The ruling from the field stands? Shedding light on officers' interpretations of body-worn cameras footage

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Despite extensive research on the expanding use of body-worn cameras (BWCs) in law enforcement, the perceived evidentiary value of the resulting images remains unclear. Previous studies have shown that images do not inherently 'speak for themselves', emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of the information these technologies may offer to different viewers. This study examines, through semi-structured interviews and video elicitation with 43 officers from a Body-Worn Camera pilot program in Quebec, Canada, how police officers interpret BWC footage and their beliefs about how citizens might interpret the same video. It aims to better understand how their distinctive police knowledge may shape their perceptions. The findings suggest that officers interpret situations based on their professional training and experiences, which provide them a 'police lens' to understand police intervention images. However, this lens is not uniform, as interpretations of certain sequences of the depicted events vary among the surveyed police officers. The findings also point to a prevailing sense of 'naïve realism', with some officers viewing the images as self-explanatory, while others believe that citizens would need context to fully comprehend the footage and overcome their biases. This study helps us understand how people and occupational cultures interpret BWC footage. It reminds us to be careful about using these images as solid evidence, whether in court or when shared with the public.

Keywords: police body-worn cameras; video elicitation, police knowledge

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Introduction

A January 2023 YouGov poll of 1,000 U.S. adult citizens reported that 77% of men and 54% of women say they understand the rules of NFL football 'very well' or 'somewhat well.' This was the highest proportion among the ten professional sports surveyed (Sanders and Orth, 2023). Despite this, NFL commentators on Fox Sports frequently turn to Mike Pereira, a former Supervisor and Vice-President of Officiating, to explain

the arcane rules during the review of game footage from several 4K cameras. This is because there are still intricacies that benefit from being explained in order for the fans to better understand the decision made by NFL officials, even if this does not always change their opinion.

In the last decades, the media have given more and more attention to police use of force incidents due to the availability of various recordings of police intervention, leading many citizens to criticize the calls made by police officers on the field (Weitzer, 2015). They however most likely did so without any live assistance from specialist commentator and with knowledge of the police use of force rules and intricacies of unknown scope.

Body-worn cameras (BWCs) worn by police officers offer one of those recordings of police intervention, as their implementation in police departments have become more common over the years. This is especially true in the United States, where there have been cases of people dying during police actions (Hyland, 2018; Saulnier & Abbatangelo, 2024; White & Malm, 2020). As calls for more transparency from the police have increased, more research has been done to understand how these technologies affect society. Many studies have looked at how BWCs change the way police officers or citizens behave during interactions – whether regarding the use of force, arrest activities, or resistance or assault against an officer – (Lum et al., 2020), or at the perception and reception of BWCs within law enforcement agencies, the justice system or the public (Gaub et al., 2021).

While the now lush literature tends to show mixed findings regarding the impact of BWC on social interactions between police officers and citizens (Lum et al., 2020; Petersen & Lu, 2023) and the opinions about the deployment of such technologies (Sousa et al., 2018; White & Malm, 2020), there are few studies on how the images

created by cameras can also (and above all) be used to document a police intervention and provide evidence. Few authors deplore the fact that "we still lack an understanding of what information these technologies provide viewers (in the sense of what they communicate to various audiences and what these audiences infer from the records that various BWC technologies create)" (Newell, 2021, p. 499) (see also Lum et al., 2019; Petersen et al., 2023). This question is particularly interesting because the few available studies suggest that, contrary to popular belief, images do not "speak for themselves."

This study thus aims at contributing to such field of research by investigating how police officers interpret a BWC footage where police officers used force against a citizen, in order to better understand how police knowledge may provide a distinctive lens through which images are looked at. This is based on semi-structured interviews and video elicitations of an entire interaction involving use-of-force incident with 43 police officers participating in BWC pilot program in Quebec, Canada. Video elicitations are well suited to understand misunderstanding and complex decision-making processes (Henry & Fetters, 2012). It has been used to study the subtleties of thought process during interactions with the public filmed with BWCs in one Canadian city (Campeau & Keesman, 2024).

Literature review

Body-worn cameras as providers of video evidence

While some may find the appeal of introducing BWCs in law enforcement agencies in their ability to influence the behaviours of police officers or citizens during an encounter (Lum et al., 2020), many advocates of BWCs also value the evidentiary worth of the footage these cameras provide (Jones et al., 2017; Lum et al., 2019; Petersen et al., 2023; Saulnier & Abbatangelo, 2024). Such evidentiary value has been

previously identified as one of the most common reasons for adopting BWCs by US law enforcement agencies (Hyland, 2018), as it may well have the ability to both 'implicate and exonerate' (White et al., 2021, p. 9).

For example, in legal cases, Body Worn Cameras (BWCs) can give helpful visuals that assist those making decisions. These images can aid police officers and prosecutors by offering more concrete evidence to identify and prove a crime. They can also better portray the victim's distress and the suspect's behaviour when police arrived, compared to just relying on testimonies from officers, victims, or suspects (Petersen & Lu, 2023; Pezdek, 2022; Vakhitova et al., 2023). Strong video evidence could lead to quicker decisions by judges or jurors and suspects might plead guilty more often, saving processing time (Gaub et al., 2021). In this regard, Petersen and Lu (2023) found a significant effect of BWCs on convictions and guilty pleas in domestic violence cases. Therefore, Body Worn Camera (BWC) footage could provide improved the quality of evidence against suspects.

