

# **THE IMPACT OF MANNER IN ROAD POLICING INTERACTIONS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research looked at the impact a Police Officer's manner has in road policing interactions. Seven video clips were filmed, all from the driver's perspective, showing an officer using different manners while issuing a speed infringement notice. The video clips were then shown to groups of Lions Club Members, Students, Prisoners and police Recruits. Prior to seeing any of the scenes, and at the completion of each one, participants completed two rating scales. These assessed their impression of the officer's manner and how they were left feeling, the latter included items such as 'feel like hitting the officer' and 'feel like complaining about the officer'. The results clearly indicate that quite small changes in an officer's manner have a marked impact on the way the manner is perceived and how people are left feeling about the officer. This includes how much they would feel like hitting or complaining about the officer. The results also indicated that people perceive an officer's manner in a remarkably similar way regardless of the subgroup they were in (Lions, Students, etc.), or age or gender. The implications for Police Officers involved in roadside interaction and police training are also outlined.

## **BACKGROUND**

This paper is a brief version of a research report prepared for New Zealand Police. Gilmour Consulting was approached by Police to research the area of roadside interactions and to review the current level of training given in this regard. We were approached as the author of this report had conducted research for the former Ministry of Transport on enforcement in the same area. That research provided practical information on manner. This was used as the basis for a training module in a programme which was designed to (and did) lead to a reduction in assaults on officers.

There is research, and large amounts of anecdotal evidence, indicating that the manner used by Police Officers has a significant impact on the outcome of a police officer/citizen interaction. The term 'manner' refers to the combined interaction of verbal and non-verbal behaviour that result in a person's actions being perceived in a certain way. In some situations the same words may be used but the way they are said can determine how manner is perceived. For instance a request "Could I see your driver's licence please?" can be said in a way that creates the impression of a polite and friendly manner. However, if an emphasis is put on certain words or if pauses are left

between some of the words (e.g. between "licence" and "please") the same words can be used to convey an aggressive or a bored/cynical manner.

While the impression of 'manner' that is created can stem largely from the non-verbal behaviour; the most common situation is for the verbal and non-verbal behaviours to be congruent. For instance a person who is being pleasant and polite verbally is also likely to communicate pleasantness and politeness non-verbally. Equally, a person who is aggressive verbally is likely to be aggressive non-verbally.

The specific objectives of this research were to enable the following questions to be answered:

- *What manner/behaviour do people expect Police Officers to display in roadside interactions and how do they expect this manner/behaviour will leave them feeling?*
- *How important is the Police Officer's manner in road policing interactions?*
- *Does the Police Officer's manner influence all groups of people or are some groups unable to be influenced?*
- *Do certain types of Police Officer's manner elicit a more positive response from the driver?*
- *Does a driver's expectation of how a Police Officer will behave affect the driver's response to the officer?*
- *Does the Police Officer's manner make a difference to how much the driver feels like hitting the officer or complaining about the officer's behaviour?*

[Note: the major report also addressed six additional questions]

## **METHOD**

The research involved showing groups of people a series of brief video clips of a Police Officer using different manners while issuing a speeding infringement notice. The video clips were all filmed from the driver's perspective and participants were asked to imagine that they were the driver. After each scene was shown participants completed two brief rating scales. The first scale assessed aspects of manner e.g. polite to impolite, professional to unprofessional, etc. The second scale assessed participants' feelings about the Police Officer's manner, e.g. they were asked to indicate the extent that the Police Officer's manner would make them feel: angry, upset, like hitting the officer, etc.

A total of 296 people participated in the research. They were from four different groups: High School Students, Lions Club Members, Police Recruits and Prisoners. Prior to watching any of the video clips participants completed a background information sheet that collected data on age, gender, etc., they also completed the same two rating scales that were used after each of the

video clips, on the basis of how they expected a Police Officer's manner would be if they were stopped for doing 64 kph in a 50kph zone, and how they expected the officer's manner would leave them feeling.

