

Attitudes of Police Recruits Toward Offenders: The Impact of the Police Training on Attitudinal Change

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Attitudes of Police Recruits Toward Offenders: The Impact of the Police Training on Attitudinal Change

The traditional prevailing perspectives on attitudes assume that attitudes, once formed, are relatively stable over time. However, research has revealed that attitudes may be influenced by different factors that may contribute to change them. The present longitudinal study aims to understand if the police recruits' attitudes towards offenders change after police training. Besides, we aim to understand the impact of sociodemographic and personality variables on recruits' attitudes towards offenders and which variables predict recruits' attitudes. The Attitude Scale towards Offenders (ATO) and the NEO-FFI Personality Inventory were used in a sample of 74 recruits of a Portuguese Police Force - Guarda Nacional Republicana -, in two distinct moments (at the beginning and at the end of the police training programme). Results revealed that at the end of the training recruits hold more negative attitudes towards offenders. Those who had previous professional experience in the army hold more positive attitudes, but only at the beginning of the training. Only attitudes towards offenders at the beginning of the police training predict recruits' attitudes towards offenders at the end of the training. These results emphasize the importance of initial and continuous training of recruits and police officers, especially in terms of their attitudes towards offenders.

Keywords: attitudes; offenders; police recruits; police training

Introduction

Attitudes are precise evaluations of an object, concept, or behaviour, based on personal beliefs with an appreciative meaning - good-bad; pleasant-unpleasant, harmful-harmless, among others (Ajzen and Fishbein 2000). They can be formed through personal experience, information received from a variety of means or through others' beliefs or statements (Garner 2005). As Hogg and Vaughan (2005) referred, an attitude is "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols" (p. 150).

The prevailing view has been that there is a strong correspondence between a person's attitude and behaviour (e.g., Robinson and Chandek 2000; Garner 2005; Myers 2013;) and that an individual's behavior is consistent with their attitudes. Nevertheless, research has found discrepancies between ones' attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Batson *et al.* 1997; Myers 2013). Besides, expressed attitudes may change over time, although individuals may not realize that such change occurs (Garner 2005). The variation could be influenced by many factors (Myers 2013), such as context, the subject's information about the attitude object, and the salience of one's thoughts, feelings, or memories at the time of their past actions towards the attitude object (Miller *et al.* 1993; Garner 2005).

Despite the inconsistent results concerning attitudes' stability and its relation with individuals' behavior, the study of attitudes remains of particular importance especially among professionals who deal with particular groups of individuals, such as offenders, on an every-day basis. This is the case of police officers, whose mission is to ensure law enforcement and citizens' protection. Therefore their attitudes are critical for the justice system response to criminal incidents (Logan *et al.* 2006). Prejudice (i.e., antipathy toward groups or individuals because of incorrect beliefs or generalizations; Allport 1954) and stigma (i.e., process through groups or individuals are rejected based on differences in personal

and/or physical characteristics, identity or flaws; Goffman 1963) might lead to negative attitudes toward offenders (e.g., Dovidio *et al.* 2005) and, consequently, influence the outcome of a police call (Logan *et al.* 2006). Police officers' procedures are guided by the law, nevertheless, individual attitudes might influence officers' views on punishment, and how they respond to situations and events (e.g., Hogue and Peebles 1997; Robinson and Chandek 2000; Craig 2005; Kjelsberg *et al.* 2007; Brooks 2015). Nonetheless, police officers' attitudes toward offenders, policing, and law enforcement may be subject to significant changes throughout their career (e.g., Garner 2005). The present longitudinal study examines attitudinal changes related to offenders among police recruits of a Portuguese Police Force after police training. In this study we also aim to understand which sociodemographic and personality variables impact recruits' attitudes towards offenders and which variables predict recruits' attitudes.

Police officers' attitudes towards offenders

Literature reveals that police officers' attitudes and perceptions toward suspects/offenders, crime, and crime control policies might influence how they respond to criminal events (Gaines and Kappeler 2005). Muir (1977), one of the first authors theorizing about how perceptions and attitudes in law enforcement predicts police officers' behavior, proposed two attitudinal dimensions: perspective (tragic or cynical) and passion (integrated or conflicted). Police officers with a tragic perspective consider all the sides and recognize the circumstances and motives that led offenders to act. Cynical officers do not understand offender circumstances and are not empathetic. These two perspectives were also analyzed regarding officers' perspectives on the use of coercive tactics. Officers who agree with coercive tactics are described as having an integrated morality and those who not are described as having a conflicted morality (Muir 1977). Subsequent research also reveal that the attitudes towards

offenders may impact police officers' responses to crime and offenders. For example, Parker *et al.* (2004) found that police officers with a more tolerant attitude towards young offenders were more likely to divert them. They also found that empathy towards young offenders and a less authoritarian approach were more likely to result in diversion. Similarly, Schaible *et al.* (2020), using data collected during a Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion training session for officers, found that officers who hold an optimistic view toward offender's rehabilitation are more likely to divert offenders.

