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Bridging Training and Practice: Communication Challenges and Sustainable Organizational Behavior in Policing

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Abstract

Effective communication is a core competence in sustainable policing, yet training programs often fail to prepare officers for the emotional and relational complexity of real-world encounters. This study explored how police officers from Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and Romania (n = 109) evaluate their communication training and identify the interactions they find most difficult. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, the research integrated quantitative assessments of training coverage with qualitative analysis of officers' narratives. Findings reveal consistent gaps in emotional regulation, empathy, negotiation, and de-escalation skills, especially in encounters with intoxicated or mentally distressed individuals, and in internal communication within hierarchical structures. Viewed through the lens of organizational sustainability, communication competence emerges as a key form of human capital that enhances officer well-being, reduces operational risks, and strengthens public trust. The study highlights the need to embed experiential, scenario-based learning into police curricula to align training with the emotional realities of field practice.

Keywords: police training; communication skills; procedural justice; experiential learning; officer preparedness; relational competence; public safety

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1. Introduction

Effective communication is one of the core skills required in modern policing. In democratic societies, police officers play a key role in maintaining social cohesion, public trust, and resolving conflicts. Policing has shifted from reactive enforcement to proactive, community-based engagement. In this setting, communication is not an accessory but a fundamental tool for ethical and effective law enforcement [1–3].

Research consistently shows that officers face increasing communication challenges in the field. They must handle situations involving people in mental health crises, trauma victims, minors, intoxicated or aggressive individuals, and culturally diverse groups. These interactions demand empathy, emotional control, and clear communication [1–5]. International guidelines also stress the need for respectful, human-rights-based dialog [6]. However, many officers still find communication stressful and confusing, especially when training is limited or too theoretical [3,4,7].

Despite its importance, communication competence is unevenly developed across police training systems. Many academies focus on law, tactics, and physical preparation, while communication is treated as secondary [4,7,8]. This creates a skills gap. Officers often feel unprepared for unpredictable, emotionally intense encounters that define real police

work. Repeated failures in communication can lead to frustration, stress, and professional burnout [1,5,9].

This study addresses the gap between the real communication challenges officers face and the limited preparation provided by police training programs. Officers often report that academies do not prepare them for high-pressure or emotionally charged interactions [8,9]. This shortfall can reduce service quality and undermine public confidence in law enforcement [2,3].

The aim of this study is to examine how police officers evaluate their communication training and identify areas where they feel least prepared. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Assess officers' views on the quality of communication training received at police academies;
2. Identify communication areas insufficiently covered during training; and
3. Explore which real-life situations officers find most difficult to handle.

A convergent mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative data on training adequacy were compared with qualitative descriptions of challenging encounters. A joint display connects statistical patterns with thematic insights to identify key training gaps. Limitations related to self-reports and uneven sampling are addressed in the Discussion.

The study adopts an organizational perspective on sustainable policing—the balance between operational effectiveness, officer well-being, and community trust. From this view, communication skills are a form of human capital that strengthens resilience, reduces stress, and lowers social and organizational costs such as complaints or burnout [6,10]. Investing in communication training is therefore both an ethical and a practical necessity. It enhances procedural justice, builds trust between police and communities, and supports officers' mental health and cooperation within organizations [2,3,5,9,10].

This article makes a twofold contribution. Empirically, it combines survey results with qualitative data to identify specific weaknesses in communication training and classify the most difficult types of encounters (e.g., mental health crises, intoxication, domestic disputes, interactions with minors, intercultural situations, and public-order incidents). Conceptually, it places communication within a sustainability framework that links de-escalation, harm reduction, trust building, and officer well-being to measurable outcomes such as complaints, use-of-force incidents, and stress indicators. This framework provides a foundation for the recommendations presented later in the paper.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 introduces the theoretical background on communication in policing; Section 3 describes the methodology; Section 4 presents the results; Section 5 discusses the implications for training reform; and Section 6 concludes with key insights and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background: Communicative Competence in Modern Policing

This section draws on four complementary strands of theory that explain why communication skills are pivotal in policing [11,12]. First, procedural justice and police legitimacy posit that citizens judge authority by the fairness, respect, and clarity officers display; communication is the channel through which these judgments are formed, and cooperation is secured [3,13–15]. Second, organizational communication and internal procedural justice show that open, two-way dialog, reflective supervision, and clear norms strengthen judgment, ethical stability, and the transfer of skills from training to field practice [2,9–11]. Third, organizational sustainability, human capital and resilience frames communicative competence as an institutional resource that lowers social and operational costs (complaints, injuries, errors) and supports officer well-being over time [6,16–18]. Finally, experiential and scenario-based learning provides the pedagogical mechanism that builds these competencies under realistic stressors, improving self-regulation, de-escalation, and decision

quality when paired with structured feedback and debriefs [4,6–8,17]. Taken together, these perspectives ground communication not as a soft add-on, but as a core determinant of ethical, lawful, and effective policing.

Effective communication is a cornerstone of modern policing and a central determinant of public trust, procedural fairness, and officer well-being. In contemporary democratic societies, citizens evaluate police legitimacy not only by enforcement efficiency but also by the fairness and empathy demonstrated in interpersonal interactions [1,2]. Communication thus operates as a professional competence through which officers maintain authority while embodying respect, self-control, and transparency. The ways an officer speaks, listens, and interprets context can transform a potentially volatile encounter into one of understanding and cooperation [3,4]. At stake is not simply the transmission of information but the enactment of authority through language and behavior—interactional choices that can either sustain or erode the perceived legitimacy of institutions over time.

