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Hooks and triggers are an ill-informed shortcut in de-escalation and crisis intervention

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ABSTRACT

The use of hooks and triggers as a de-escalation strategy in law enforcement has gained traction due to its intuitive appeal and ease of application, especially during high-stress and high-stake encounters. This approach suggests that identifying conversational hooks and avoiding corresponding triggers can foster rapport and mitigate escalation. However, despite its growing popularity, a review of peer-reviewed and grey literature reveals a lack of empirical validation for this framework. More importantly, the apparent simplicity of hooks and triggers masks underlying complexities, which can lead to unintended consequences such as compromised trust, reduced rapport, and escalation rather than de-escalation. Key drawbacks include oversimplification, static assumptions about individual preferences, and self-centric social projection, all of which hinder effective de-escalation and crisis intervention. Moreover, a set of cognitive biases reinforces overconfidence in the method, further entrenching its use despite its limitations. This contribution critically examines hooks and triggers by reviewing the literature, highlighting risks, and providing recommendations to mitigate their materialization. It concludes by calling for a fundamental shift toward empirically more supported communication strategies, such as emphasizing unconditional respect, curiosity, proper use of questions, and active perspective-taking, over formulaic techniques like hooks and triggers. Only by moving communication education and training beyond hooks and triggers, we can equip first responders with the knowledge and tools that foster safer and more effective conflict and crisis interactions.

Key Words   De-escalation; crisis intervention; evidence-based policing; cognitive bias; communication; crisis negotiation.

Training in communicative de-escalation[1] typically emphasizes skills and techniques rooted in crisis intervention and counselling psychology, such as active listening, Cialdini's principles of influence, and empathetic communication strategies (e.g., in Canada, see Deveau, 2021; in the United States, see Police Executive Research Forum, 2023, or McMains et al., 2020). One emerging approach, gaining traction in North America, focuses on equipping first responders with the ability to identify "hooks" and "triggers" to effectively build rapport over the course of an encounter (Barker, 2015; Hart, 2017; London Police Service, 2021).

Hooks are typically referred to as topics that a person encountered is more willing to talk about and which allow a first responder to continue the conversation without aggravating that person but rather reducing their emotional intensity. In contrast, triggers, or hot buttons, are stressors or sensitivities that can escalate the person (Slatkin, 2015; Strentz, 2013). Consequently, seeking hooks and avoiding triggers offer an intuitive and easily teachable framework for de-escalation and crisis intervention in law enforcement contexts. Its simplicity makes it accessible and practical, especially in high-intensity, high-stress, and time-critical situations (cf. Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Klein & Boals, 2001) that first responders frequently encounter, for instance when responding to individuals experiencing a mental health crisis (cf. Baker & Pillinger, 2020; Watson et al., 2014).

Yet, it is this simplicity that masks a nuanced, underlying complexity of the approach. If first responders use hooks and triggers without proper training and unaware of their pitfalls, they can make things worse. Unintended consequences include compromised trustworthiness and overall emotional and physical escalation of an encounter.

This contribution will (1) review the literature on hooks and triggers, (2) highlight their inherent caveats and risks, (3) provide recommendations for proper use, and (4) conclude by pointing out better-supported alternatives.

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[1] As opposed to tactical considerations on de-escalation, including creating time and distance or seeking cover (cp. Police Executive Research Forum, 2023).

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A REVIEW OF EVIDENCE ON HOOKS AND TRIGGERS

A rapid review of peer-reviewed and grey literature, as well as open-source materials, reveals a limited evidence base for the hooks and triggers framework. Key term searches of "hooks and triggers," "hooks," "seeking positives," "triggers," and "hot buttons" were conducted on Google Scholar,[2] SciSpace Literature Review,[3] and Google, yielding only few relevant results.[4]

Counselling and Psychotherapy Literature

Search results located a considerable body of research on triggers in counselling and psychotherapy. There, most discussions of triggers focus on stimuli, including events, situations, memories, or sensory experiences, that provoke strong emotional or psychological reactions, often rooted in past trauma or stress, and potentially leading to crisis (e.g., Viney, 1996; Weissman & Verdeli, 2012). Although these triggered responses do not inherently carry negative valence, they can heighten emotional intensity in ways that affect the therapeutic alliance (Eubanks et al., 2018; Safran et al., 2011). When these reactions are not effectively addressed, they can contribute to what is commonly referred to as a rupture in the therapeutic alliance: "breakdown in the collaborative relationship between patient and therapist" (Safran et al., 2011, p. 236), a key predictor of treatment outcome (Elvins & Green, 2008; Safran et al., 2011).