Conversely, BWC footage could uphold individual rights and assist citizens who have been victims of improper police practices or wrongful charges and convictions (Sandhu, 2019; Todak et al., 2024). Historically, it has been difficult for senior managers, courts, and the public to understand how police officers interact with individuals they stop, question, or arrest (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997). However, the proliferation of BWCs and other portable devices equipped with cameras have considerably changed the scope of the visibility of police work in the last decades (Brucato, 2015; Fan, 2019). BWCs footage could now provide video evidence of unethical or non-standard police officers' behaviour, whether it is for the court, for administrative or deontological procedures, or for the public, representing greater police

transparency and accountability (Lum et al., 2019; Saulnier & Abbatangelo, 2024; White & Malm, 2020).

Still, despite the wealth of articles on the use of BWCs in policing, some authors deplore the lack of research attention given to the evidentiary value of BWC footage, both perceived and empirically measured (Gaub et al., 2021; Lum et al., 2019; Petersen et al., 2023). The interpretation of BWCs video by various stakeholders - such as judges, jurors, senior police managers, police officers, or citizens - has received less attention compared to the numerous empirical studies on the effects of BWCs on police-citizen encounters. Nevertheless, the available literature points to emerging issues and questions about such endeavour that may impact how BWCs footages are used and understood in the justice system and public space (Newell, 2021; Petersen et al., 2023).

Whose eyes to believe?

Video evidence, whether from a BWC or another source, possesses significant persuasive power. It gives viewers the impression of directly experiencing an event and collecting relevant information, enabling them to form their own judgments (Granot et al., 2018). Videos are often thought of as complete depictions of events that would be understood in the same manner regardless of who watches, with little to no questioning of the conditions underlying the images production (Boivin et al., 2020; Brucato, 2015; Granot et al., 2018; Morrison, 2017). Advocates of BWCs often believe that video footage provides more objective or truthful information than conflicting accounts of an event, like in the famous Scott v. Harris case (2007).

The Scott v. Harris case (2007), presented before the U.S. Supreme Court, involves a high-speed car chase between officer Scott and Harris, whose conduct was deemed dangerous and who was ignoring police signals to stop. During the chase, Scott

successfully made a maneuver to stop the suspect's vehicle, causing Harris to lose control and resulting in a crash that left him permanently paralyzed. Harris later sued Scott, saying the move was too risky considering the small threat he posed and arguing that the use of force was excessive in the situation. What makes this case unique is that a dashboard camera recorded the high-speed chase from beginning to end. While previous Court sided with Harris and held that officer Scott's maneuver was unreasonable, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the decision and ruled that his actions were reasonable under the circumstances.

To reach their decision, Justices said the video showed that Harris was a significant threat, and that officer Scott acted appropriately (Boivin et al., 2020). They believed – except for Justice Stevens – that '*no reasonable jury* could have believed [the respondent's version].' (*emphasis added*) (Kahan et al., 2009), meaning that nobody could view the footage as anything other than what they have themselves seen. They thus 'proclaimed that a video recording of a public-police encounter "corroborates or lays aside subjective impressions for objective facts" '(Newell, 2021, p. 500).

The issue with this statement regarding the interpretation of video evidence is that both minority viewpoints in the Scott v. Harris case (i.e. those of the lower courts and Justice Stevens) and research have discredited the validity of such a position (Birck, 2018). Kahan and his colleagues (2009) indeed showed the dashboard camera footage to 1,350 Americans and surveyed them about their reading of the events. While most respondents (74%) did interpret the events like the majority of the Justices in the case, the authors also found that the interpretation of the event was systematically associated with some individual characteristics like race, level of incomes, living area and political opinion (liberals or democrats). Some individuals, such as Justice Stevens, assigned

more blame to the officer who executed the hazardous maneuver, deeming his actions improper.

Justices have not taken into consideration that images are in fact not neutral, nor do they speak for themselves. This phenomenon is associated with naïve realism - the belief that 'that we see the world in an objective, neutral manner [and] that other reasonable people view the world in the same way we do' (Birck, 2018, p. 168). Naïve realism simultaneously encompasses our ease to detect the influence of people's beliefs when they share different interpretations than us, and our difficulty to identify how our owns beliefs may influence our interpretation of an event (Kahan et al., 2009). What we see and the meaning given to a video is therefore inherently shaped by our individual and cultural ways of seeing the world around us (Birck, 2018). In a similar way, information gaps caused by what we do not see or know about the situation going on in a video have a great chance of being filled with our own knowledge, experiences and beliefs acting as a lens (Birck, 2018). Thus, understanding how different social groups interpret BWC footage is crucial to assessing its potential use as evidence. However, we currently know little about how some of these groups, especially police officers, interpret BWCs footage through their unique knowledge.

Viewing BWCs footage through a police lens

Police officers acquire and later share the necessary occupational knowledge and skills to perform their routine tasks, maintain order, and enforce the law. They are usually taught when they are allowed to use force by law. In Canada, police officers who are acting on reasonable grounds and in accordance with the principles of proportionality, necessity and reasonableness, as specified in the case of R. v. Nasogaluak (2010), are authorized to use force under the Criminal Code (1985). The appropriateness of an officer's use of force can be assessed using the criteria of the U.S. Supreme Court

decision of Graham v. Connor (1989), which stated that:

> the "reasonableness" of a particular use of force must be judged from the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene, and its calculus must embody an allowance for the fact that police officers are often forced to make split-second decisions about the amount of force necessary in a particular situation. (p.387)

In other words, the standard of conduct for the appropriate use of force is not that of excellence, but that of the average officer in the same circumstances (Baldwin et al., 2022).

