *coaches* instead of *trainers* or *instructors*), we have to provide a description of the different behaviour this terminology entails.

Belonging

Different cultural settings have different vocabulary describing the same things. Concerning martial arts (that are at some point linked to police self-defence and arrest training), there are, depending on the martial art, several terms referring to *alter*: *sensei* in the Japanese martial arts like judo or karate, *sifu* in kung fu related martial arts like wing tsun, *maestro* in the Brazilian martial art of capoeira, *professor* in Brazilian jiu-jitsu or *instructor* in reality-based self-defence systems like krav maga.

Using the vocabulary present in a specific community of practice may serve the purpose of belonging. A common vocabulary is a key characteristic of communities of practices, and as such of martial arts and other learning settings. The use of terminology in anecdotes 2 and 3 may be explained by this. As part of the community, the police *alter* refers to *alter* of a community he engages with as a *professor* (anecdote 2); and the police officers of the special operations force refer to their *alter* in hand-to-hand combat as a *sifu* (anecdote 3). By referring to these terms, they show that they belong.

Research in the context of martial arts describes belonging as an essential motive in martial arts (Heil et al., 2017). Concerning wing tsun especially, but also other systems like krav maga, speak of practitioners of the system as “family” (Koerner et al., 2019). The metaphor of family emphasizes the bond between practitioners, belonging as an essential feature of practicing within a community.

(Pedagogical) Authority

The concept of obeying authority is regularly negatively connotated and is thus hard to navigate if some kind of authority is needed in any social setting (Reichenbach, 2009). The experience of Nazi Germany and Milgram’s obedience to authority experiments (Milgram, 1974) showed the disastrous consequences of unreflectively following the lead of authorities. As such, authority – in the sense of authoritarian *alter* behaviour – is also critically discussed in learning settings.

In the context of police conflict management, there is also another aspect worth considering. Authority maintenance theory posits that police officers tend to take measures (e.g., use of force) to reinstate their authority once it has been threatened in police-citizen interactions (Alpert et al., 2020; Klukkert et al., 2008). Concerning the learning settings within police, it has been argued that an authoritarian teaching style of the *alter* provides the observational template for the *ego*, to learn how authority is managed if it is threatened (Staller et al., 2019). Based on the observation that the concept of authority is prominent in the police organization and socialization (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010) and that decisions tend to be based on authority that is not based on an objective discourse (Mitchell & Lewis, 2017), a reflexive focus on what the implicit leading authorities are seems warranted.



It is exactly this argument that Reichenbach (2009) puts forward when he argues that there is the need of authority in learning settings. In his understanding pedagogical authority refers to the recognition of authority in learning settings that is needed in order to engage in learning activities that are instructed and to be receptive of knowledge structures that are conveyed from *alter* to *ego*. If there is no explicit authority to turn to, implicit authorities will provide the orientation for learning and behavioural conduct. However, he points out that it is the responsibility of the mature individual to critically evaluate whose authority to adhere to (“No one has the right to obey”, S. 74). This evaluation has to be based on the content, not on the status and the terminology used to describe this status. Once pedagogical authority is recognized, its effects are twofold: obedience on a behavioural level and believing on a knowledge level (Reichenbach, 2009). In the light of the consequences of blind recognition of authority, the critical evaluation of the recognition of authority becomes essential.

Based on this perspective, the terminology used for *alter* falls behind the content of the pedagogical process. Hence, it seems problematic if the terminology is used to justify pedagogical authority. It may be functional if authority is sought out in its own right; yet, if the process is in the focus, authority is the result of the process, not its foundation. We would argue that in order for conveyed information to be able to resonate a certain amount of authority it has to be granted initially, at least insofar as to allow for an *alter-ego* interaction that allows for the authority to be challenged, to be maintained or to be further built up, depending on the objective discourse. As such pedagogical authority rests within what is said and done. The rationale for why pedagogical authority should be granted is based on the content and on the processes that *alter* conveys or initiates. It has to be gained and maintained. It is not in the title or in the terminology used to describe the status. As such, the responsibility of the recognition of pedagogical authority lies within the learner – the *ego*. However, *alter* has the responsibility that there is something worth adhering to.

Viewed from this perspective, anecdote 1 shows a distinct pattern: the claim for recognition of authority through the terminology used to describe *alter*'s authority. It seemed that the focus of the acting individuals rested on finding the right term (“*instructor*”) that grants more authority on a semantic level. The content (the pedagogical process between *alter* and *ego*) moved into the background. In anecdote 2 there are two interpretations (or a combination of these) concerning the aspect of pedagogical authority: on the one hand, the *sifu* has earned his authority through the process of training and is as such referred to as *sifu* and treated with submissive behaviour (police trainers always walked behind him). On the other hand, the granted semantic authority (*sifu*) and the behaviour of the police trainers in his presence manifested the (pedagogical) authority that then extends to the content (knowledge, etc.) he is providing. While the second interpretation is more problematic than the first one, both interpretations ultimately include an exaggeration of the recognition of authority that may lead to an uncritical transfer of knowledge structures and an uncritical obedience towards instructions from the *alter*.



CONCLUSION: INSIGHT MATTERS

The use of terminology of describing and addressing the *alter* in police conflict management training settings is based on its functions. It may serve the purpose of (a) differentiating *alter* from *ego*, (b) describing what *alter* does, (c) expressing belonging to a community of practice, or (d) justify authority. By referring to four autoethnographic accounts, we have provided insights into how the different functions are manifested within social interaction related to training settings. While we value the importance of different functions in different social contexts, we argue for the case of police conflict management training that the function of differentiation and the indication of pedagogical authority are key concerns for professional practice and police organizational culture. Both functions are practically not concerned with an exaggeration of the authority status of *alter*. Therefore, we would argue for a sensible use of terms which allows for the differentiation between *alter* and *ego* and simultaneously limit the authoritarian status of *alter* to a minimum. Therefore, we would argue for a sensible use of terminology depending on one's understanding of professional practice. In order to find one's own appropriate term, insight into the different functions matters. Either way, the use of terms for pedagogical roles within police training also reflects the current state of police professionalization.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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