## RESULTS

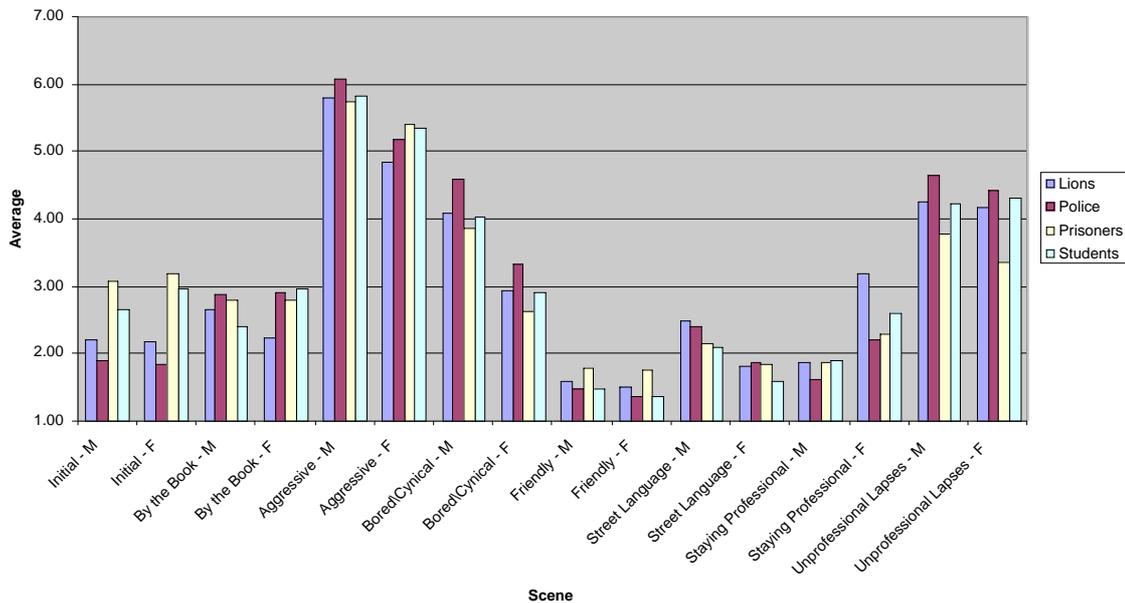
The Manner scale had seven items in it and the Feeling scale had five. To assist in interpretation, an overall score was produced for each of the two scales on each video scene. These overall Manner and overall Feeling scales were calculated by obtaining the means for each item on the scale and then calculating an overall average of those means.

Chart 1 shows these overall ratings. The column labelled 'Initial M' gives the overall averages for the initial ratings that participants gave on the Manner scale items. The column labelled 'Initial F' gives the overall averages for the initial ratings that participants gave on the Feeling scale items. The column labelled 'By the Book M' gives participants overall averages of the Manner items on the By the Book scene. The column labelled 'By the Book F' gives the participants overall averages of the Feelings items for the By the Book scene, etc.

The lower the score the more positive the result is, and the higher the score the more negative the result is. Low scores on the Manner scale therefore indicate that the officer would have been viewed as professional, courteous, polite, etc; whereas high scores indicate that the officer would have been viewed as unprofessional, rude, impolite, etc. High scores on the Feelings scale indicate that the participants felt angry, upset, like hitting the officer, etc; whereas low scores indicate that the participants did not feel angry, upset, etc. Levels of statistical significance are not shown on the charts. However, most differences between scores of .5 or larger were statistically significant and all differences of 1 or more are significant at the  $p > .001$  level.

From Chart 1 it can clearly be seen that the biggest differences in ratings (i.e. scores) occurred across the different scenes (e.g. between the Aggressive and the Friendly scenes), rather than between the groups (i.e. between the Lions, Students, Prisoners and Police Recruits). Furthermore, any scene that was rated negatively by one group, such as Lions, was also rated negatively by all of the groups. For instance, all groups rated the Aggressive scene most negatively, followed by the Unprofessional Lapses scene, and the Bored Cynical scene. All groups rated the Friendly scene as the most positive. While there were some differences between the groups across the different scenes, the overall results strongly indicate that Manner is perceived in a very similar way by Lions Club Members, High School Students, Prisoners and Police Recruits.