Police officers know these rules better than most people (Pezdek et al., 2024). In Canada, like in other countries, police academies and organizations train their officers and standardize practices using use-of-force models or continuums. These models offer steps, signs to watch for, and choices to assist officers in their ongoing evaluation of the situation and their decision-making process. They may instruct officers to pay particular attention to the level of threat perceived, the surrounding environment, the number of persons involved – both citizens and police officers –, the subject's conditions, behaviour and background, the urgency to act and other tactical considerations (Boivin et al., 2020; Terrill & Paoline, 2013). Police officers also share problem-solving, perceptual, decision-making and use-of-force skills that enable them to assess and respond effectively to risky situations (Bennell et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2024). Lastly, police officers in Canada are trained to utilize effective, respectful communication tactics and de-escalation techniques when interacting with citizens, providing them with alternative strategies to using force when dealing with potentially threatening individuals in situations where it may not be necessary (Bennell et al., 2022).

Unsurprisingly, police knowledge can influence how officers interpret BWC footage. Because of their training and experience, officers may "have a decision-making mental model [that] is likely to produce cognitive differences between police officers and civilians in how they encode […] what transpires in a use-of-force incident" (Pezdek et al., 2024, p. 3). Boivin and his colleagues (2017, 2020) demonstrated that images may be interpreted differently by experienced police officers, novice police officers, police recruits, and citizens. After watching a video of police using force against a suspect, citizens did not agree with the police actions, while most experienced, new, and future police officers thought it was right. The different views were mainly due to how threatening they thought the suspect in the video was. The results also show that police officers at different career stages may see events differently, and people with some police knowledge interpret a police intervention video differently from those without any. Due to their training, police actors would be better at forming a mental representation of the situation and filling the gaps in the footage (Boivin et al., 2017). While these studies are indeed valuable, they offer minimal detail on how police officers decode the footage of an intervention.

Current study

Footage from BWCs is believed to enhance police transparency and accountability by supporting court decisions in cases where the behaviour of a police officer, suspect, victim, or third party is recorded. However, previous work has highlighted how video evidence is not free of (re)interpretation from different groups and individuals. BWCs images, like any other video, must be interpreted. People make sense of what they see according to multiple factors such as subjectivity, the framing of the footage (i.e. see literature on the perspective bias), available information and the larger social context in which images are watched (Newell, 2021). If the available literature tends to show that

perspective or cultural biases may both come into play in the assessment of the legitimacy of a police officer's use of force captured by a camera (Boivin et al., 2020; Kahan et al., 2009; Pezdek et al., 2024), we still have limited knowledge about the underlying mechanisms that produce these effects, and what specific viewers, especially police officers, do or do not perceive in a given BWC footage (Petersen et al., 2023).

The aim of the current study is to describe how police officers interpret BWC footage in which an officer used force against a citizen, in order to get a better understanding of how police knowledge and skills may provide a distinctive lens through which images are looked at. On one hand, it explores what officers focus on in such footage, deepening what they see (or believe to see) and do not see in the footage that they believe could be relevant information to fully understand the footage. Additionally, to further explore the naïve realism often associated with viewing BWC footage, this study examines how police officers believe average citizens would interpret the same BWC footage they have viewed. This study adds depth to prior research by offering a more detailed and nuanced understanding of how police officers interpret BWC footage. It does not look at *how much* officers may support a police intervention in a video, but at *what* do they see (or believe to see) in it. It also expands on previous qualitative studies by focusing not on broad opinions, beliefs or hypotheses, but providing access to interpretative processes in very specific, concrete case.

Material and methods

Participants

In 2021, the Quebec provincial police (i.e. Sûreté du Québec) initiated a BWC pilot program in four of its departments across the province. To assess the reception and impact of the BWCs, we conducted individual interviews with the 46 officers who

participated in the pilot program. This research was approved by the research ethic committee of [University] (certificate number). The interview we report here were from the second wave, at the conclusion of the program. All of the officers received an email invitation from the research team and accepted to participate to the interviews. For the sake of the current study, a subset of 43 police officers were shown the same BWC footage during their interview. Indeed, three of the 46 participants did not have the chance to watch the video during the interview, mostly because of a time constraint. Those participants were thus excluded from the sample.

Table 1: Demographics of the participants

Characteristics	**Mean (Std)**	**N (%)**
Sex		
Male	---	30 (70)
Female	---	13 (30)
Police function		
Patrol officer	---	41 (95)
Patrol officer & 1st level supervisor	---	2 (5)
Police department		
Police dept.1	---	11 (26)
Police dept.2	---	10 (23)
Police dept.3	---	11 (26)
Police dept.4	---	11 (26)
Age	32.7 (5.3)	
Years of police experience	8.5 (5.0)	

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the interviewed police officers. The majority of our sample are men (70%) who were serving as patrol officers (95%) at the time of the interview. On average, participants were in their early thirties, with a mean of 8.5 years of experience in the force when interviewed.

Interviews and video elicitation

This study relies on semi-structured individual interviews. These were conducted via

videoconference from October 2021 to June 2022 by a single interviewer. In line with many recent publications on the benefits of remote data collection (Archibald et al., 2019; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), the use of virtual interviews has proved beneficial as it allowed to easily meet with participants at a time that best suited their schedule and to complete multiple interviews in a short period of time. The interviews lasted in average 52 minutes (Std = 17), with the shortest one lasting 20 minutes and the longest one, 1h52. At the end of each interview, video elicitation was used to access the police officers' interpretation of a BWC footage. That is the part we are presenting here.