Research has been consensual in stating that police officers are more likely to hold more negative attitudes regarding offenders than other groups, such as community members, students, criminal justice professionals, and correctional officers (e.g., Melvin *et al.* 1985; Fielding and Fielding 1991; Hogue 1993; Terpstra and Kort 2016). Melvin *et al.* (1985), comparing a sample of police officers to other groups, found that police officers hold a significantly more negative view towards prisoners than university students, community members, correctional officers, prisoners, and reform/rehabilitation workers. Likewise, Cunha and Gonçalves (2017) found that Portuguese police officers had less favorable views towards offenders than did graduate students and correctional officers.

Nonetheless, police officers' attitudes towards offenders seem to vary according to the characteristics of offenders and the type of crime. For example, Hogue (1993) found that police officers presented more negative perceptions about sex offenders than about other groups of offenders. Further, Hogue and Peebles (1997) found that British police officers had significantly less favorable attitudes towards sexual offenders than other British professionals, including mental health workers, social workers, probation, or parole officers. The high visibility and censorship of some crimes and offenders, as well as the punitive criminal policies towards some crimes might lead to the formation of negative perceptions, beliefs, and

attitudes towards specific offenders, such as sex offenders (e.g., Purvis *et al.* 2003; Church *et al.* 2011).

Different studies also have concluded that, compared to other groups, police officers hold less favorable attitudes towards offenders' rehabilitation (Chen and Einat 2015; Terpstra and Kort 2016). Fielding and Fielding (1991), in a sample of police recruits in the UK, found that a large portion of police recruits did not feel that criminals needed treatment and felt that prison inmates are a threat to the community if released on probation or parole. Similarly, Furnham and Alison (1994) observed that police officers advocate harsher sentences for criminal acts and are more prone to view crime as a deviation. Terpstra and Kort (2016) also found that only a small percentage of police officers refer that rehabilitation is an essential function of criminal justice. They also found that officers felt that pre-trial detention should be used more frequently, viewing it as an important tool for preserving order in neighbourhoods and as a first and provisional sentence for an assumed offence.

The negative attitudes shown by police officers may impact offenders' rehabilitation and their consequent reintegration in society. If a professional promotes the involvement of the offender in rehabilitation and adopts a more tolerant and understanding approach (Gakhal and Brown 2011), it might influence offenders' search and integration in rehabilitation programs and, therefore, change offenders' behaviour (Beech and Fordham 1997). Contrarily, professionals who show a more positive attitude towards offenders revealed a greater involvement, satisfaction, and commitment to work, translating into higher effectiveness of the rehabilitating strategies (Craig 2005), when compared to professionals who show negative attitudes (Misis *et al.* 2013). Research has concluded that a negative treatment of offenders is a recipe for failed intervention (Cullen and Jonson 2014; Bonta and Andrews 2017). Thus, although police officers do not have the role of rehabilitating the offender, the more positive

the offenders' contact with the judicial system, including with police officers, the better the prognosis for success in future rehabilitation.

Correlates of attitudes towards offenders

Identifying variables associated with police officers' attitudes towards offenders may contribute to improve these professionals' knowledge and education and consequently reduce stigma and facilitate offenders' rehabilitation (e.g., Rade *et al.* 2016). Several factors have been related with police officers' attitudes. Prior research has found that the individuals' direct experience with the object of attitude might influence attitudes towards that object (Cunha and Gonçalves 2017). Similarly, interpersonal contact theory (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006) advocates that an increased contact with a group member is associated with a decrease in prejudice and/or stigma towards that group. Consistent with this theory, individuals who report more contacts with offenders tend to hold more favorable attitudes towards them (Gibson *et al.* 2009; Hirschfield and Piquero 2010; Viki *et al.* 2012; Rade *et al.* 2016). Besides, police officers who were more experienced and had more years of service tended to adopt more positive attitudes towards offenders compared to less experienced police officers (Gakhal and Brown 2011; Cunha and Gonçalves 2017). Literature also found that police officers who received training about offenders and who had a greater knowledge on the law demonstrated a significant improvement in their attitudes towards offenders and crime (Hogue 1993; Craig 2005; Kleban and Jeglic 2012; Lin *et al.* 2020).