Empirical work shows that communication is not merely the transfer of information but a reflexive, context-dependent practice integrating emotional awareness, cognitive flexibility, and ethical judgment [5]. This characterization highlights a dual status for communication: it is at once a personal capability that enables self-regulation and tact, and an institutional resource that creates coherence across roles, procedures, and expectations. Within the procedural justice tradition, legitimacy depends on how fairly and respectfully authority is exercised. Empathetic, transparent, and predictable communication strengthens both compliance and perceived institutional legitimacy by signaling that power is constrained by norms and reasons rather than whim [3,6,14]. A growing body of research further indicates that these effects are observable across groups and over time, with durable downstream benefits for cooperation and conflict management [15,16]. At the interactional level, then, communication functions as the medium through which procedural values—voice, neutrality, respect, and trustworthy motives—become visible to citizens and are internalized by officers as professional norms.

Translating these principles into pedagogy, recent studies argue that communication should be treated as a core element of crisis and conflict management rather than an auxiliary "soft skill." Scenario-based and dialogic learning—with structured reflection—consistently improves decision-making under stress and builds ethical reflexivity by allowing officers to practice tempo control, question framing, and stance taking in psychologically realistic settings [4,7]. Evaluations of conflict-management and de-escalation programs further indicate gains in knowledge, confidence, and field-relevant behaviors when training includes communication-intensive simulations that mirror real encounters and culminate in targeted debriefs [8,17,18]. These findings support the view that the capacity to sustain composure, regulate emotion, and project calm authority is best understood as tactical communication aimed at reducing risk and harm [4,7,18]. At the same time, emerging evaluations caution that benefits hinge on instructional design: fidelity of scenarios, quality of feedback, and opportunities for repetition appear to be decisive levers, whereas one-off exercises without debrief often fail to transfer to practice—an important boundary condition for interpreting positive results across jurisdictions [17,18]. This points to a pedagogical paradox: the more communication is taught as a checklist, the less adaptive it becomes under pressure; the more it is trained as a reflective, situated skill, the more reliably it supports discretion in fluid environments.

In European police education, scenario-based approaches are increasingly embedded to cultivate adaptability, cooperation, and intercultural awareness—competencies vital for policing diverse societies [5,8]. Even so, many academies continue to emphasize legal/tactical curricula at the expense of interpersonal communication, limiting preparedness for the relational realities of frontline work [4,8]. This persistent tension between

societal expectations and institutional provision motivates the empirical focus of the present study on perceived training adequacy. Conceptually, it also invites a multi-level account in which micro-interactional practices aggregate into meso-level organizational routines and macro-level legitimacy dynamics: it is at the frontline that procedural justice is enacted, but it is through organizational learning that such enactment becomes repeatable, accountable, and strategically aligned [15,16].

Beyond individual skills, communicative competence operates as an organizational mechanism for collective sense-making, problem-solving, and adaptation. Organizational learning perspectives treat communication as the conduit through which feedback circulates, norms are clarified, and discretion is aligned with shared values; institutions that foster open dialog and reflective supervision report higher trust and ethical stability, particularly when supervision models invite upward voice and error reporting without fear of sanction [2,9–11]. This view complements the procedural justice tradition by emphasizing internal procedural justice: officers who experience fairness and clarity inside the organization are more likely to deliver fairness externally, creating a reinforcing loop between internal culture and public legitimacy [16]. Critically, internal communication also structures how stress is processed and distributed: briefings, debriefs, and peer exchange can either normalize reflective practice or, if absent, individualize strain and increase the risk of maladaptive coping—an organizational determinant of communicative performance under pressure.

Framed in terms of sustainability, this amounts to human-capital development that underpins institutional resilience. Communication practices that reduce error and harm, build trust, and support officer well-being contribute to the durability of legitimacy over time [6,19]. To render this link empirically tractable, four mechanisms and indicative outcomes are emphasized. First, de-escalation is expected to track with lower rates of force incidents and injuries where communication scripts stabilize tone, pacing, and space. Second, error and harm reduction should manifest in fewer complaints and critical-incident reviews citing communication failures when briefings and handoffs are structured and language is concrete. Third, trust building should appear in improvements on procedural-justice survey items and cooperation metrics where officers give reasons, invite voice, and follow through consistently. Fourth, officer well-being should be reflected in burnout and stress proxies when internal communication provides psychological safety and reflective supervision [15–18]. These mechanisms do not claim exclusivity—legal frameworks, resource constraints, and community histories also matter—but they offer a coherent path for connecting communicative micro-practices to organizational indicators and, ultimately, to legitimacy trajectories.

A final strand concerns intra-organizational communication and its role in shaping the conditions for external performance. Constraints created by hierarchy, limited feedback loops, and performance anxiety can impede briefing quality, learning, and morale. Leadership that prioritizes transparent, two-way communication helps bridge rank boundaries and supports discretionary judgment aligned with shared values [11]. In practical terms, building internal clarity and psychological safety enhances external service quality by stabilizing decision-making under pressure and supporting officer well-being [1,6,19]. This alignment is not automatic: without routines that institutionalize reflection—after-action reviews, coached debriefs, and cross-rank learning forums—good communication remains idiosyncratic and fragile. With such routines, by contrast, interpersonal competence becomes part of organizational memory and a scalable asset, rather than the property of particularly gifted individuals.