A rupture in the alliance may arise from a variety of factors, including lack of agreement on therapeutic tasks and goals (e.g., Coutinho et al., 2011), miscommunication (e.g., Rhodes et al., 1994), perceived insensitivity and lack of validation (e.g., Samstag et al., 2003), or a therapist's unawareness of a client's negative feelings (e.g., Coutinho et al., 2011). In a broader sense, any of these breakdowns can themselves be considered triggers, given their potential to spark strong emotional reactions that undermine rapport and collaboration. This review did not identify any discussion of hooks in the context of therapeutic alliance or broader counselling literature.

Law Enforcement Literature

In contrast to counselling settings, where emotional escalation does not necessarily result in a complete breakdown of communication and an increased safety risk for everyone involved, law enforcement generally defines triggers as stressors or sensitivities that should be avoided to prevent rapport rupture and stabilize individuals or situations (Barker, 2015; Grubb, 2016; Grubb et al., 2019; Hart, 2017; Slatkin, 2009, 2015). This orientation corresponds to a more immediate operational goal of preventing harm and maintaining control, emphasizing the need to de-escalate before further crisis intervention occurs. Correspondingly, hooks are understood as elements that foster rapport, such as shared interests, validated emotions, or alignment with the individual's values and motivations (Hart, 2017; Slatkin, 2009).

Hooks and triggers appear to have been first introduced to broader audiences by crisis negotiation non-fiction and popular literature, which provided experiential, i.e. anecdotal, accounts of police negotiators (e.g., Pultz, 2022; Slatkin, 2009, 2015; Strentz, 2013). In these sources, too, hooks are described as positives that facilitate rapport, while triggers, sometimes referred to as hot buttons, escalate emotional intensity. This review did not identify a formal academic conceptualization or evaluation of either hooks, triggers, or both in combination.

Retrospective Validation

A recently emerging body of inductive research, largely derived from interviews with crisis negotiators, supports the operational usage of hooks and triggers within law enforcement (e.g., Grubb, 2016; Grubb et al., 2019; Hay & Bennell, 2024). However, interviewees' references to utilizing positives and avoiding hot buttons are preceded by the popular and non-fiction literature mentioned above. These publications have significant reach and are frequently cited in standard textbooks, such as *Crisis Negotiations: Managing Critical Incidents and Hostage Situations in Law Enforcement and Corrections* (McMains et al., 2020). The sequence of the literature reporting inductive research projects following the above-mentioned popular and non-fiction literature on hooks and triggers may suggest that crisis negotiators' training may have been influenced by these earlier works. While this pathway remains speculative, the literature search did not produce any rigorous, either observational or (quasi-)experimental, evaluation of the approach.

Conclusion: Practical Appeal and Ease of Use

Drawing on his journalistic research with the New York City Police Department's Hostage Negotiation Team, Eric Barker (2015) emphasizes that steering conversations toward hooks and away from hot buttons or triggers helps first responders reduce unnecessary antagonism and soothes individuals in crisis. It is this simplicity that fosters rapid recall and easy implementation, especially in high-pressure situations (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Klein & Boals, 2001), contributing to the ongoing popularity of this approach despite the paucity of formal research.

[2]The substantial coverage of Google Scholar has been demonstrated in prior studies (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016; Visser et al., 2021), which highlight its ability to index a broader range of citations compared to Scopus, Web of Science, and other databases. These findings support the validity of using simple keyword searches in Google Scholar to identify relevant literature, particularly during initial exploratory research stages. However, critical evaluation of its indexed sources remains necessary.