Chart 1 - Overall Averages



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The Feelings that participants had towards a particular scene were also remarkably similar, regardless of whether the participants were a member of the Lions, Students, Prisoners or Police Recruits group. This indicates that not only do different groups of people perceive Manner in a very similar way; their Feelings towards the Manner that the officer uses are also very similar.

Chart 1 also shows another key finding which is that, not surprisingly, there is a strong link between people's perceptions of Manner and the Feelings that a particular Manner invokes. For instance the Aggressive scene was perceived as the most negative by all groups and all groups indicated that it generated the most negative feelings within them. The exact opposite occurred with the Friendly scene.

While the biggest differences that are shown in Chart 1 occur from scene to scene, there are smaller, but still statistically significant, differences that

occurred between the groups. The biggest difference between the groups was on their Initial Ratings. Police Recruits Initial Ratings were slightly more positive than Lions on both the Manner and Feelings scale, and the overall ratings of both groups indicates that they have a very high expectation of how officers will behave as the average was close to two on a seven point scale. Prisoners' initial ratings were significantly less positive as their average was just over three. Even so, the initial ratings by Prisoners, which indicate how they would expect an officer to behave and leave them feeling was still clearly on the positive side of the scale.

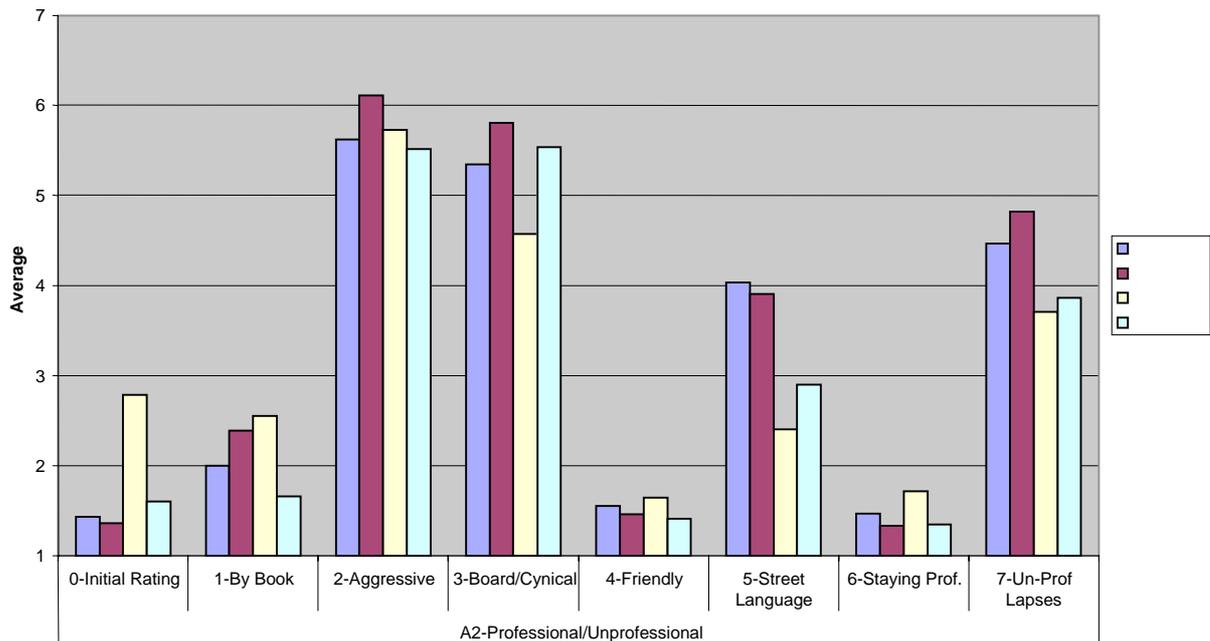
The Police Recruits were the most offended by the negative scenes because their scores were the highest of any group for the Aggressive, Professional Lapses and Bored/Cynical scenes. It is probable that the reason the Police Recruits gave such high (negative) ratings to the negative scenes, is because it was so different to their expectations of how a Police Officer would behave. From a psychological point of view, the greater the discrepancy between a subject's expectations and the actuality of the situation, the greater the psychological impact.