In summary, the theoretical background positions communicative competence as a multi-level construct—individual, interactional, and organizational—with direct implica-

tions for sustainable policing. At the individual level, it integrates emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and ethical judgment [5]. At the interactional level, it operationalizes procedural justice through clear explanations, respectful tone, and opportunities to be heard [3,6,14–16]. At the organizational level, it functions as a learning and coordination mechanism that links internal fairness to external legitimacy and anchors resilience as an outcome of routine practices rather than ad hoc heroics [2,9–11,19]. Read through a sustainability lens, communication becomes a measurable pathway from training inputs to institutional outcomes, connecting scenario design and supervisory culture to reductions in force, complaints, and stress. This synthesis provides the conceptual rationale for the study's mixed-methods design and for the indicators proposed later in the paper to evaluate training adequacy and organizational impact [15–18].

Synthesizing these strands yields a multi-level view in which communicative competence links individual regulation and judgment to organizational learning and, ultimately, public legitimacy. At the encounter level, procedurally just communication should manifest in clearer explanations, opportunities to be heard, and respectful tone, with downstream effects on cooperation and conflict containment [3,14–16]. Within organizations, transparent briefings, coached debriefs, and supportive supervision embed these practices, aligning discretion with shared values and reducing error under pressure [2,9–11]. Read through a sustainability lens, four mechanisms connect communication to measurable outcomes: de-escalation, error and harm reduction, trust building, and officer well-being—implying observable indicators such as force-incident and injury rates, complaints, procedural-justice survey items, and stress/burnout proxies [6,15–19].

This synthesis motivates the study's mixed-methods design and the joint reading of item-level preparedness with qualitative accounts of difficult encounters, treating communication training as an investment in organizational resilience and legitimacy rather than a peripheral skill set [4,7,8,17,18]. This integrated framework thus provides an original theoretical contribution by positioning communication as a sustainability-enabling mechanism that bridges training, competence development, and institutional outcomes.

Conceptual Contribution of the Study. While previous research has linked communication to police legitimacy and procedural justice, this study advances the discussion by embedding communicative competence within a sustainability framework. It conceptualizes communication not merely as a behavioral or interpersonal skill but as a systemic capability that connects training inputs to sustainability outcomes across multiple levels—individual (emotional regulation and judgment), interactional (procedural fairness and empathy), and organizational (resilience, learning, and trust). By aligning these levels within a unified logic of human capital development, the study offers a novel theoretical synthesis: communication becomes a structural resource for sustainable policing, linking officer well-being, operational performance, and institutional legitimacy through measurable pathways. This contribution extends the sustainability discourse beyond environmental or economic domains into the social and ethical infrastructure of policing organizations.

To integrate the theoretical strands discussed above, the study proposes a conceptual framework that visualizes how communication training translates into sustainable policing outcomes. The framework (Figure 1) depicts the sequential link between training inputs, communicative competence, organizational mechanisms, and sustainability results, thereby clarifying the study's theoretical logic and empirical orientation.

As shown in Figure 1, sustainable policing emerges through the cumulative interaction of training, competence, and organizational culture. Experiential and scenario-based learning build the communicative skills that enable emotional regulation, empathy, and de-escalation under pressure. These micro-level capabilities operate through organizational mechanisms—such as internal procedural justice, supportive feedback, and transparent

leadership—to produce macro-level sustainability outcomes, including reduced operational risks, enhanced officer well-being, and greater public trust. The framework thus conceptualizes communication as a systemic capability that sustains both institutional legitimacy and human capital over time.