Video elicitation combines the use of visual techniques (i.e. the analysis of a video) and narratives to explore participants' interpretation of an event. Such method is particularly relevant to reveal how police officers 'read' a situation, gather information about people's behaviour and intentions and make sense of a police officer's (re)actions (Keesman, 2022, 2023). Each respondent discussed with the interviewer after viewing a 1:15 minute long police BWC video where force was used. That was a realistic training video filmed by a crew for the provincial police academy. The video depicted an intervention of two police officers on a call for domestic violence, with both a man (suspect) and a woman (victim) screaming at each other outside of their house. As officers approach the scene and engage with the suspect, he becomes aggressive and gets closer to the officer. The officer then uses an ambiguous level of force (see results below) to control the suspect, take him to the ground, and handcuff him. The video ends with the officer on top of the suspect, arresting him. After watching the video once, participants were encouraged to comment and reflect on the police intervention they just saw. As defined in the interview protocol, the interviewer asked participants if they saw anything special that specifically triggered their attention. Conversely, they were also asked whether they think anything did not come through by the BWC during the

intervention. Lastly, they were asked to share their views on whether the public would understand and interpret the footage in the same way as they do if it were released.

Analytical strategy

Manual transcripts from audio recordings were integrated into Dedoose®, a qualitative data management and analysis software (see Salmona et al., 2019), to perform a thematic content analysis seeking to derive meaning from the participants' discourse (Miles et al., 2014). Once the excerpts following the presentation of the BWC footage were manually spotted in the transcripts, an inductive approach was first used by the research team to analyse each interview and propose first-level descriptive and *in vivo* codes. Then, a cohesive coding grid was developed based on both these codes and common themes related to police use of force (e.g. tactical considerations). A final code was created to compile participants' opinions on the potential public understanding of the BWC footage if it were to be released. This coding grid was then manually applied to each transcript to emphasize broader trends and differing interpretations. Two coders coded all transcripts for that video elicitation question. They resolved any initial disagreements to reach a consensus on all items.

Results

Table 2 highlights the three major aspects of the footage on which participants focused during video elicitation. The threatening and resisting subject's behaviour (86%), the appropriate actions of the police officers (91%) and the hard-to-grasp situational and tactical considerations characterizing the intervention (77%) were discussed by most police officers interviewed. The depth offered by the qualitative nature of our data allows us to break down in greater detail how participants interpreted each of those themes in the BWC footage.

Table 2: Distribution of themes and sub-themes among participants

Themes & Codes	**N (%)***
Threatening and resisting subject's behaviour	*37 (86)*
Threat and resistance to the police officer	36 (84)
Threat to the victim	15 (35)
Appropriate police officers' behaviour	*39 (91)*
Respectful communication and clear orders	23 (51)
Appropriate use of force	35 (81)
Hard-to-grasp tactical considerations	*33 (77)*
Context prior to the intervention	17 (40)
Potential presence of a weapon	12 (28)
Partner's behaviour and collaboration	18 (42)

*Most participants identified more than one aspect they focused on after watching the video, which explains why the total percentage may be higher than 100.

Threatening and resisting subject's behaviour

For 37 of the 43 participants (86%), the first thing that they mentioned after viewing the BWC footage was that it was clear for them that the subject arrested represented some form of threat (to the officers or the alleged victim) and resistance throughout the police intervention they have viewed. 36 Participants (84%) explained in a consistent way having seen a very aggressive person who refused to cooperate when ordered to do so by officers. A respondent said:

> What do we see in this video? We see an aggressive individual who doesn't listen to clear police orders, […] we see the escalation that led to this. We see aggression. We see the warning signs of an assault. (Male, 10.5 years of policing experience)[1]

Participants described the subject as aggressive in his gestures, such as raising his fist,

[1] For every quote, participants are identified based on their gender and years of police experience.

posture, and voice, including screaming at officers. However, some also indicated recognition of 'warning signs of an assault' (see quote above) or 'signs of aggression' (Female, 4.5 years of policing experience). In doing so, they highlighted their expectation that the subject was going to present an immediate threat that officers needed to swiftly thwart.

Participants who reported the threatening suspect's behaviour to the police also highlighted his resistance level during the police intervention. For example, a participant referred to the Use of Force situational model taught to all Quebec police officers to talk about such resistance, saying that 'the subject was really in active resistance' (Male, 6 years). Through his assessment of the subject's behaviour, this participant demonstrates the use of specific police knowledge on how to characterize or label citizens' behaviour (i.e. 'in active resistance'). The subject was thus perceived as a threat not only because of his aggressive behaviour, but also due to his lack of change in behaviour upon the officers' arrival and his refusal to cooperate.

The BWC video shows the subject walking towards the police aggressively, even after warnings. Up to this point, all participants agree on what they saw regarding the subject's threatening behaviour. But, when it comes to this part of the video, their agreement starts to waver. They all saw the subject charging at the officer, but their views on whether the subject was likely to attack the officer wearing the BWC are less unanimous[2], with some believing that the latter was hit by the man while others were

[2] The BWC footage alone was unclear as to whether the officer was hit or not, in a similar way to what has been used in the experiment from the New York Times team of journalists (see https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/04/01/us/police-bodycam-video.html).

not sure if he was. Table 3 provides examples of the ambivalence of participants regarding how the scene unfolded.

Table 3: Examples of ambivalence about the level of aggression toward the officers

Interpretation	Excerpts	Participant
The officer was probably hit by the suspect.	*'The camera shows the use of force. You can see that… **you can see that the police officer was hit**.'*	Male, 4.5 years
	*'**The police officer was hit once**, on one occasion. After that, well, he controls [the subject].'*	Male, 10 years
	*'[The subject] runs towards the officer, **seems to hit him once**, comes back, pushes him, then comes back a second time. […]'*	Male, 8 years
The officer was probably not hit by the suspect.	*'It's certain that someone somewhere will come along and question the baton stroke, you know, saying 'But the guy didn't hit him!', because **I think the guy didn't hit him**. Maybe the suspect didn't hit the police officer.'*	Male, 11 years
	*'We can clearly see that the officer was attacked, **but I am not sure if he received a punch** to the face or whatever.'*	Female, 10 years
	*'In the end, the man became aggressive and **tried to hit the police officer.**'*	Male, 5 years

Table 3 suggests that officers with very different levels of experience, both those with 10 years or more and those with 5 years or less, may interpret events similarly or differently, and with varying levels of confidence.