[3]The utility of artificial intelligence tools in streamlining the literature review process has been highlighted in recent studies (Devi et al., 2024; Jain et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2023). SciSpace has been shown to be beneficial for conducting detailed literature reviews (Devi et al., 2024; Jain et al., 2024). However, while artificial intelligence tools like SciSpace can help make (especially) explorative literature reviews more effective, their limitations require careful validation of their outputs (Devi et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2023).

[4]Rapid reviews are typically subject to limitations, including potential search, selection, and data extraction bias; however, because (1) only few studies on Hooks and Triggers as a concept were identified all together, (2) this review utilized more than just one database (see above, footnotes 2 and 3), and (3) grey literature was included in the search, these specific sources of bias have been significantly reduced (cp. Smela et al., 2023), highlighting that the main limitation lies in the absence of available evidence.

DRAWBACKS

Yet, the simplicity and intuitiveness of hooks and triggers neglect an underlying complexity. If first responders do not understand the nuances that characterize the approach, they can cause more harm than good. Drawbacks can undermine rapport-building and escalate encounters on two levels. On the first level, they impact each individual interaction directly. On the second level, they consolidate an oversimplified understanding of hooks and triggers and, therefore, perpetuate potentially harmful use, without first responders being aware of it.

First-Level Drawbacks

Oversimplification

As discussed, first responders commonly understand hooks as positive topics that foster rapport, such as hobbies, safe spaces, or trusted individuals (cp. Barker, 2015; Hart, 2017). Triggers, conversely, are associated with negative topics that escalate emotional intensity, such as crisis-precipitating events or consequences of regrettable actions (cp. Barker, 2015; Hart, 2017). Steering toward hooks and away from triggers appears as intuitive as logical: Focusing on enjoyable topics should ease cognitive strain and de-escalate emotions, while avoiding sensitive topics reduces the likelihood of escalation.

However, this simplicity poses a significant risk. Associating hooks only with positive subjects and triggers only with negative ones overlooks the complexity of human interaction. The same topic can act as a hook or a trigger depending on factors like relationships, context, or emotional state. For example, someone might openly discuss personal struggles with a friend but shut down when talking to a police officer. Similarly, a person may confide in a crisis worker about past trauma but hesitate if a family member is present, or a veteran might feel comfortable sharing deployment experiences with fellow service members but become defensive if engaged by a civilian.

Static assumptions

Another pitfall arises from the assumption that hooks and triggers that have been identified during previous encounters remain static over time or across contexts. This assumption disregards the fluid nature of human preferences and emotional states. Topics that served as hooks during past calls may no longer apply due to shifts in personal relationships, developmental changes, or evolving interests. For instance, a young person who previously found comfort in discussing the Pokémon universe may no longer relate to that topic as their interests shift over time. A client might be known to first responders to respond well to mentions of their psychotherapist (a hook), yet only until funding for the therapy expires or the therapist ends the relationship (now a trigger). Additionally, the dynamics within a crisis call can transform hooks into triggers, or vice versa, as emotional intensity fluctuates or the focus shifts between past, present, and future concerns. Such a reliance, often fostered by software programs and local records providing first responders with "pre-response safety briefings," including "de-escalation techniques, any known triggers, and contextual information compiled from previous contact" (HealthIM, 2024), can set the de-escalation effort up for failure.

Self-centricity and social projection

A further complication involves social projection, wherein individuals project their own hooks and triggers onto others based on their personal frame of reference (cp. Epley, 2015). Even experienced crisis negotiators and mental health professionals are susceptible to this bias, potentially leading to miscommunication and reduced or compromised rapport and escalation (Zaiser, 2023). Examples include calling on persons experiencing suicide crisis to think of their children or parents as a hook, without prior exploration of the nature of the corresponding relationship, or avoiding the graphic discussion of potential suicide methods out of one's own discomfort and/or fear of giving others ideas of self-harming behaviours.