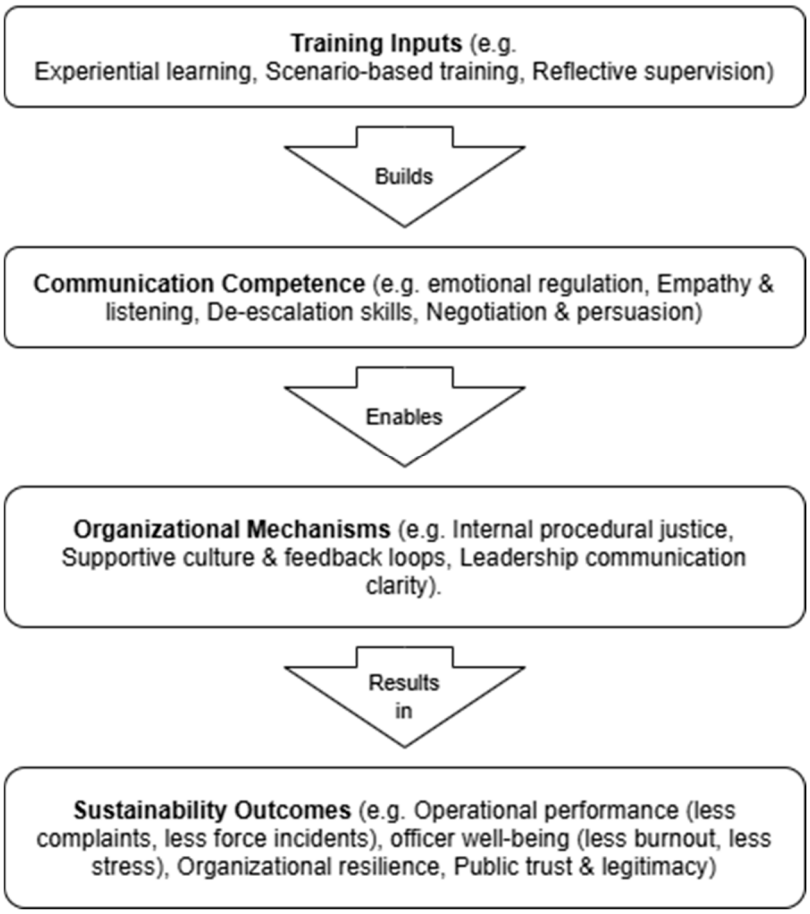


Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking communication competence, training, and sustainability outcomes in policing.

3. Methodology

Study design. A convergent mixed-methods design was used: quantitative and qualitative data were collected with the same online instrument, analyzed in parallel, and integrated at interpretation, with equal weighting (QUAN = QUAL). Integration followed an expansion logic in which inductively derived themes extend and contextualize item-level indicators rather than confirm them. The integration product is a joint display that aligns preparedness/coverage items with qualitative themes and indicates convergence, divergence, or expansion. This specification is consistent with established mixed-methods guidance and reflexive qualitative analysis principles [20–23].

Procedure and data collection. Data was collected in January 2024 via a secure online questionnaire. A single invitation wave was sent through official police e-mail channels to ~100 officers per country (Lithuania, Czech Republic, Romania); no reminders were issued, and the platform did not log partial starts, so only completed submissions were retained. Consistent with AAPOR definitions, the response rate RR1 = C/(I − U) was calculated and reported in text as Lithuania = 0.670 (67.0%), Czech Republic = 0.140 (14.0%), and Romania = 0.280 (28.0%); between-country contrasts are interpreted descriptively given unequal subsamples [24].

The English master instrument underwent forward–back translation into Lithuanian, Czech, and Romanian with panel reconciliation; a brief cognitive pre-test/pilot informed minor wording and ordering adjustments to support response-process clarity across languages. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and uncompensated; no personally identifying information was collected, and free-text fields were screened for potential identifiers. Procedures adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki and the EU ethics guidance for SSH research [25,26].

Data handling followed a standard archival workflow: time-stamped exports to read-only storage and analyses conducted on de-identified copies. Duplicate filtering was not applied (short instrument; single-wave fielding); these operational constraints are acknowledged in the Limitations. Reporting choices (item-level descriptives; RR1 under incomplete start logs) align with AAPOR guidance [24].

Participants. The analytic sample comprised 109 active-duty police officers: Lithuania n = 67 (61.5%), Czech Republic n = 14 (12.8%), and Romania n = 28 (25.7%). The sample was a non-probability (institutional convenience) cohort obtained from official contact lists; as such, it is not intended to be statistically representative, and between-country contrasts are read descriptively. This comparative component should therefore be interpreted as exploratory rather than inferential, aiming to identify indicative patterns rather than statistically representative differences. Respondents completed the questionnaire in national-language versions produced via forward–back translation to support response-process clarity across languages [25,26].

Instrument. The study employed a short online questionnaire focused on police officers' perceptions of communication-skills training and communicative challenges in practice. The instrument included four core questions relevant to this analysis. Respondents rated the overall quality of communication-skills development during their training on a five-point Likert scale (1 = poor, 5 = excellent). Two multiple-choice questions asked which communication domains were well covered and which were insufficiently covered during academy studies, using the same list of eleven predefined areas such as emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, empathy, respect and non-discrimination, active listening, emotion management, communication under pressure, cultural awareness, verbal and non-verbal communication, negotiation, and community engagement. Finally, an open-ended question invited participants to describe situations in their professional practice that were difficult from a communication perspective, providing brief contextual details. The English master version of the instrument was translated into Lithuanian, Czech, and Romanian through forward–back translation with minor linguistic adjustments to ensure conceptual equivalence [25,26].

Quantitative analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using item-level indicators. The Likert-scale question on training quality was summarized through means and proportions of high ratings (scores 4–5). Multi-select items on communication domains were recoded into binary variables (selected/not selected) and reported as frequency counts and percentages by country. No inferential statistics were applied due to the small and uneven country subsamples; all differences are interpreted descriptively. Missing data were minimal (<5%) and handled by listwise deletion at the item level. Quantitative indicators were later integrated with qualitative categories in the joint display to identify convergent and divergent patterns between the two strands [20,23,24].

Qualitative analysis. Open-ended responses were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following the principles of reflexive qualitative methodology [22,23]. The unit of analysis was the respondent's full written answer, treated as a coherent meaning segment. Coding proceeded in two stages: first, initial open coding was used to identify recurring ideas and descriptive categories across all responses; second, related codes were grouped

into higher-order themes reflecting types of communicative difficulty and contextual features of challenging encounters. The process emphasized semantic clarity and internal coherence, allowing multiple codes per response when several issues were mentioned.

All coding was performed manually by the first analyst and reviewed by a second researcher for conceptual consistency; minor differences were resolved through discussion. No software was used. Theme salience was evaluated through simple frequency counts (number of respondents mentioning each theme), which were used only to indicate relative prominence and later compared with quantitative indicators in the joint display. The qualitative strand thus complemented quantitative findings by providing contextual explanations for reported training gaps and communication challenges.