Several studies have been analyzing the relationship between gender and attitudes, concluding that, although both genders demonstrate punitive attitudes, male officers tend to score higher than their female counterparts (Unnever and Cullen 2007; Chen and Einat 2015). Besides, female officers tend to have a more optimistic view toward rehabilitating offenders, seeing offenders as victims of their circumstances (Schaible *et al.* 2016). Nonetheless, other

studies found that male and female police officers hold similar attitudes towards offenders (Hirschfield and Piquero 2010; Rouhani *et al.* 2019;); while others found that women tend to be more punitive than men (Mancini *et al.* 2010; Willis *et al.* 2013).

Other demographic variables, such as age and education, revealed mixed findings. For example, age has been an important factor that influences police officers' attitudes towards offenders, with older professionals showing positive attitudes more frequently (Hirschfield and Piquero 2010; Cunha and Gonçalves 2017) and younger ones demonstrating a higher tendency to opt for detention than rehabilitation (Misis *et al.* 2013). However, other authors found that older individuals are more punitive than younger ones (e.g., Hough and Moxon 1985; Klein and Cooper 2019); while others found no association between age and punitive attitudes (e.g., Comartin *et al.* 2009; Mancini *et al.* 2010; Chen and Einat 2015; Shafiq *et al.* 2016). Concerning education, there is no consistency in literature, with some studies demonstrating a correlation between higher education and a lower level of punitive attitudes (e.g., Leiber *et al.* 2002; Comartin *et al.* 2009; Willis *et al.* 2013; Chen and Einat 2015), while others pointing to the opposite direction (Cunha and Gonçalves 2017), and others suggesting no effect of education level on attitudes (e.g., Hirschfield and Piquero, 2010; Mancini *et al.* 2010).

Personality variables also seem to be related with police officers' attitudes. For instance, Olver and Barlow (2010) concluded that agreeableness and openness to experience are positively correlated to police officers' attitudes towards sexual offenders and towards sexual offenders' rehabilitation. Extraversion is also correlated to more negative attitudes towards sexual offenders and their rehabilitation. This result might be explained by the fact that these individuals value the will and wish for the offenders to rehabilitate, believe in the effectiveness of treatments and in offenders' right to change and reintegrate the society (Olver and Barlow 2010). Studies on personality variables have also found a positive association

between conservative attitudes and punitiveness (Bowers and Waltman 1993; Huang *et al.* 1996), and between conservative attitudes and negative attitudes toward offenders and offenders' rehabilitation (Rosselli and Jeglic 2017).

Current study

Police officers' attitudes assessment is crucial for implementing training and policy measures to promote the adoption of more accurate strategies to deal with offenders. This is very important since attitudes can influence how police officers interact with offenders and how they respond to criminal incidents (Melvin *et al.* 1985; Robinson and Chandek 2000).

The present longitudinal study aims to assess recruits' attitudinal change during the training programme, testing if the police training influences recruits' attitudes towards offenders. Participants, police recruits from a Portuguese Police Force – Guarda Nacional Republicana -, were assessed at the beginning and at the end of their training programme. The training program consisted of three phases: i) general military training that includes a variety of subjects directly related with the military component (e.g., general staff doctrine and proceedings, decision-making process; techniques, tactics and operations; justice and discipline); ii) educational training which is composed of themes that are directly associated with the different areas of performance (e.g., police legislation; law; human, material and financial resources; communications, public relations and protocol; sociology, psychosociology); and iii) in-service training that involves practical training in the territorial units. We also aim to understand which sociodemographic and personality variables influence police recruits' attitudes towards offenders and which variables predict recruits' attitudes.

Materials and Methods

Participants

The participants of this study were selected through a convenience non-probabilistic sampling process. Data was collected in two different moments: at the beginning and at the end of the training programme. After pairing the collected data between the first and the second moments, the final sample was composed by 74 police recruits from Guarda Nacional Republicana. The Guarda Nacional Republicana is a Portuguese military national force constituted by militaries organized in a special body of troops. Its functions are to keep peace and public order, to ensure obedience to the law, to prevent criminality, to develop criminal investigations, and to supervise and resolve traffic problems, among others.

The participants were in average 23.61 years old ($SD = .30$), ranging between a minimum of 19 years old and a maximum of 29 years old. Most participants were male ($n = 56$; 75.7%), single ($n = 69$; 93.2%), completed the 12th grade ($n = 68$; 91.9%), and had previous professional experience ($n = 55$; 74.3%). Among this last group, 39.2% ($n = 29$) had previous experience in the army. The sociodemographic data are presented at Table 1.