This interaction between expectations and psychological impact is frequently seen in the service industry. For instance if people take a film in to a one hour photo processing outlet at 9am and cannot get the photos back until 1pm, they are likely to feel annoyed and feel like complaining. However, if they took their photos to a same day processing outlet at 9am and then found they could get their photos at 1pm they would not feel annoyed, or feel like complaining. Indeed, they are likely to feel pleased. In both examples the level of service delivered is identical but because the people's expectations are different the psychological impact is significantly different.

The parallels for road side interactions are important. If drivers expect a Police Officer to be polite and professional and they are confronted by one who is unprofessional and rude; then they will feel more annoyed and more like complaining than drivers who have a much lower expectation of Police Officers.

In this brief report it is not possible to give a detailed item analysis however, there were a number of findings that are definitely worthy of comment because they either have important implications for roadside interactions or they highlight the subtleties of the impact of manner.

Chart 2- Manner: Professional/Unprofessional by Subgroup

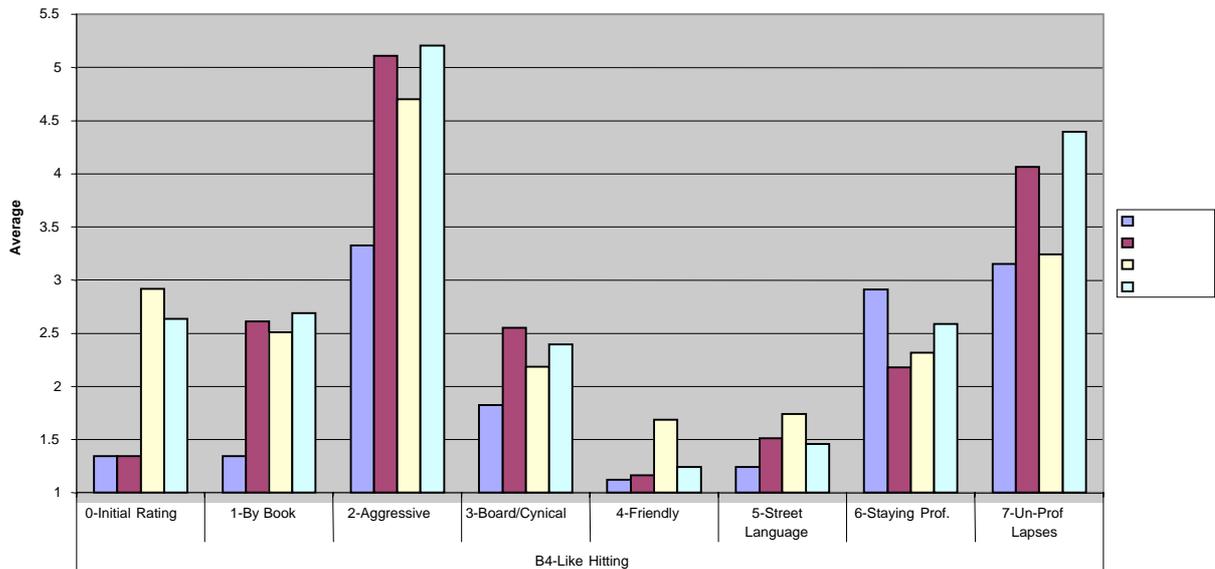


An example of the latter can be seen in Chart 2 which shows the average scores for the Professional/Unprofessional item. The ratings by the Lions and Police Recruits on the Street Language scene indicated that both groups viewed the scene as unprofessional, and yet the overall ratings for this scene for both of these groups were reasonably positive. The explanation for this apparent discrepancy could be seen from the other item ratings of this scene which are not shown here but were a lot more positive. These showed that the Street Language scene was viewed as Friendly by all groups, including the Lions and Police Recruits.