Mixed-methods integration. The study followed a convergent mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected using the same online instrument, analyzed in parallel and integrated at the interpretation stage with equal weighting (QUAN = QUAL) [20,23,27]. The two strands addressed complementary aspects of the same research aim—how police officers perceive the adequacy of communication-skills training and the communicative difficulties they encounter in practice.

Integration followed an expansion logic, whereby qualitative findings extend and contextualize quantitative indicators rather than test or confirm them. Quantitative results captured the prevalence of specific training domains and self-rated quality scores, while qualitative themes provided explanatory depth on the nature and context of communication challenges. Alignment between strands was examined using a joint display, which mapped key quantitative items (e.g., well-covered and insufficiently covered communication domains) against emergent qualitative themes describing real-life difficulties. Points of convergence indicated consistency between training gaps and practical challenges (for example, limited preparedness in managing emotional escalation), while divergence highlighted mismatches between perceived coverage and field experiences.

The integration process yielded meta-inferences that situate officers' self-assessed training adequacy within a broader pattern of communicative competence under stress. This interpretive synthesis supported the identification of core training deficits—such as emotional regulation, empathy under pressure, and conflict de-escalation—and linked them to the concept of sustainable policing introduced in the theoretical framework. The mixed-methods integration thus allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how communication training influences both officer readiness and organizational resilience over time.

Limitations. Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The study relied on a convenience sample recruited through institutional e-mail lists, which limits generalizability and may favor officers with stronger motivation or interest in communication training. The uneven subsamples across countries reduce the comparability of quantitative results, which are therefore interpreted descriptively. Participation was voluntary and self-reported, introducing potential self-selection and social desirability biases common in survey-based research.

Because the questionnaire was short and focused on specific communication domains, some aspects of competences, such as situational awareness, stress regulation, or organizational culture, were not directly assessed. Cultural differences in response style and interpretation of Likert scales may also influence cross-national variation in ratings. Finally, no observational or organizational data were collected, precluding triangulation with behavioral or performance indicators. These limitations were mitigated by integrating qualitative narratives that contextualized officers' quantitative assessments and by interpreting results within the boundaries of descriptive, exploratory mixed-methods research [20,23,24]. These limitations mean that the study's cross-country comparisons should be understood as

exploratory pattern identification rather than hypothesis testing. The findings are intended to generate conceptual and pedagogical insights rather than generalizable claims about national differences.

4. Results

Results are presented in two parts. Quantitative findings describe officers' ratings of training quality and domain coverage, while qualitative findings illustrate the real-life contexts in which communication difficulties occur. The strands are integrated at the end of this section to identify convergent and divergent patterns.

Quantitative analysis. Officers rated the overall quality of communication skills training as moderate. Across all responses (N = 109), the mean score was 3.33 (SD = 0.97), suggesting that training is perceived as adequate but improvable. The distribution of ratings indicates that roughly half of respondents assessed the training positively (scores 4–5), while one quarter considered it below satisfactory. This pattern supports the view that police academies provide a foundation in communication, but not to a level officers find sufficient for field realities.

Evaluation of specific communication domains revealed a clear imbalance between areas perceived as well covered and those considered underdeveloped (Table 1). The highest proportion of "well covered" responses was observed for conflict resolution and de-escalation, communication under pressure, and active listening—skills directly linked to operational control and officer safety. Yet these same domains also appeared among the most frequently prioritized for further improvement. Emotional intelligence, empathy, and negotiation were repeatedly identified as areas requiring greater emphasis, reflecting the officers' recognition that relational and emotional dimensions of communication remain insufficiently addressed in formal curricula.

Table 1. Evaluation of communication domains: proportion of officers indicating "well covered" and "should be prioritized" during studies (%).

Communication Domain	Well Covered	Should Be Prioritized
Emotional Intelligence in Communication	17.4	37.6
Conflict Resolution and De-escalation	48.6	80.7
Empathy in Law Enforcement Interactions	15.6	27.5
Respectful and Non-Discriminatory Communication	19.3	48.6
Active Listening	36.7	36.7
Emotions in Communication	19.3	43.1
Communicating in High-Pressure Situations	30.3	69.7
Cultural Sensitivity and Diversity Awareness	21.1	13.8
Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication	26.6	32.1
Negotiation and Persuasion	13.8	47.7
Community Engagement and Public Speaking	13.8	10.1

The pattern indicates that officers value practical and emotionally adaptive competencies over procedural or purely informational ones. Domains involving emotional regulation, empathy, and persuasion were rarely described as well covered but frequently prioritized, showing a perceived gap between academy teaching and the communicative demands of frontline policing. Conversely, skills related to cultural diversity and community engagement were neither strongly endorsed nor prioritized, suggesting that officers regard them as less central to immediate operational challenges.

These findings confirm the first two research objectives: communication is recognized as an essential element of professional competence, yet training remains uneven across domains, with pronounced deficits in emotionally intensive and context-sensitive skills. The next section explores how these perceived gaps manifest in practice through officers' qualitative accounts of difficult encounters.