[INSERT HERE TABLE 1]

Instruments

A Sociodemographic Questionnaire was developed specifically for the present study to collect information about gender, age, educational qualifications, marital status, and previous professional experience.

In the present study, an adaptation of the “Attitudes toward Prisoners” scale (ATP; Melvin *et al.* 1985) was used, the “Attitudes toward Offenders” (ATO) scale (Cunha and Gonçalves 2017), where the word “prisoner” was replaced by “offender” in all items. The ATP is a self-reported measure consisting of 36 items assessing attitudes toward prisoners. The items are rated on a five-point scale, ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The higher the total score on the scale, the more positive attitudes toward inmates. The

instrument presents good psychometric properties. In the original study, the ATP had a split-half reliability ranging from .84 to .92 in five different samples (i.e., students, correctional officers, police officers, prisoners and personal involved in prison reform or prisoner rehabilitation), and the test-retest reliability was .82 (Melvin *et al.* 1985). Factorial analyses showed that the tool is one-dimensional (Brodsky and Smitherman 1983). The Portuguese ATP version has 34 items since two items were negatively correlated with the total score and were removed (Gonçalves and Vieira 2007). Cronbach's alpha was .91 for the Portuguese version (Gonçalves and Vieira 2007). For the present sample, the internal consistency of the total scale was .92 for the first moment and .86 for the second moment.

The NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa and McCrae 1992; Portuguese version Magalhães *et al.* 2014) is a 60 item self-report instrument to measure the five personality domains according to the Five-Factor Model: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. The NEO-FFI is composed by self-descriptive statements responded in a five-point Likert scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Each domain score is calculated by summing the 12 item responses. Both the original and the Portuguese version reveal adequate internal consistency values, varying between .68 and .86 for the original version (Costa and McCrae 1992) and between .71 and .81 for the Portuguese version (Magalhães *et al.* 2014). In this sample, the following Cronbach's alphas were obtained: .83 for Neuroticism, .79 for Extraversion, .30 for Openness to Experience, .79 for Agreeableness and .88 for Consciousness.

Procedures

Data was collected through an online study. The convenience sample was recruited from a Police Force in Portugal – Guarda Nacional Republicana. Initially, the research team contacted the Police Direction to request authorization for the police recruits to participate in

the study. After obtaining permission, the Police School was contacted through the institutional supervisor to clarify the objectives and define the data collection procedures. A link to the protocol was then sent to the institutional supervisor who shared it with the police recruits through the institutional email, inviting all the recruits to participate in a study about their attitudes toward offenders. The participants could withdraw from the study at any time, under ethical board regulations. Data was collected in two different moments: at the beginning and at the end of the police training programme. Since the study was conducted in two moments, an identification code was requested at the beginning of the protocol. This code did not allow the participants' identification as its purpose was only of matching the participants' identity in the two moments. Thus, the study's participation was anonymous and voluntary, and no financial assistance, compensation or incentives were provided, as well as no harm could result from refusing to participate.

This study was conducted during 2018. All ethical procedures established by the University of X Ethics Commission and Portuguese legislation were followed.

Statistical Analysis

All the analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS – version 26.0). Descriptive statistics were performed using measures of central tendency to describe participants' demographic characteristics. Wilcoxon tests were used to analyze the differences in attitudes between moment one and moment two and Mann-Whitney tests were performed to examine differences in attitudes according to educational level, marital status and previous professional experience. Pearson correlation tests to analyse the correlations between personality dimensions and age and attitudes were conducted. To determine the predictors of recruits' attitudes a linear regression analysis was performed.

Results

Attitudes towards offenders

Regarding attitudes towards offenders, in ATO police recruits obtained an average score of 70.24 ($SD = 15.57$) in the first moment (i.e., at the beginning of the police training programme) and an average score of 68.12 ($SD = 11.09$) in the second moment (i.e., at the end of the police training programme). A Wilcoxon test revealed statistically significant differences in attitudes towards offenders between moment one and moment two, $Z = -2.402$, $p = .016$. Police recruits held more negative attitudes towards offenders at the end of the training programme than at the beginning (see Table 2).

[INSERT HERE TABLE 2]

An item analysis of the ATO revealed a significant difference at the beginning of the police training and after the training on 11 items: “offenders never change”, “offenders have feelings like the rest of us”, “it is not wise to trust an offender too far”, “I think I would like a lot of offenders”, “trying to rehabilitate offenders is a waste of time and money”, “there are some offenders I would trust with my life”, “offenders are just plain immoral”, “most offenders can be rehabilitated”, “I would like associating with some offenders”, “offenders respect only brute force”, and “if a person does well in prison, he should be let out on parole”. Results are presented in Table 2. These differences represent a significant worsening in attitudes towards offenders post-training.