Second-Level Drawbacks

On a higher level, these drawbacks also feed into false beliefs that overrate efficacy and reliability of hooks and triggers as well as disregard the corresponding drawbacks discussed above. A set of cognitive biases creates a self-reinforcing cycle that makes it difficult for first responders to critically assess opportunities and limitations of hooks and triggers in dynamic situations: First, processing fluency promotes overconfidence in the approach. Then, confirmation and outcome bias consolidate the skewed perception, before availability bias sustains it.

How false beliefs form: processing fluency

Hooks and triggers align with how humans process and store information, making them easy to learn, retrieve, and apply, especially under stress (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Reber & Schwarz, 1999). Processing fluency makes simple concepts feel more truthful (Newman et al., 2012), leading to uncritical acceptance of oversimplified ideas. For instance, relying on hooks and triggers passed on from previous calls, whether through local files or earlier conversations (e.g., during handoff from primary response to crisis negotiations), may reduce first responders' uncertainty and foster a deceptive sense of preparedness. The associated processing fluency reinforces confidence in the approach's effectiveness, often at the expense of critically examining corresponding limitations and shortfalls.

How false beliefs consolidate: confirmation and outcome bias

Confirmation bias then leads responders to favour information that support these beliefs and to disregard indicators of the limitations of hooks and triggers, promoting further reliance on the approach (Hart et al., 2009; Nickerson, 1998). Outcome bias further distorts assessments, as responders judge effectiveness based on success rather than process (Baron & Hershey, 1988). If a situation de-escalates, responders may attribute success to hooks and triggers, ignoring other factors like the passage of time or implicit communication. This misplaced credit reinforces a false sense of reliability of hooks and triggers.

How false beliefs sustain: availability bias

Once a skewed perception of hooks' and triggers' effectiveness and reliability are consolidated, availability bias will sustain them, re-starting the self-reinforcing cycle mentioned above. Availability bias refers to people's tendency to judge the importance of information based on how easily it

is recalled (Sanna & Schwarz, 2004; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Because hooks and triggers are now consolidated as a seemingly effective and reliable approach, they appear more valid and are more easily retrievable (Schwarz et al., 1991). Training (processing fluency) and selectively recalled successes (confirmation and outcome bias) position hooks and triggers for quick and easy access for future encounters, especially under stress.

Recommendations for Proper Use

While discussing seemingly trivial but positive topics (cp. Barker, 2015, London Police Service, 2021; Pultz, 2022) can serve as a temporary distraction and buy time in high-stakes situations, meaningful rapport-building extends beyond superficial small talk (Alison et al., 2013; Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990). Vecchi et al. (2005) offer a way of relating to hooks in a more nuanced way: Events that are strictly within the scope of the person's crisis experience, rather than positive topics geared to elicit cognitive ease in a person going through crisis. Addressing these experiences is essential to validate and normalize the individual's feelings, which are prerequisites for building effective rapport and achieving de-escalation and problem-solving (Roberts, 2005, Tripathi et al., 2023). Through the lens of the hooks and triggers framework, this might feel counter-intuitive to first responders, and they might construe such hooks as triggers and avoid them all together at the expense of building meaningful rapport.

On the bottom line, to use hooks and triggers effectively and to fully unlock their potential, first responders have to move away from the narrow, limited, oversimplified, and static understanding that this contribution has identified. The complexities and dynamics discussed above reveal that hooks and triggers can only function effectively when specific conditions are met, which current education and training have to stress both when it comes to collecting corresponding information in local records and databases as well as for the actual conversational de-escalation and crisis intervention:

1. Awareness of the limitations: First responders need to be educated on the caveats at both levels, as discussed above, to better understand the possibilities and the limitations of using hooks and triggers as an approach to de-escalation and crisis intervention, especially when relying on previously captured and stored information as well as entering corresponding information into local records or other databases for future use.

2. Direct engagement for first-hand identification of hooks and triggers: Because hooks and triggers are inherently dynamic and context-dependent, they must be identified, negotiated, and/or verified (if retrieved from local records, other databases, or passed on between first responders) in real time through direct, empathetic conversation with the person in crisis. This ensures that the topics addressed resonate authentically with the individual and are not based on generalized assumptions or second-hand reports.