Qualitative findings. The qualitative analysis provided insight into the types of communication challenges most frequently encountered in policing and the underlying emotional and situational dynamics that shape them. Responses were grouped into eight main categories derived inductively from officers' written accounts. Each category reflects a distinct type of interaction that officers perceived as particularly demanding or stressful, often exposing gaps between formal training and the realities of police–citizen communication. Table 2 summarizes these categories, subcategories, relative frequencies, and representative quotations.

Table 2. Qualitative categories, subcategories, frequency, and illustrative quotations.

Category	Subcategory	Frequency (Approx. N or Level)	Illustrative Quote
Situations causing strong negative emotions	Intoxicated persons	N—35	"It is always difficult to deal with people under the influence of alcohol or drugs; communication becomes chaotic, and they rarely listen."
	Aggressive persons	N—30	"It is particularly difficult to communicate with a person who immediately resorts to aggression and provokes conflict."
	Categorical communicators	N—18	"Challenging when a person insists on their own version of events and pressures the officer to act accordingly."
	Non-communicating individuals	N—10	"When people call for help but then refuse to speak, it's impossible to understand their problem."
Inadequacy due to medical condition	Mental health difficulties	N—28	"Dealing with psychologically unstable people is unpredictable and stressful; one word can provoke them."
	Suicidal individuals	N—12	"Questioning a suicidal person is extremely delicate; every word can affect their decision."
	Hearing impaired individuals	N—6	"Communicating with deaf people is very difficult because we don't know sign language."
Foreigners and cultural differences	Communication barriers due to language and culture	N—15	"When dealing with foreigners, it's hard to make them understand local rules and our procedures."
Offenders and suspects	Emotional and manipulative behavior	N—25	"The hardest are suspects in murder cases; communication is tense and emotionally draining."
Minors	Lack of cooperation, overconfidence in rights	N—14	"Minors often act fearlessly, knowing their rights, and simply refuse to participate in questioning."
Notification of deaths	Informing relatives of fatalities	N—8	"Notifying family members about death is one of the hardest tasks; it requires empathy and composure."

Table 2. *Cont.*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency (Approx. N or Level)	Illustrative Quote
Organizational and internal communication	Public speaking anxiety	N—10	"Public speaking is very stressful; it's not addressed properly during training."
	Communication with supervisors and colleagues	N—9	"Communication with hierarchical superiors causes tension and stress."
	Use of ICT and administrative communication	N—5	"Learning to use digital systems effectively for communication would improve efficiency."

The thematic analysis revealed that emotionally charged encounters dominate officers' perceptions of communicative difficulty. The most frequent situations involved intoxicated, aggressive, or mentally unstable individuals, confirming that officers' stress and uncertainty increase when emotional regulation and empathy are tested under pressure. These situations correspond to the quantitative finding that emotional intelligence, empathy, and de-escalation were among the least adequately covered areas in formal training.

Interactions with minors and foreigners highlighted distinct but related challenges: in the former, officers reported frustration with perceived legal asymmetry and the limited authority to influence uncooperative youths; in the latter, communication barriers due to language and cultural distance often escalated tension unintentionally. Both categories point to the need for more nuanced interpersonal strategies beyond procedural compliance.

Less frequent but particularly sensitive themes emerged around death notifications and internal communication. The first underscores the moral and emotional burden associated with delivering tragic information competence rarely addressed in police education. The second reveals organizational and interpersonal barriers within police hierarchies, including difficulties in communicating with superiors and in public contexts, suggesting that communication strain extends beyond citizen encounters.

Across categories, officers consistently described communicative challenges as emotionally taxing, situationally unpredictable, and insufficiently rehearsed during training. These narratives reinforce the interpretation that communication competence in policing is not limited to verbal technique but integrates emotional self-regulation, empathy, and adaptive judgment—skills that require experiential learning and reflection rather than procedural instruction.

Mixed-methods integration. The final stage of analysis integrated quantitative and qualitative results through a joint display aligning survey items with inductively derived themes. This approach follows an expansion logic: quantitative indicators identify general areas of perceived training adequacy, while qualitative findings extend and contextualize them by describing the communicative situations in which deficits manifest. Table 3 summarizes the alignment between both strands, including representative quotations and notes on convergence or divergence.

Percentages and counts are aggregated across all countries (N = 109). Theme salience indicates the number of distinct respondents who mentioned each issue in open-ended responses. Integration follows a convergent design (QUAN = QUAL) with expansion logic, where qualitative themes elaborate, refine, or occasionally challenge the survey indicators.

The integrated display confirms several strong convergence points: emotional regulation, empathy, and de-escalation consistently appear as central yet underdeveloped areas. Qualitative data add specificity by illustrating how officers translate these deficits into field experiences—such as maintaining composure during aggression or rephrasing communication with mentally distressed individuals. Divergent patterns, such as intercultural and accessibility challenges, highlight domains that are operationally relevant

but underrepresented in quantitative items. These findings underscore the importance of addressing both affective and contextual dimensions of communication in police education, strengthening the case for experiential, scenario-based learning approaches.

Table 3. Joint display aligning item-level survey results with qualitative themes.