Sociodemographic variables and attitudes towards offenders

The results concerning sociodemographic variables are presented in Table 3. Results only revealed statistically significant differences in attitudes towards offenders between police recruits with previous professional experience in the army and without previous professional

experience in moment one, $U = 228.500$, $p = .012$. However, in the moment two, results revealed no statistically significant differences. No statistically significant differences were found in police recruits attitudes towards offenders in the other variables (i.e., age, gender, and educational level), neither in moment one nor in moment two.

[INSERT HERE TABLE 3]

Dimensions of personality and attitudes towards offenders

The correlations between the recruits' attitudes toward offenders, both in moment one and moment two, and dimensions of personality are presented in Table 4. Results showed no statistically significant correlations between the variables, neither in moment one nor in moment two.

[INSERT HERE TABLE 4]

Predicting attitudes toward offenders

A linear regression was conducted to examine if the attitudes towards offenders in moment one (the only statistically significant variable) predicts attitudes toward offenders among police recruits in moment two. Table 5 presents the linear regression model.

[INSERT HERE TABLE 5]

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1,65) = 37.259$, $p < .001$, explaining 36.8% of the variance ($R^2=.368$, adjusted $R^2=.358$). Besides, attitudes towards offenders in moment one contributed significantly to the model ($t = 6.104$, $p < .001$), being a significant predictor of attitudes toward offenders in moment two.

Discussion

This study aimed to increase our understanding about the attitudes of police recruits towards offenders. We intended to identify potential changes in attitudes of police recruits towards offenders during the initial police training programme. We also examined which sociodemographic variables and personality dimensions impact recruits attitudes towards offenders and which variables predict recruits' attitudes. The current study extended previous research on police officers' attitudes towards offenders by using a longitudinal design and a sample of police recruits.

Results revealed that police recruits changed their attitudes towards offenders from moment one to moment two, holding more negative attitudes at the end of the police training programme, i.e., after military training, educational training and in-service training. These results seems to contradict previous research that point that a greater knowledge and contact with offenders are related to more positive attitudes towards offenders (Craig 2005; Gibson *et al.* 2009; Hirschfield and Piquero 2010; Kleban and Jeglic 2012; Viki *et al.* 2012; Rade *et al.* 2016). The analysis of the ATO items revealed that this negative change from moment one to moment two was more evident in items related to offenders rehabilitation and to a view of the offenders as deviant individuals. Although the attitudinal change was in the opposite way that we expected, these findings are in line with previous studies that revealed that police officers tend to hold more negative attitudes towards offenders' rehabilitation, advocate harsher sentences for criminal acts and are more prone to view crime as a deviation (e.g., Fielding and Fielding 1991; Furnham and Alison 1994). This attitudinal change in a more negative way after police training may be related to the nature of police training and job requirements. The aim and content of the police training were mainly focussed on the acquisition of military skills (e.g., general staff doctrine and proceedings, decision-making process; techniques, tactics and operations) and the acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge on the topics directly related with the job (e.g., police legislation; law; human, material and financial

resources; communications, public relations and protocol) and less on the acquisition of knowledge about crime causes and offenders characteristics and motivations. As the police officers' main functions are controlling the offenders' behaviour and, when necessary, arresting them, they must focus on the negative characteristics of the offenders (Kjelsberg *et al.* 2007), it is possible that the police training delivered implicit messages which may worsen the attitudes of recruits towards offenders (e.g., Craig 2005).

Another possible explanation for these results may be related to the the fact that for most of the recruits this was their first contact with the law, the institution, the offenders (during the in-service training) and with their duties as law enforcement agents. This “confrontation with reality”, seeing how things actually work, and, therefore, the confrontation with their professional demands and their job risks might impact their personal and professional lives (Ribeiro and Surrador 2005). These difficulties might be perceived in the first contacts with offenders, leading to disappointment and frustration and, consequently, triggering negative attitudes towards offenders since they can be perceived as the cause of their difficulties. Besides, previous research indicates that, in the first years of the career, police officers may use a defence mechanism against stress, the so-called “John Wayne Syndrome” (Chandler 1979). This mechanism described by emotional withdrawal and coldness, authoritarian attitudes and cynicism reflect the adaptation problems caused by the difficulties in carrying out their tasks or interpersonal difficulties when they face their professional demands (Chandler 1979; Conroy and Hess 1992). Literature suggests that the salience given to the crime and the offenders is a strong predictor of more punitive attitudes (Costelloe *et al.* 2009). Since police recruits are at the beginning of their careers, they might experience more stress, leading to a more negative view of offenders. However, to test this hypothesis, it would be necessary to conduct in-depth interviews with police recruits to explore their perceptions about offenders and their professional role.

