The Interactive Effects of Officer Gender and Emotional Response on Perceptions of Lethal Police Use of Force

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01 | BACKGROUND

~1 in 4 Canadian police officers are women (Statistics Canada, 2026), and they too face critical incidents such as lethal use of force (UoF)

- Lethal UoF draws intense public and media scrutiny; public perceptions are pivotal to police trust and legitimacy
- Ontario's Special Investigations Unit Act (2019) limits what police may disclose after these incidents
- Police statements tend to minimize responsibility (Walby & Alabi, 2022), though acknowledging harm is linked to trust and cooperation (O'Brien et al., 2020)
- News and witness accounts often fill this gap, describing how the officer reacted afterward

02 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Role Congruity Theory
Eagly & Karau, 2002

People are judged less favourably when gender stereotypes clash with their role. Policing is male-dominated and stereotypically masculine.

Emotions as Social Information
EASI; Van Kleef & Côté, 2022

Observers use emotional expressions to infer intent and responsibility. Anger may signal hostility; distress may signal the officer did not want to use lethal force.

Gendered Emotion Stereotypes
Plant et al., 2000

Anger is stereotyped as masculine and sadness as feminine, so gender shapes whether an emotion seems appropriate.

03 | PRIOR EVIDENCE IS MIXED

Female officer judged more favourably

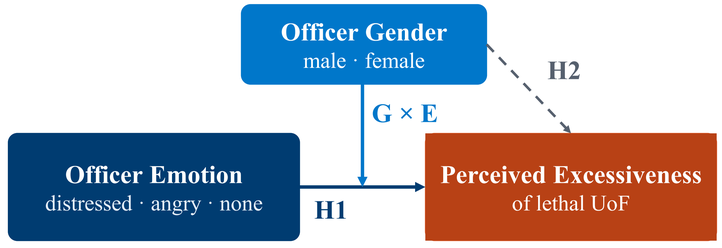
- Identical force attributed to a dangerous situation; officer trusted more (Salerno & Sanchez, 2020)
- Women use less force (Sheppard et al., 2024), so her force may seem necessary

Female officer judged more harshly

- Identical force rated as more excessive (Patton et al., 2017)
- Women's anger attributed to disposition, costing status and influence (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008)

**Both officer studies examined non-lethal force, and neither examined the officer's emotional response afterward.*

04 | HYPOTHESES



H1 Regardless of officer gender, lethal UoF will be seen as **more excessive** when the officer is described as angry than as distressed or with no reaction described.

H2 Perceived excessiveness will differ for male vs. female officers. *Exploratory; no direction predicted.*

G × E Exploratory; for an **angry female officer:**

If read as character
Force rated MORE excessive than an angry male officer's

If read as situational
Force rated LESS excessive, as her anger signals greater danger

05 | PROPOSED METHOD

3 × 2 between-subjects	Male officer	Female officer
Distressed	$n = 41$	$n = 41$
Angry	$n = 41$	$n = 41$
No reaction	$n = 41$	$n = 41$

Participants $N = 245$ adults via Prolific (equal men and women; $4.00 CAD). G*Power 3.1: $f^2 = .05$, $\alpha = .05$, power = .80 → $N = 222$, plus 10% for low-quality data

1. Baseline attitudes
Attitudes Towards Police Legitimacy Scale (Reynolds et al., 2018)

2. News article + BWC video
Identical footage; gender via officer's name and pronouns; emotion via witness report

3. Perceived excessiveness
9-point Likert scale, then manipulation checks; attention checks throughout

Analysis Hierarchical linear regression on perceived excessiveness. Step 1: gender and emotion; Step 2: Gender × Emotion.

06 | APPLICATION

- **Theory:** extends gendered-emotion research from workplaces and courtrooms to policing
- **Equity:** unequal scrutiny for identical decisions could discourage women from policing
- **Communication:** informs what police share after critical incidents
- **Oversight & training:** how the SIU weighs witness accounts; preparing officers for post-incident conduct

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