Additionally, after viewing the BWC video, 15 viewers (35%) noted that the person's actions seemed menacing towards the woman at the scene, who they thought was the supposed victim of domestic abuse. They felt there was enough reason to think that the man had attacked or was still attacking the woman, and hence, he needed to be stopped 'to safeguard the victim' (Male, 6 years). One respondent shared:

> **It is easy to see** the couple shouting at each other, and then **the man keeps coming forward, threatening, threatening her**. You understand that there's something going on, a marital dispute, it's not going well. And the

officer is shouting that he's under arrest. You see he's not cooperating. (Male, 4 years)

During the event, several points caught the attention of the 15 participants, indicating an urgent need for action. Some thought they saw injuries on the woman or heard an officer in the video state that the victim was injured. Others noted that the woman's screams suggested she was in distress. Both were seen as signs that the aggressor should be removed from the victim. Several participants focused on the aggressor's physical proximity to the victim and his continued movement towards her despite being arrested. Some stressed the speed with which the aggressor could attack the victim. One participant explained:

> I understand being patient and all [in a situation] where you can take more time in the sense that there's no one in danger. With people that are suicidal, well, that's going to take as long as it takes. It doesn't matter. But in this case, it is an intervention **where [the possible victim] is two meters away from this guy**. And when he decides to take off [and attack her], he won't warn you. And **if he's got anything in his pockets, he can injure her in two seconds. You won't even realize it**. You won't even have your gun out yet. (Male, 3.5 years)

Finally, another participant described the urgent need to intervene, calling for an 'immediate action' (Male, Department 3, 25 years). While this concept may simply refer to a 'quick action' for the neophyte, in the police context, it also refers to a particular approach and tactic used to respond to active threats and draw the attention of the protagonist away from the public (RCMP, 2024). Here again, participants' discourses show that their interpretations of the BWC footage is tainted by their occupational knowledge about police work.

Appropriate police officers' behaviour

After viewing the BWC footage, 39 participants (91%) shared their thoughts on the officers' actions in the video. While some suggested possible improvements for the officer (like using force sooner or giving more specific instructions), everyone agreed that the force used was acceptable and the intervention was handled professionally in this particular case. Two sub-themes emerge from the participants' discourse about how appropriate the officers' behaviour was. First, 23 participants (51%) highlighted that they saw respectful communications and clear orders from the officers to the subject of the intervention.

> We can see that he's giving orders. We can see that he's explaining not to go there, to back up, not to come towards him. **You can clearly see that his requests to the subject are clear and precise**. That makes it correct. (Female, 17 years)

The orders were deemed straightforward and reiterated enough to ensure the subject understood them. Even when facing an aggressive and resistant individual, officers in the video were described as polite, patient, and tolerant. Three participants specifically noted that the officers refrained from insulting the subject despite his behaviour. They incidentally shared their perception that citizens sometimes complain about the language used by officers.

Secondly, 35 participants (81%) deemed the use of force as appropriate in the intervention context, suggesting that they would also use some level of force if faced with a similar scenario. Some participants indicated that this sense of adequacy was tied to the fact that force was a reaction to the threat posed by the subject. They emphasized that the officers did not initiate any physical altercation on their own. A participant said:

> **I think the main thing you see is that the officer never run at him**. You see, it's really the guy who runs towards the police. So, you know, **the officers are really reacting to the person**. That's what people often misunderstand. People think we're offensive, but we're always defensive. We'll never make the first move, in any case, unless there's really... a threat towards the victim. (Male, 2.5 years)

Viewed through the lens of force continuum and use-of-force model, the footage displayed a 'gradual increase in tension' (Male, 8 years) for some participants. It showed how the person's threat level rose, leading to the police responding with greater force, starting from verbal directions to the use of a weapon and physical restraint. Additionally, some viewers felt the police on the scene acted appropriately as their use of force appeared justified. The video did not show any undue force or needless strikes. Here are two examples that clarify this:

> The rest of us are taught to avoid all hand-to-hand combat. That's why the intermediate weapons were brought out. Then, until the suspect surrendered, **I don't see that there was any excessive use of force**. (Female, 7 years)
>
> We see a deployment of the collapsible baton with a strike in the green zone, which is the thigh, **that will probably cause a bruise, but, in the end, it won't cause permanent damage**. (Male, 7.5 years)

These two quotes also reveal an interpretation of events heavily influenced by police knowledge about the use of force. Participants try to understand the officers' behaviour through references to occupational procedures (i.e. 'avoid[ing] hand-to-hand combat') and technicalities (i.e. 'a strike in the green zone') that are mostly unfamiliar to the general public.

However, when discussing the nature of the force used by the officers in the BWC footage, what used to be homogeneous discourses suddenly appear more diverse.

Indeed, Table 4 shows that participants shared at least four different interpretations or inferences of the use-of-force sequence.