The attitudinal change might also be related to a social desirability effect, and a desire for society's admiration, and/or supervisors' recognition. Although we tried to control this variable through anonymous participation, recruits may have responded negatively to show a more authoritarian and cynic attitude towards offenders, believing that this view makes them more valued and respected by the community and/or to please their supervisors. Research demonstrates that the supervisors are mediators between the communication of expectations to the recruits and implementing these expectations when dealing with crime; thus, the recruits may replace their priorities and expectations by the supervisors' priorities and expectations (Engel and Worden 2003). The leadership theory (Schein 2017) may also explain police recruits' attitudinal change. Attitudes can be formed through personal experience and influenced by others' beliefs and statements (Garner 2005). Those who are perceived as leaders within the organization may particularly influence recruits' attitudes and perceptions (Schein 2017). Thus, the increased negative perceptions/attitudes towards offenders may result from senior officers and instructors sharing experiences and "war stories" that influence recruits' perceptions. However, recruits' attitudes should be assessed not only at the end of their training programme, but also throughout the professional career. A longitudinal approach to the study of attitudes would be valuable to examine if they maintain their negative views of offenders or adopt more tolerant attitudes towards offenders as their experience and direct contact with offenders increases (e.g., Gibson *et al.* 2009; Hirschfield and Piquero 2010; Viki *et al.* 2012; Rade *et al.* 2016; Cunha and Gonçalves 2017). However, all these hypotheses need further development and examination.

Regarding the sociodemographic variables, recruits who served in the army held more positive attitudes towards offenders than those who did not, although this difference was only observed at the beginning of the police training programme. However, it is essential to state that the only similarity between Army and Guarda Nacional Republicana is the military

structure, which does not necessarily mean a direct contact with offenders. In fact, in most cases, recruits who serve in the army do not contact with offenders and/or crime. In the other demographic variables, no significant results were found. However, these findings were not unexpected since previous literature revealed mixed findings concerning demographic variables (e.g., Hirschfield and Piquero 2010; Chen and Einat 2015; Cunha and Gonçalves 2017; Shafiq *et al.* 2016; Klein and Cooper 2019). Nonetheless, one possible explanation for the absence of significant results is related to the small sample size and its demographic characteristics (e.g., age, educational level), making it challenging to perform comparisons between groups.

Also, no significant statistical correlations were found between the recruits' attitudes towards offenders and their personality dimensions. The absence of results might suggest that perhaps police recruits share a set of common and homogeneous personality characteristics (e.g., Twersky-Glasner 2005; Garbarino *et al.* 2012). Those features could explain their predisposition to choose this specific job. Alternatively, the selection process for police recruits might promote a specific personality type. Therefore, there was a predominant set of personality features across police personnel (Twersky-Glasner 2005). Nonetheless, this assumption needs further examination. Another possible explanation for our findings is related to the type of questionnaire used to assess personality dimensions, i.e., a self-report instrument and therefore, more vulnerable to social desirability. Besides, reliability values on the dimension of openness to experience values were unacceptable, revealing problems with internal consistency, which undermines our confidence on the results obtained in this domain. This is particularly problematic since literature identifies openness to experience as a dimension positively correlated to police officers' attitudes towards offenders (Olver and Barlow 2010).

To examine which variables predict the recruits' attitudes towards offenders, a regression was performed. The regression confirmed that attitudes at the beginning of the police training programme were positively correlated with attitudes at the end of the police training programme, meaning that more negative attitudes in the first assessment predict more negative attitudes in the second assessment. These findings seem to suggest that police training – involving new experiences, skills, and potentially new group influences - has a critical impact on recruits attitudes (Garner 2005). Besides, recruits' contact with offenders, the information received from various channels and/or the contact with supervisors' beliefs and statements (Garner 2005), as well as the recruits' previous beliefs, might influence recruits' attitudes towards offenders.