Quantitative Domain/Item	% Selecting 4–5 ("Covered")	Qualitative Theme	Theme Salience (N)	Representative Quote	Integration Note
Conflict resolution & de-escalation	21.7	Mental-health crises/suicide risk	12	"The second category encompasses situations where suicidal ideation makes every sentence consequential."	Convergence. Quantitative results flag importance; qualitative data specify time–space tactics and phrasing.
Communication under pressure	8.7	Volatile intoxication/aggression management	5	"The first task is to steady one's voice and keep the exchange structured."	Expansion. Qualitative strand details stress-management strategies (tone, pacing, boundaries).
Verbal & non-verbal communication	11.3	Public speaking/internal communication	7	"Public speaking and briefing clarity emerged as recurring stressors."	Mild mismatch. Quantitative coverage moderate; qualitative accounts show higher practical load.
Respectful & non-discriminatory communication	9.6	Intercultural and language clarity	5	"Plain-language explanations were necessary; otherwise procedures were misunderstood."	Expansion. Intercultural and accessibility demands underrepresented in quantitative items.
Active listening	7.0	Serious offenses/suspect interviewing	4	"During questioning, pacing and short prompts mattered more than the volume of speech."	Expansion. Adds micro-skills: framing, sequencing, pace control.
Emotional intelligence	7.8	Volatile intoxication/aggression management	5	"Keeping affect stable while asserting clear boundaries reduced escalation."	Convergence and extension. Emotional intelligence links to tone regulation and boundary setting.
Empathy	7.0	Mental-health crises/suicide risk	12	"Slow, concrete phrasing was required to maintain fragile rapport."	Convergence. Empathy as a necessary condition; qualitative data clarify phrasing and tempo.
Negotiation & persuasion	5.2	Serious offenses/suspect interviewing	4	"Resistance was enacted through communication itself; framing and pacing became decisive."	Expansion. Reveals implicit negotiation mechanisms under pressure.
Emotions in communication	4.3	Communication under pressure	5	"Calm authority depended on regulating voice and avoiding rapid escalation cues."	Convergence and extension. Provides actionable emotion-regulation strategies.
Community engagement & public speaking	3.5	Public speaking/internal communication	7	"Addressing a crowd without clear scripts increased tension."	Mismatch. Sparse quantitative attention; recurrent practical need in qualitative data.
Cultural sensitivity & diversity	1.7	Deaf/hard-of-hearing and accessibility	8	"Communication with deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals relied on ad hoc adjustments."	Expansion only. Accessibility barriers not reflected in quantitative coverage.
—	—	Death notifications	2	"Delivering tragic news required compassionate but tightly structured communication."	Expansion only. Suggests inclusion in future curricula.

The results demonstrate a consistent pattern across analytical strands. Quantitative data revealed that officers perceive communication training as moderately adequate but unevenly developed across domains. Skills tied to emotional regulation, empathy, and de-escalation received the lowest coverage scores yet were most strongly prioritized for improvement. Qualitative findings reinforced this pattern, showing that officers most often struggle in emotionally charged and unpredictable encounters—particularly when dealing with aggression, intoxication, mental distress, or death notifications.

The integration of results underscores that communication challenges in policing are not merely technical but inherently emotional and contextual. Deficits identified in

academy-based training—limited emphasis on emotional intelligence, negotiation, and active listening—translate directly into operational stress and reduced confidence in the field. Conversely, officers' narratives suggest that effective communication under pressure can prevent escalation, preserve procedural fairness, and sustain psychological well-being.

Taken together, these findings confirm that communication competence functions as both a professional and organizational resource. When insufficiently developed, it undermines officers' capacity to manage complex social interactions; when strengthened, it enhances resilience, trust, and the legitimacy of policing as a public institution. This empirical evidence provides the foundation for the subsequent discussion on training design and sustainable professional development.

To clarify how communication competence contributes to sustainable policing, Table 4 summarizes indicative operational metrics that connect communicative mechanisms to measurable sustainability outcomes across individual, organizational, and societal levels.

Table 4. Illustrative operational indicators linking communication competence to sustainability outcomes.

Sustainability Dimension	Mechanism	Indicative Indicators (Examples)	Expected Direction of Change
Operational performance	De-escalation and conflict resolution	Use-of-force incidents; injuries during interventions; time to conflict resolution	Decrease
Organizational resilience	Error and harm reduction through structured communication	Number of citizen complaints citing communication failure; disciplinary reviews; incident-report accuracy	Decrease
Social legitimacy	Procedural fairness and community trust	Public trust index; cooperation in community surveys; perceived fairness and transparency	Increase
Human capital and well-being	Emotional regulation and reflective communication	Officer burnout index; absenteeism; stress self-assessment; peer-support utilization	Decrease
Learning and adaptation	Internal procedural justice and feedback culture	Frequency of debriefings; employee voice indicators; leadership communication climate	Increase

These indicators are not exhaustive but illustrate how sustainability can be empirically tracked through observable communication-related outcomes. By operationalizing sustainability in this way, the study links theoretical constructs of human capital and procedural justice to practical, measurable dimensions of police performance and well-being.

5. Discussion

This study examined how police officers in three European countries evaluate the adequacy of communication training and the real-world contexts in which communication difficulties occur. The findings indicate that communication competence is both an operational requirement and a moral foundation for legitimacy. Yet, as shown by both quantitative and qualitative data, academy-based preparation remains uneven—strong in procedural and tactical clarity but limited in emotional, relational, and adaptive aspects.