Table 4: Examples of varied interpretations of the very nature of the force used in the BWC footage (N=28)

Interpretation	n (%)	Examples of excerpts	Participants
The subject may have been hit with a collapsible baton by the officer wearing the BWC.	17 (61)	*'He falls to the ground holding his thigh, but* ***we don't see that the officer has probably used the baton, which we see afterwards when he's handcuffing the other man****.'*	Male, 2.5 years
The subject may have been hit by a collapsible baton or a kick, by one of the two officers.	5 (18)	*'At one point, [the subject] starts jumping on one leg. That's when I realize that his leg is hurt because he holds on to it. So,* ***I deduce that he's been hit, but with what? I don't know enough. I can't see it. Is it the baton? Did the other officer kick him? Did the officer wearing the BWC man kicked him in the leg?*** *I've no idea.'*	Male, 7 years
The subject may have been controlled with a conducted energy weapon, an OC spray or a firearm, by one of the two officers.	4 (14)	*'I do not know it the cops fired […] I'm not sure what happened to the gentleman there.* ***I don't know if he was shot or tasered or what, it's kind of unclear****.'*	Male, 9 years
The subject may have injured his own leg without any police involvement before being brought to the ground.	2 (7)	*'****You can see that [the subject] fell by himself, that the officer didn't touch his leg****. […] In a case like that, the officer, he's well covered. He could say, "look, I didn't hurt the guy.". The camera footage protects him.'*	Male, 4.5 years

Most participants (n = 17) inferred a police officer used a collapsible baton, as evidenced by the subject's behaviour as he holds on to his thigh and the baton's appearance at the end of the video. Despite not seeing the actual use of force, these cues led them to this conclusion with some certainty. However, eleven other respondents believed they saw had a different course of events.

Five participants believed that an officer struck the subject. However, they were unclear whether it was a baton strike or a kick, and which officer was responsible. Four

others did not perceive a leg strike but questioned if any other intermediate weapon like oleoresin capsicum (OC) spray or conducted energy weapons (CEWs), or even the service weapon, was used. As with the previous group, they showed a less confident interpretation of the events. In the end, two participants unexpectedly said they clearly saw the person hurt his own leg during the event. They did not think the officers were involved or to blame. They felt the officer with the BWC only stepped in to control the situation after the person had fallen from his injury and that he did not use any force before this. These results indicate that while police officers with similar training may agree on their interpretation of the appropriateness of a police intervention shown in BWC footage, they may perceive the sequence of events quite differently.

Hard-to-grasp tactical considerations

The final theme participants focused on after viewing the BWC footage was what we have termed as the difficult-to-understand tactical considerations related to the intervention. Such theme was brought up in interviews by 33 participants (77%) who commented on situational and tactical cues that they feel were unclear from the BWC footage, creating some difficulties to fully make sense of the intervention. Just like police officers in Boivin and colleagues' (2020) study, forty percent (17 participants) expressed difficulty in interpreting the police officers' work without question, as the footage alone does not provide any contextual information prior to the intervention.

> **I don't think there's anything missing here except, of course, context. Who are these people? What's the appeal? Are they intoxicated? We don't know**. Who are they with? And do they have a criminal history? Do officers have the elements, when they arrive, to place the man under arrest? (Male, 3 years)

Such context was believed to be essential to participants, because it clarifies why police officers intervened at first, what happened before they got to the scene, and why did they intervene the way they did. It would also have given useful prior knowledge on the people they were interacting with (e.g. is the subject known to be aggressive or violent against police officers? Does he possess weapons?). Participants also believed that additional background information on the context might have helped them better assess whether the officers in the video targeted the correct individual or if the alleged victim could have also contributed to the incident.

The ambiguous presence of a weapon in the subject's hand was noted by 12 participants (28%), leading to varied interpretations of the video. Some thought they heard one of the officers say that the subject had no visible weapon, while others believed they heard the opposite. Additionally, some participants struggled to definitively determine whether the subject was holding a weapon. A participant shared:

> At one point, I was focusing, trying to see. **I couldn't see if he had anything in his hand. Because that changes our work**. So, there I was wondering, does he have anything in his hand? And then at a certain point, I thought 'Ok, there's nothing in his hands, that's fine'. (Female, 9 years)

Finally, many participants said they would have like to have more information about the second police officer's behaviour in the video (i.e. the one that does not wear a BWC). Many participants said the footage shows good communication between the two officers. However, most of the 18 participants who talked about the partner's actions were worried because the video did not show what he did.

> The only thing I don't like is that **you can't see where the colleague is. Where is he?** Why here? Someone's running into your colleague. I mean, I'd have been the first to jump on him too. **What's he doing? You can't see it.** (Male, 10.5 years)

> Well, **the other one, you know, I don't really know what he was doing**, but he should also have been there to, you know, to assist his colleague. (Male, 5.5 years)

From the viewpoint of the BWC, the officers believed it was impossible to see if the partner engages in any way with the suspect, has displayed or use any intermediate weapon (e.g. OC spray, taser), and is helping or covering the police officer controlling and handcuffing the subject. Participants found it hard to assess the intervention due to the second officer's actions influencing the BWC officer's behaviour.

Citizens' outsider understanding

The last dimension addressed in the interviews that deserves particular attention is the participants' interpretation of the BWC footage and their beliefs about how citizens would understand the same video. In total, almost all participants (n = 40, 93%) shared that the BWC footage could be shown to the public without any risks or need for edits, particularly because it is believed to show the rapid escalation of the intervention, the threatening behaviour of the subject under arrest and the respectful attitude of the police officers involved. The few who expressed some doubts were more hesitating about the relevance, in a broad sense, of showing BWC footage to the public. Among those who were sure it could be shown, two clear trends emerged. Table 5 shows that 20 participants (47%) believed that most citizens would, on their own, easily share their reading of the intervention while the remaining 20 (47%) believed they would need some supporting explanation and contextualisation to do so.