Studies about police officers' attitudes towards offenders are essential, as they allow to develop timely and appropriate interventions to improve attitudes toward offenders and, as a consequence, impact their decisions and the way how they respond to criminal events (Gaines and Kappeler 2005). Improving knowledge about recruits' attitudes can inform future policies, practice implementation and training programs and improve overall crime responses. Besides, the improvement of attitudes and the reduction of stigmatization might promote offenders' active search for help (Imhoff 2015). Positive attitudes towards the population with whom police officers deal daily are also associated with higher levels of involvement and satisfaction with work, decreasing stress levels (Misis *et al.* 2013). Thus, the study of attitudes should be taught in the initial police training and be part of continuous training, allowing reflection upon attitudes and expectations to change incorrect beliefs and prejudice that can negatively influence the job. Monitoring and self-awareness of their attitudes and beliefs has been shown to decrease the susceptibility to errant attitudinal and increases behavioral change (Garner 2005). Thus, police training programs could focus on modelling more positive attitudes and behaviors toward offenders.

Despite the tactical and technical component of recruits' training being vital for citizens' safety, the current police training is essentially focused on law-application. Although the police training programme already includes a psychosociology module, it focus mainly on stress management, conflicts resolution, crisis intervention, victim assistance, among others. Thus, it is crucial to include a sociological and psychological module that accounts for an effective understanding of crime and its causes, offenders, their surrounding circumstances, reasons to commit crimes, offenders' rehabilitation, as well as the purposes and effectiveness of the distinct penal sanctions - namely to deconstruct unfounded punitive attitudes. Obtaining factual and reliable information about offenders and offenders rehabilitation can change attitudes (Singer and Cooper 2009). Psychoeducational intervention dispelling myths about offenders could positively impact individuals' attitudes towards offenders (Kleban and Jeglic 2012) and towards their rehabilitation. Training should also encourage the more experienced police officers and supervisors to talk to their younger colleagues about these matters and promote an improvement of attitudes towards offenders (Harper 2012). Therefore, there are three critical components to include in police officers' training: the acquisition of skills that promote good performance in the police functions; the acquisition of knowledge and attitudes (mainly recognising their attitudes and its impact on the way they respond to the events); and the acquisition of skills to identify, analyse and solve problems. It is also decisive to improve their initial training, both regarding military and educational skills, but also in terms of in-service training, to allow a higher familiarization with their job and improve attitudes towards offenders.

Despite the findings of the present study, some limitations should be mentioned. First, our sample is relatively small (and therefore the statistical power of our results), and homogeneous in sociodemographic variables. The absence of significant results may be an artefact of the lack of statistical power and variability regarding sociodemographic variables,

compromising more reliable and consistent conclusions. Second, the instrument used to assess the attitudes towards offenders was developed for the US population. Although the instrument was validated to Portugal (with good psychometric properties), there might be differences in culture and crime policies between USA and Portugal that might make the scale less reliable to measure what it originally intended. Moreover, the ATO original version includes 36 items, while the Portuguese version only includes 34 items. The version used in this study was modified and adapted to police officers' samples, hence some discrepancies from previous studies may be due to measurement variability. Third, in this study, only self-report measures were used. A more reliable and comprehensive evaluation of the professionals' attitudes towards offenders should adopt a broader and more diversified approach (e.g., using in-depth interviews; exploring other variables such as political ideologies, motivations for choosing a police officer career, etc.). Finally, other factors that potentially mediate or moderate police officers' attitudes could be considered, such as the offenders' characteristics or supervisors' issues.

In sum, this study improves the knowledge about attitudes of police recruits towards offenders, specifically the impact of the police training and the contact with offenders on such attitudes, and the influence of the police officers features over these attitudes. Given the impact of attitudes on police officers' responses to situations and offenders, and the role that police officers have on offenders' future rehabilitation, the police officers initial and continuous training should include the necessary psychological and relational dimensions, with a focus on grounding police officers attitudes on evidence and knowledge, instead of previous common sense backgrounds.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Table 1

Sociodemographic data (N = 74)

	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Male	56	75.7
Female	17	30
Educational level		
12th grade	68	91.9
Higher education	6	8.1
Previous professional experience		
Yes	55	74.3
No	19	25.7
Previous military experience		
Yes	26	35.1
No	29	39.2

Table 2

Changes on ATO total scores and individual items between Moment 1 and Moment 2

Attitudes towards offenders	Moment 1	Moment 2	Z	p	Effect
	M (DP)	M (DP)			size
ATO total score	70.24 (15.57)	68.12 (11.09)	-2.402	.016	.20
1. Offenders are different from most people.	3.01 (1.01)	3.03 (.93)	-.291	.771	
2. Only a few offenders are really dangerous.	3.08 (.96)	3.12 (.78)	-.058	.953	
3. Offenders never change.	3.72 (.79)	3.28 (.79)	-3.579	.000	
4. Most offenders are victims of circumstance and deserve to be helped.	3.43 (.92)	3.35 (.64)	-3.579	.000	
5. Offenders have feelings like the rest of us.	3.90 (.81)	3.60 (.72)	-.375	.708	
6. It is not wise to trust an offender too far.	2.47 (.93)	2.75 (.72)	-2.062	.039	
7. I think I would like a lot of offenders.	2.21 (.84)	2.53 (.84)	-2.020	.043	
8. Bad prison conditions just make an offender more bitter.	2.92 (1.07)	3.12 (.76)	-.825	.409	
9. Give an offender an inch and he'll take a mile.	2.69 (.88)	2.68 (.76)	-.287	.774	
10. Most offenders are stupid.	3.24 (.96)	3.09 (.75)	-1.576	.115	
11. Offenders need affection and praise just like anybody else.	3.35 (.86)	3.18 (.75)	-.287	.774	