Viewed through the lens of sustainable policing, communication functions as a form of human capital that sustains organizational resilience and ethical performance [6,19]. Officers' reports of emotional strain, uncertainty, and limited preparedness in managing high-arousal situations are consistent with recent evidence that deficiencies in communicative competence are linked to occupational stress, reduced well-being, and a higher incidence of public complaints [9,10,19]. In contrast, training that develops emotional intelligence, empathy, and de-escalation skills correlates with better field outcomes and public cooperation [28–30].

A systematic review by Magny and Todak (2021) found that emotional intelligence underpins effective communication, especially during crisis encounters, improving officers' capacity to read emotions, regulate responses, and maintain composure under pressure [28]. Similarly, Wood, Tyler, and Papachristos (2020) demonstrated that procedural justice training emphasizing respectful, explanatory communication reduced use-of-force incidents and citizen complaints [29]. These studies reinforce the current findings that communication training operates as a preventive mechanism: when officers are taught to interpret cues, manage emotion, and provide explanations, both operational errors and psychological exhaustion decline.

The present analysis extends prior research by showing how training deficits manifest in everyday practice. Officers frequently described difficulties managing interactions with aggressive, intoxicated, or mentally distressed individuals—contexts that require calm authority, empathy, and improvisational judgment. These accounts confirm that communicative competence is not limited to language accuracy but involves adaptive judgment under stress, balancing assertiveness with emotional awareness. Training should therefore integrate experiential learning—scenario-based exercises, structured debriefs, and reflective feedback—rather than rely solely on classroom instruction [4,7,8,17,18,30–32].

The results also reveal a structural gap between academy content and field realities. While curricula often stress procedural fairness and compliance communication, officers face communicative breakdowns arising from emotional volatility and cultural barriers rather than legal misunderstanding. Recent research on procedural justice supports this interpretation: legitimacy depends not only on rule enforcement but also on the perceived fairness, empathy, and transparency of interactions [3,14–16,29]. In this sense, sustainable policing is achieved when communication embodies both competence and compassion—when authority is exercised with restraint and emotional awareness.

At the organizational level, officers' references to hierarchical communication barriers and stress in public speaking highlight that communication is also a systemic practice shaped by culture, leadership, and internal justice. Studies show that internal procedural justice—fairness, transparency, and openness within police organizations—predicts how fairly officers treat citizens in the field [16]. Embedding reflective supervision, peer discussions, and open feedback loops may thus enhance both officer well-being and external legitimacy [9,11].

The findings suggest that communication competence cannot be developed in isolation from the organizational culture in which officers operate. Internal procedural justice—the perception of fairness, respect, and transparency within an organization—strongly conditions how officers communicate externally. When internal norms promote open dialog, voice, and supportive supervision, officers are more likely to reproduce fairness, empathy, and legitimacy in public encounters. Conversely, when internal communication is hierarchical, punitive, or opaque, officers may internalize defensive or detached communicative styles that erode trust and escalate tension in the field. This alignment between internal and external justice thus constitutes a cultural mechanism through which sustainable policing is realized. Strengthening internal procedural justice—through reflective supervision, participatory decision-making, and feedback loops—becomes not only a managerial reform but also a pathway to communicative and institutional resilience.

Practically, these findings imply three priorities for reform. First, communication should be recognized as a core operational competency, not a peripheral "soft skill." Second, curricula must embed scenario-rich training that integrates emotional intelligence, negotiation, and empathy modules, with repeated practice and reflection [7,8,17,31]. Third, evaluation metrics should include behavioral indicators—officers' ability to de-escalate, explain, and maintain rapport—rather than only cognitive tests. These changes align with

evidence that scenario-based and feedback-driven programs improve both confidence and decision quality under stress [17,18,28,32].

Methodological limitations—such as non-probability sampling, self-report bias, and lack of observational triangulation—restrict generalizability. Nonetheless, the consistency across quantitative and qualitative strands strengthens interpretive validity. Future research could extend these findings through longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs linking communication training to performance metrics, stress outcomes, and legitimacy indicators.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a growing body of evidence that communicative competence is foundational to effective, ethical, and sustainable policing. Strengthening communication through experiential learning, emotional regulation, and reflective organizational practices is both a professional necessity and a structural investment in the long-term legitimacy and resilience of police institutions.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrated that police officers view communication competence as central to their professional effectiveness yet insufficiently developed in formal academy training. The strongest deficits were found in emotionally demanding domains—de-escalation, empathy, and emotion regulation—where officers felt least prepared to act calmly and fairly under stress. These deficits translate into operational strain and diminished confidence in real-world encounters, underscoring the need for communication to be treated as a structural rather than supplementary component of police education.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence supports the view that communication is not merely a technical function but an adaptive, relational, and ethical process fundamental to sustainable policing. When communication training cultivates emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-regulation, it strengthens officers' capacity for procedural fairness, reduces escalation, and enhances legitimacy. Conversely, when such training is neglected, both officers and communities bear the costs through misunderstanding, conflict, and loss of trust.

Future reform should prioritize experiential, scenario-based learning that mirrors the realities of front-line communication. Embedding reflective practice, peer learning, and supervisory feedback can consolidate these skills as part of organizational culture. Strengthening communicative competence in this way is an investment in human capital—one that sustains professional well-being, public confidence, and the long-term legitimacy of democratic policing.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and uncompensated. No personal or sensitive data were collected.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to institutional data protection policies and participant anonymity.

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