Table 5: Participants' opinion about the potential citizens' understanding of the BWC footage

Theme & Codes	N (%)
Citizen's outsider understanding	40 (93)
Similar understanding of the video for most citizens	20 (47)
Need for supporting explanation and contextualisation	20 (47)

Participants who shared the impression that most citizens would have an understanding of the footage similar to their own believed that there was 'no place to interpretation' (Male, 13 years) or potential misunderstanding of the intervention. A participant shared:

> **I don't see what could be misunderstood here**. The person doesn't listen, then on top of that, decides to rush the policeman who has done nothing about it. (Male, 8 years)

For those participants, the BWC footage showed the essential parts of a relatively obvious sequence of actions: the subject was put under arrest by the officers, he was threatening and resisting to the orders given, he charged the officers who, in response, used an appropriate level of force to control him. A 'normal citizen' (Male, 4 years) or 'someone who is sane or logical' (Male, 11 years) would thus understand the overall intervention as they did, an interpretation very similar to the words used by the Supreme Court in the Scott v. Harris decision (see Kahan et al., 2009).

Conversely, the participants who believed citizens would need some supporting explanation and context highlighted two elements that would prevent them from understanding, on their own, the BWC footage as they did. On the one hand, the uncertainty about the context prior to the intervention and the very nature of the force could be wrongly interpretated by citizens who watch the video and are not 'necessarily familiar' (Male, 7.5 years) with police interventions. A participant detailed:

> "But **I don't know how people can perceive just by seeing the suspect approach**. Suddenly, he's moving away, he's moving closer. He falls to the ground. He holds on to his thigh, it's like... It seems that t**he fact that we can't see what weapon is being used, could perhaps raise ambiguity and questions in people's minds**." (Female, 7 years)

In their view, simple clarifications about what really happened when the subject falls to the ground, the use-of-force model and/or the information in the 911 call (e.g. the reason why the subject is under arrest) would thus be necessary for the public to understand the officers' behaviour through a more police-like lens. However, participants' discourse also includes references to a trend of criticism against police work. They believe explanations would be necessary with the release of the BWC footage because some citizens always dislike police officers, believing that 'they know [the] work better than [officers] do' (Male, 13 years) or 'always find something wrong with the way officers intervene' (Female, 11 years). A participant shared:

> No matter the video, it is important to have explanations because **people may like or dislike the police and interpret footage in such manner**. (Female, 11 years)

This quote emphasizes the participants' belief that citizens who dislike the police would not be able to put aside their personal opinions when watching and interpreting the video. BWC footage, like the one shown to participants, shared with the public without explanation, could leave room for criticism about the intervention, which, according to participants, has no place in this case.

Discussion

This study aimed at improving our understanding of how police knowledge and skills may provide a distinctive lens through which BWC footages are looked at, by

examining police officers' interpretations of a mock police intervention footage. Combining semi-structured interviews and video elicitation, our results converged on three key findings about how police officers read BWC footage.

First, our findings illustrate the specific perspective through which officers interpreted the situation and the underlying behaviours of both the police officers and the suspect shown in the BWC footage. Interviewed officers seemed to use such perspective, combining their professional knowledge, attention skills and cognitive resources, to analyze the footage and understand the actions depicted. They, for example, shared to have recognized and focused on several behaviours that have been typically associated in research with an increased likelihood of use of force, like threats against the officers, aggressive and resisting demeanour, and the suspect's involvement in a dispute with a third party (Bolger, 2015; Kane & Cronin, 2011; Terrill et al., 2003). Additionally, many have mobilized concepts from use-of-force models or continuums in recounting their interpretation of the BWC images shown, emphasizing their distinctive knowledge about police responses to incidents and procedures and guidelines (Bennell et al., 2022; Pezdek et al., 2024). Our results are thus consistent with previous research suggesting that police officers may have specialized and well-informed perceptions about the threat level posed by an individual and the appropriateness of police intervention where force is used, which they can refer to when interpreting use-of-force incident videos (Boivin et al., 2017, 2020; Pezdek et al., 2024). They add depth to the literature and help us understand how distinctively police officers interpret BWC footage. They also show how video elicitation can be beneficial in capturing detailed interpretations and use of police knowledge (Keesman, 2022, 2023).

Second, our findings show that most interviewed officers had a very similar view of the threat level and the appropriateness of the force used in the BWC footage.

Such finding is consistent with the scientific literature on police culture, as police officers often demonstrate a strong sense of solidarity which could explain their overall support for the actions of their colleagues depicted in the video (Crank, 2004). However, despite such consistency, they conversely illustrate how officers who did observed the same footage still had different interpretations of the events unfolded during the police intervention, particularly regarding the level of aggression on the officer (was he hit or not?), the presence (or not) of a weapon in the suspect's hands, and the very nature of the use of force (did officers use a collapsible baton, a kick, or a conducted energy weapon, or did the suspect fell to the ground by himself?). Such results reiterate previous findings on the viewing of BWC footage, arguing again that BWC footages do not 'speak for themselves' but are rather interpreted through individual and/or collective 'ways of seeing' police intervention images. They strengthen the fact that ambiguous, incomplete or acontextual footage – like the one participants were exposed to – may lead viewers to fill in the blanks with their subjective understanding of events (Birck, 2018; Morrison, 2017), and that video evidence is accordingly not simple 'objective' recording of events that leaves aside any influence of the viewer's subjectivity (Granot et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2017; Kahan et al., 2009; Newell, 2021). Given the many ways in which the participants interpreted the intervention, findings also raise questions about how the criteria of appropriateness of the use of force (Graham v. Connor, 1989; R. v. Nasogaluak, 2010) are applied so that police officers who share having seen different things nevertheless share the same assessment of the reasonableness of the use of force. Further research is needed to better understand the characteristics of the 'police lens' within law enforcement agencies, its influencing factors and its potential impact on video evidence assessment.