3. Other- (as in patient-/client-) centricity: Instead of drawing from their own reasoning in assessing

what might seem reasonable conversational avenues of intervention or de-escalation, first responders must explore the other person's frame of reference, along with their current emotional intensity and the context of the encounter. This is a commitment to curiosity and openness beyond the mere/formulaic exercising of a list of active listening skills, with the responder continuously adjusting their approach based on verbal and non-verbal cues to make their best guess of the subject's experience and needs. When it is first responders' own frame of reference, i.e., experiences, values, beliefs, and worldviews, that informs their determination of another person's hooks and triggers, they reflect the responders' assumptions rather than the individual's lived experience. This self-centric approach runs counter to overwhelming evidence emphasizing that rapport-building requires subject-centricity (Epley, 2015; Kirschenbaum & Jourdan, 2005; Roberts, 2005; Rogers, 1951; Zaiser, 2023).

Training and education can teach accordingly within existing formats through scenario-based training, role plays, and modular sessions that fit easily into current crisis intervention, use-of-force, or annual requalification training. These activities can be reinforced in the field through coaching and field integration, with supervisors and field training officers using simple debrief prompts to embed the skills into everyday policing without adding extra classroom hours. Such an approach also addresses common objections of time and resource constraints while giving officers repeated opportunities to practise and reinforce the skills in realistic settings, regardless of agency size or geographical location (urban/rural).

CONCLUSION: PROCESS OVER SUBSTANCE

Hooks and triggers seem to represent a viable framework for de-escalation and crisis intervention to equip first responders with the tools they need to build rapport and, with it, trust. Their intuitive appeal lies in their simplicity and applicability under stress, suggesting first responders an easily accessible way to navigate emotionally charged interactions. However, the effectiveness of this approach has significant limitations, which are masked behind the same characteristics that constitute its appeal and are reinforced by a cognitive, self-referential loop that perpetuates a uniformed reliance on an approach ill-suited to unlock the full potential of communicative de-escalation and crisis intervention.

Whereas hooks and triggers appear deficient of any scientific evidence base rooted in rigorous evaluative research, a growing body of research does support how (unconditional) respect and a humanizing approach (e.g., Bennell et al., 2021; Todak & James, 2018), curiosity in the other person (Letendre Jauniaux & Lawford, 2024; Thacker et al., 2019), along with the sincere and genuine asking of (open-ended) questions (e.g., Kardas et al., 2022; Oliva et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2004), and a non-judgmental focusing on the other person (other-centricity, Alison et al., 2013; Lavoie et al., 2025; Zaiser, 2023) can supersede verbal and non-verbal listening tactics, especially when they are applied without proper intention

and may, as a result, not be perceived as authentic communication (Epley, 2015; Mehrabian, 1971; Schulz von Thun et al., 2019). These principles are also reflected in Lavoie et al.'s (2025) set of tangible de-escalation competencies that their studies validated for the context of law enforcement response to mental health crises.

These are only examples of approaches to de-escalative and rapport-building communication for law enforcement that are supported by empirical evidence. While, at this point, most of that evidence comes from other occupational domains (including healthcare and counselling literature; cp. McDermott & Hulse, 2012; or Price & Baker, 2012, for instance), several researchers have argued that these principles are transferable to encounters between police and community members (McDermott & Hilse, 2012; Oliva et al., 2010; Vecchi et al., 2005, 2019). In addition, an emergent body of research has corroborated the argument and supports the successful adoption of such approaches (e.g., Bennell et al., 2021; Engel et al., 2022; McLean et al., 2020; Oliva et al., 2010; Todak & James, 2018).

A shift toward the strategies listed above will better equip first responders to navigate the complex interactions they encounter on a daily basis. At the same time, practitioners will benefit from future research that will further test these approaches across diverse crisis contexts, evaluate their long-term impact on responder–subject interactions, and compare their effectiveness against existing, empirically supported communication frameworks.

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