It would therefore seem that comments such as "Gooday mate", "Who owns the wheels", "What do you do for a crust mate" and calling the driver "Pete" (as opposed to Mr Smith or even Peter); were viewed as unprofessional by Lions and Police Recruits. However, the overall manner in which it was said created a friendly impression which obviously negated the unprofessional aspects.

Chart 2 also shows that the Students' ratings of the Street Language scene, when compared with their initial rating, indicate that they viewed the officer's behaviour as considerably less professional than they expected. However the Prisoners rating indicates that the scene was viewed as slightly more professional than they expected it to be.

Chart 3 - Feelings: Like Hitting the Officer by Subgroup



An excellent example of just how marked the impact can be on how people can be left feeling can be seen in Chart 3 this which shows how much the participants would feel like hitting the officer. The initial ratings indicate that the Lions and Police Recruits would not expect the officer's behaviour to leave them feeling like hitting the officer. Prisoners initial ratings were considerably higher, as were students, although the average for both groups was below the mid-point on the seven point scale. However, the feelings of wanting to hit the officer skyrocketed for all groups on the Aggressive scene. In this regard it should be noted that while the ratings given by Lions did substantially increase their 'Feeling like Hitting' score was still just below mid way on a seven point scale. On the other hand Police Recruits, Students and Prisoners gave ratings that were much higher than the Lions, indicating that they quite strongly felt like hitting the officer. These results clearly show that the manner officers use does have a marked impact on how likely people are to feel like hitting them.

## DISCUSSION

In the research objectives section of this report a series of specific questions that this research aimed to answer were outlined. These questions and the answers to them are discussed one by one below.

## **What manner/behaviour do people expect Police Officers to display in roadside interactions and how do they expect this manner to leave them feeling?**

The answer to this question can be seen from two components of the results. The first is from the initial ratings that participants made prior to viewing any of the scenes and the second is to look at which scenes most closely matched the initial ratings.

The initial ratings showed that overall people have high expectations of how they expect an officer will behave and leave them feeling in a roadside interaction. The finding that Police Recruits and Lions had more positive expectations than Students or Prisoners is not intuitively surprising, but the overall levels of positivity of all groups is. This is especially so given the amount of recent negative media coverage directed at Police over speed enforcement.

The second method for assessing people's expectations, by looking at which scenes most closely matched participants initial ratings, also demonstrates that people have high expectations. The By the Book scene was the closest for Students and Prisoners and the scene showing the officer Staying Professional, when the driver was being rude and abusive, was closest for the Police Recruits and Lions.

The finding that people have positive expectations of how officers will behave in roadside interactions and how they would be left feeling is the one area where there were significant differences between this research and the previous research for the old MOT. People's expectations of how Traffic Officers would behave, in the early 1980's, were considerably more negative. Indeed, the scene that was the closest to people's initial ratings in that research was the Bored/Cynical scene.

While the finding that people have high expectations is very encouraging from an overall Police public relations point of view, it comes with a 'Catch 22'. The catch is that it makes it very difficult for an individual officer to behave in a manner that is significantly better than a member of the public expects. This was particularly true for Police Recruits and Lions, as even the most positive scenes only received ratings slightly better than the initial ratings. On the other hand groups with the lowest expectations (Prisoners and Students) are the ones that are easiest for individual officers to impress.

## **How important is the Officer's manner in road policing interactions?**

The results clearly show that an officer's manner has a huge impact in roadside interactions. Relatively small changes in behaviour generated highly significant changes in ratings by all groups. The changes in manner not only altered people's perception of aspects such as how polite, courteous and professional the officer was, they also directly impacted on how people felt. The negative scenes left all groups feeling far more: angry, annoyed, like complaining and like hitting the officer than the positive scenes.