Finally, results show the ambivalence of interviewed police officers about their beliefs that citizens would understand the police intervention depicted in the BWC footage on their own in the same way they did. In line with previous research, police officers in our study mostly believed that the images could be shown to the public and that most citizens would understand the video provides evidence of how the police intervention was carried out (Boivin et al., 2020; Lum et al., 2019). However, while about half of the officers thought a 'normal' and 'logical' person could understand the images easily, the other half rather believed that many people would need an explanation to fully understand the footage because they might have their own biases against the police. Such findings may suggest some persistent form of collective naïve realism among police officers (Birck, 2018; Kahan et al., 2009).

Indeed, officers who believe that citizens can, on their own, understand the BWC footage in the same way they did seem to associate some form of neutrality with the images. Doing so, they fail to perceive how their own police lens and their police knowledge about threatening signals or the use-of-force model seemed to have influenced their interpretation. On the other hand, officers who believe that citizens need context to understand the footage as they did quickly identify that the biases of the latter (i.e. their lack of police knowledge or their negative opinion of the police) might influence their interpretation of the video. Available research tends to be more supportive of the latter's perspective: previous research has shown that the views of police officers on a police intervention may differ from those of civilians (Boivin et al., 2020; Pezdek et al., 2024). This could be explained by the fact that many citizens are unaware of police principles and fundamentals that seem so obvious to officers (Mourtgos & Adams, 2020) and have never experienced a police encounter or heard a dispatch call (Pezdek, 2022), let alone had to control or subdue a threatening or resistant

individual (Engel & Smith, 2009). Considering the mixed results found in some studies (see Kahan et al., 2009; Saulnier & Sytsma, 2023), differential interpretations between police officers and 'non-police' civilians would benefit from further investigation to better understand how BWC footage may be understood when shared with the Court or the general public.

Of course, this article is not without limitations. A first limitation is that participating officers were already in the BWC pilot project, possibly causing respondent bias. However, they were reminded that participation was voluntary, and answers were anonymous. A second limitation is that video elicitation reflects participants' (re)interpretation, not their actual focus, which may introduce desirability bias. A third limitation is that participants watched only one BWC video, only once, to ensure uniform data collection. However, repeated viewings of a wider variety of footages might influence interpretations, especially for ambiguous sequences. Thus, future research, particularly a quantitative assessment of the impact of variables such as sociodemographic (e.g. police experience), situational (e.g. nature of the police intervention), and methodological factors (e.g. the use of multiple videos) on officers' interpretation of BWC footage, is needed to test our hypotheses and consolidate and extend our results.

Conclusion

Beyond their potential impact on police-citizen interactions, body-worn cameras (BWCs) may provide strong video evidence to better understand the progression of a police intervention. In legal procedures, BWCs footage may benefit decision-makers by better capturing a suspect's demeanor than any testimony (Petersen & Lu, 2023; Pezdek, 2022; Vakhitova et al., 2023) and saving processing time (Gaub et al., 2021). In the context of deontological procedures or defense of citizens' rights, they could also

provide evidence of (im)proper police practices, thus offering greater police transparency and accountability to the public (Lum et al., 2019; Saulnier & Abbatangelo, 2024; White & Malm, 2020). However, research has shown that video evidence does not 'speak for itself' and that people may interpret differently images of a police intervention, raising questions about the evidentiary value of these images (Granot et al., 2018). To contribute to our understanding of such phenomenon, this study examined 43 police officers' interpretations of a BWC footage of a police intervention through semi-structured interviews and video elicitation.

Our findings suggest that their distinctive police knowledge and skills seem to shape their attention to the images and their subsequent interpretation of the depicted police intervention. Police officers engaged a repertoire of police knowledges and concepts specific to their profession (e.g. use-of-force continuum) to describe the suspect's and the police officers' behaviour depicted in the BWC footage. Our results also highlight that even among police officers who share a very similar perception of the appropriateness of the police intervention – most supported the officers' use of force –, varied interpretations of some ambiguous sequences may persist. This suggest that the police lens through which officers watch BWCs footage should be understand as pluralistic rather than monolithic, influenced by individual, situational and/or social factors that remain to be studied. Incidentally, this study also suggests some persistent form of collective naïve realism, as many police officers we interviewed associated the images with neutrality, believing that citizens would fully understand the footage on their own, while some others believed the public would not understand the police intervention, quickly identifying the biases that can affect their different interpretation. On a collective level, our participants are thus both demonstrating their ease to detect the influence of beliefs different from their own in others, and their difficulty to identify

how their owns beliefs may influence their interpretation of an event (Kahan et al., 2009). In this regard, our results re-emphasize the need to treat BWCs footages with caution when they are introduced as evidence in the justice system or released to the public.

To hark back to our initial example at the beginning of this article, maybe the public criticize police decisions on the field in the same way they comment football. However, our findings show that police officers share a specific interpretation of police intervention footage, likely shaped by their specific knowledge, whereas citizens are most likely far more familiar with the NFL rules than with the intricacies of police work. They also are not likely to benefit from the live explanations of a specialized commentator to help them understand the rules of the police intervention they are watching. As proposed by some authors (Boivin et al., 2020; Pezdek et al., 2024; Vardsveen & Wiener, 2022)., it seems that knowledge and perspective sharing among different communities (e.g. legal, police, and public stakeholders) could facilitate a common understanding of BWC images, whether as part of a legal procedure or a public release.

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