12. You should not expect too much from an offender.	3.06 (.87)	2.90 (.72)	-1.944	.052
13. Trying to rehabilitate offenders is a waste of time and money.	3.94 (.75)	3.32 (.78)	-4.768	.000
14. You never know when an offender is telling the truth.	2.68 (.96)	2.76 (.79)	-.403	.687
15. Offenders are no better or worse than other people.	3.18 (.92)	3.25 (.70)	-.718	.473
16. In general, offenders think like act alike.	3.50 (.81)	3.43 (.72)	-.315	.752
17. If you give an offender your respect, he'll give you the same.	2.90 (.86)	2.94 (.83)	-.260	.795
18. Offenders only think about themselves.	3.00 (.90)	2.81 (.76)	-1.777	.076
19. There are some offenders I would trust with my life.	2.46 (.98)	2.75 (.87)	-2.144	.076
20. Offenders will listen to reason.	2.50 (.82)	2.79 (.76)	-1.854	.064
21. Most offenders are too lazy to earn an honest living.	2.92 (.96)	2.81 (.85)	-.829	.407
22. I wouldn't mind living next door to an ex-offender.	3.21 (.84)	3.04 (.72)	-1.252	.211
23. Offenders are always trying to get something out of somebody.	3.00 (.86)	2.87 (.69)	-1.660	.097
24. The values of most offenders are about the same as the rest of us.	2.83 (.84)	2.96 (.70)	-1.034	.301

25. I would never want one of my children dating an ex-offender.	2.56 (.92)	2.62 (.77)	-.404	.687
26. Most offenders have the capacity for love.	3.54 (.79)	3.35 (.77)	-1.313	.189
27. Offenders are just plain immoral.	3.42 (.80)	3.12 (.66)	-2.678	.007
28. Offenders should be under strict, harsh discipline.	2.51 (.89)	2.54 (.82)	-.244	.807
29. In general, offenders are basically bad people.	3.18 (.88)	3.09 (.73)	-.939	.348
30. Most offenders can be rehabilitated.	3.79 (.73)	3.35 (.79)	-3.328	.001
31. Some offenders are pretty nice people.	3.26 (.69)	3.13 (.69)	-1.244	.213
32. I would like associating with some offenders.	2.28 (.88)	2.57 (.83)	-2.546	.011
33. Offenders respect only brute force.	3.42 (.78)	3.18 (.73)	-2.445	.015
34. If a person does well in prison, he should be left out on parole.	3.07 (.95)	2.81 (.87)	-2.199	.028

Table 3

Differences in the ATO scores according to demographic variables

	ATO_M1		ATO_M2	
	M (DP)	<i>U</i>	M (DP)	<i>U</i>
Gender				
Male	72.45 (14.41)	356.500	68.86 (12.29)	350.000
Female	64.5 (16.92)		65.75 (6.20)	
Educational Level				
12 th grade	71.11 (15.76)	108.500	68.81 (10.84)	96.500
Higher Education	60.67 (9.77)		59.40 (11.72)	
Previous professional experience				
Yes	71.85 (15.57)	386.500	68.73 (11.76)	360.500
No	65.00 (14.81)		66.13 (8.61)	
Previous military experience				
Yes	66.90 (13.46)	228.500*	66.43 (9.70)	285.000
No	77.38 (16.15)		71.42 (13.50)	

Note. * $p < .05$.

Table 4

Pearson Correlations between ATO and Personality Dimensions

	Neuroticism	Extraversion	Openness to Experience	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness
ATO_M1	-.006	-.066	.007	.053	-.005
ATO_M2	-.097	-.137	.088	.132	-.064

Table 5

Linear Regression Model for Attitudes of Police Recruits in Moment 2

	95% CI B						
	B	SE	β	t	p	L	U
Constant	38.366	4.968		7.723	.000	28.441	48.291
ATO_M1	.420	.069	.607	6.104	.000	.282	.557