## **Does the Police Officer's manner influence all groups or are some groups unable to be influenced?**

Intuitively it could be easy to believe that some groups of people, such as Prisoners, could have such a negative view of Police that no matter how an officer behaved towards them they would still rate the officer negatively. This research strongly refutes such a belief. All people changed their ratings significantly across the different scenes. Furthermore, the additional analysis shown in the Police report indicated that even when people were grouped on a different basis the same patterns of responding occurred (e.g. when people were grouped on the basis of gender, age and ethnic group).

## **Do certain types of Police Officers' manner elicit a more positive response by the driver?**

The scene that received the most positive results for all participants, regardless of whether they were grouped by age, gender or by Lions, Students, Prisoners and Police Recruits, was the Friendly scene. The difference in ratings for the Friendly scene and the Aggressive scene which all people rated as the most negative was massive. On average it represented a movement of approximately four points on a seven point scale for the majority of people.

The Friendly scene was not, however, the only scene that was viewed positively. The Street Language and Staying Professional also received positive ratings, and the differences in ratings between these scenes and the Aggressive and Unprofessional Lapses scenes were very large.

The results also showed that not only do different manners elicit a more positive or negative response by drivers, but that drivers/people are quite discerning in how they judge a particular manner. This was demonstrated by the fact that Lions and Police, and to a lesser degree Students, did not consider the officer in the Street Language scene to be behaving professionally, but they still considered the manner to be friendly and overall gave the scene positive ratings. The implications of this finding for Police

Officers doing road safety work is that quite small changes in their manner will have a substantial impact on how positively or negatively they are viewed.

### **Does a driver's expectation of how a Police Officer will behave affect the driver's response to the Officer?**

The results indicate that there is a very strong relationship between drivers' expectations of how an officer will behave and their response to the manner that the officer displays. What happens is that when people have high expectations of how the officer will behave, they are more horrified and upset when the officer behaves poorly. However, when they have high expectations and the officer behaves well the psychological impact is not great as it is just like they expected it to be.

The exact opposite occurs when people have very low expectations of how an officer will behave. When an officer does behave poorly they are not particularly horrified as it fits with their expectations. However, they are impressed with the positive scenes as these are so different from what they had expected.

The link between people's expectations and how they respond to a Police Officer's manner has two very important practical implications for road policing. The first is that it suggests that complaints about an officer's manner/behaviour are more likely to come from people who have positive expectations of how officers will behave, because they feel most offended!

The second implication is that officers will have the most positive psychological impact when they behave in a friendly/professional manner to people who least expect it. This finding is entirely consistent with the informal feedback that the author has received from officers over many years. Most officers can give examples of times when they have dealt professionally with an offender who is well known to the Police, and could easily have been expected to be 'difficult', and yet the interaction passed without incident.

The message for Police Officers from these findings is therefore quite simple. It is essential that they behave in a friendly/professional manner with all of the people they deal with. This in turn will significantly reduce the likelihood of people complaining about them and it will enable them to have the most positive influence over people who they may expect to be difficult.

### **Does the Police Officer's manner make a difference to how much the driver feels like hitting the Officer?**

The results very clearly show that a Police Officer's manner has a huge impact on how much drivers feel like hitting the officer. As an indication of just how huge the impact is, there was a difference of 4 points on the seven point scale

in how much like hitting the officer Students and Police Recruits felt between the Friendly and the Aggressive scenes.

The implications of this for Police involved in road policing are simple. The manner they use has a marked impact on how much drivers feel like hitting them. Furthermore, when they use a professional approach, especially one that is both professional and friendly, then the drivers they are dealing with are very unlikely to feel like hitting them. While feeling like hitting would often not be followed up with actually hitting, what could be counted on is that when a person does not feel like hitting they would be very unlikely to assault the officer!