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LAW, CRIMINOLOGY & CRIMINAL JUSTICE | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Law enforcement disconnect from the community

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Abstract: The dialog about enforcing the law varies between administrators, politicians, law enforcement officers, and the community. Each in turn has their own defined language. We performed a qualitative study on how officers reported critical incidents. A convenience sample of Louisiana and Mississippi Police officers was recruited from the Regional Counterdrug Training Academy in Meridian, MS. All participants were rural law enforcement officers ($n = 307$). Officers answered qualitative open-ended questions about their responses to critical incidents and the Life Events Checklist-5 was administered. Our results indicate that disengaged and disconnected language is used by officers to cope with the stress of critical incidents; the officer's disengagement creates efficiency and functionality. Unfortunately, the language that police use to protect themselves can create barriers to dialog between officers and others. Thus, public administrators and politicians can bridge the communication disconnect with the community by assuring clear unambiguous two-way transmission of information and that police language is interpreted correctly.

Subjects: Police; Trauma Studies; Urban Policy

Keywords: police dialog; community and police; police stress

1. Introduction

There are approximately 18,000 separate, autonomous law enforcement agencies in the United States (Police, 2014). Decentralization and fragmentation of law enforcement is apparent but can also be advantageous because of greater diversity that can be more responsive to local conditions. The law enforcement agencies enforce federal and local laws and create internal security for maintenance of a civil society (Kraska, 2007). "Security does not just operate through centralized sovereign decisions but also through everyday administrative routines ..." (Kienscherf, 2014), such as



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LisaAnn Gittner's current research focuses on poor health outcomes that derive from unhealthy communities, especially medically and socially disenfranchised communities. Her research always has a focus on assuring that all population groups are included and that the results can be translated to the widest possible population. Her research and teaching propose solutions that can be implemented in communities to alleviate marginalization and create healthier environments. Gittner teaches public administration and public health students how to navigate the policy process and to look for solutions that benefit all.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Police officers speak in a language that can easily be misinterpreted by the public. Police use "official" jargon when discussing incidents to shield themselves from feeling the full impact of the traumatic incident. The police are not being evasive or abusive, rather they are shielding themselves. Their language is a defense mechanism that allows them to function even under great stress. However, the language of law enforcement could be and sometimes is misconstrued as uncaring or disengaged. Administrators can be a buffer that can interpret police communication for the public.

decisions on law enforcement's presence and actions in a community. Social control of citizens and social order is maintained through "rules" and law enforcement officers are the keepers of "the rules." The social fabric is held together because of the order, cohesion, and safety that policing supplies (Bradford, 2014).

Law enforcement, then keeps "the rules" and civil society intact. Law enforcement agencies and officers maintain "the rules" by moderating their responses to the level of risk each citizen and community poses to the overall society; law enforcement responses can range from coercion to consent (Kienscherf, 2014). The boundaries between "the rules" community norms are fluid. They can hold different meanings for government representatives and community members. There is a spectrum of coercion-persuasion that is used by the government through law enforcement to assure citizens behave in a socially acceptable fashion (Kienscherf, 2014). But there is also trust that the interactions between police and the community will be fair (Murphy, Mazerolle, & Bennett, 2014).

Thus the interaction, dialog, and language regarding enforcing the law becomes important to assure the varied constituents build trustworthy relationships (Murphy et al., 2014). But the language varies between administrators, politicians, law enforcement officers, and the public (i.e. community); each in turn has their own defined dialogs. Administrators are the neutral arbitrators between "the rules," fair implementation practices and the street-level actuation; administrators are expected to exhibit neutral competence to include the broadest social context into the dialog (Vinzant, 1993). Politicians, on the other hand, are expected to represent their voters; they represent the opinion of the political minority (i.e. the community, district, State as compared to the national whole) who put them in office (Wlezien, 2004). Administrators and politicians frequently speak the same administrative language and typically are the liaison to promote dialog between law enforcement and the public when critical incidents occur. Law enforcement officers have their own bias and through their paramilitary training which includes an intensive socialization process "for the realities of potentially dangerous jobs that incorporate the use of force" (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). Law enforcement training instills an *esprit de corps*, forms the officers into a tightly bound cohort, increases cohesion, strengthens relationships within the officer community, and creates a dialog of us vs. them that excludes the citizen community that they are engaged to protect (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). Public dialog about law enforcement varies; multiculturalism has changed the community which no longer speaks with one voice. Thus, in our multicultural society, the public may or may not feel they are represented and there may be a multitude of community voices defining social norms.

The definition of social acceptability varies depending upon community norms and perception. Nationally, young black males who are more likely to be involved with law enforcement because of an incident (as either victims or perpetrators), are the "... same people that most often view the police as illegitimate ..." (Police, 2014). The legitimacy of law enforcement as rule keepers in communities has recently been questioned because of a disconnect between law enforcements' and the communities' varying perception of social acceptable norms. Communities by societal convention assume the best of government and law enforcement actions, while law enforcement officers in turn assume the worst of the citizen (Bovard, 2000) inherently leading to conflict and policy paradoxes regarding the role and scope of law enforcement. Society then innately becomes divided into the enforcers and those needing to have rules enforced upon them. Power is kept by the enforcers which then disenfranchises the remainder of the community. Foucault (1977) states that power produces realities and in that reality there are objects and rituals that are considered "truth" (Foucault, 1977). Each of these groups has their own language which provides meaning to the rules and society. Sometimes the derived meaning between the groups is the same and other times it is not.

Language is the glue that maintains order, unifies "the rules," and coalesces a society. The between-group dialog brings a society together as a whole—the politicians and administrators, law enforcement officers, and the citizens. However, the language of law enforcement is different from

language used by politicians/administrators and the community to describe law enforcement activities. Language produces meaning and a reality. "... if you call for more police presence to regulate criminalized drugs ... you understand the 'problem' as primarily a 'law and order issue'" (Boyd, Boyd, & Kerr, 2015). But if you call for more police presence to assist with getting drug abusers into treatment programs, you understand "the problem" as primarily a "mental health issue" (Boyd et al., 2015). Therein lies a paradox that creates difficulties with even outwardly straightforward communication between law enforcement officers and the community. As officers internalize and make meaning of their profession, the language they use becomes their truth. When officers are exposed to critical incidents, they can internalize a different meaning of reality than administrators and the community. Unfortunately, the language used might create a very different meaning about the same critical incident for different groups. The same is true of incident images. Images could have multiple meanings for diverse viewers; previously, the general community obtains meaning from the narrative constructed by law enforcement that accompanies the images of an incident (Police, 2014). The purpose of this study was to explore law enforcement officers' perception of critical incidents through their language and descriptions of the incidents.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample and setting

A quasi-experimental, mixed methods study was conducted with a convenience sample of Louisiana and Mississippi Police officers recruited from the Regional Counterdrug Training Academy located in Meridian, MS. All participants were rural law enforcement officers. The total sample was 307 officers. An online survey link was sent to the officers by email; survey responses were collected for 12 days.

2.2. Data collection

The survey included open-ended questions about individual officer's exposure to potential traumatic events and elaboration on their experience of each event. In addition, participants filled out a Weathers et al., (2013) Life Events Checklist-5 (LEC-5) (Weathers et al., 2013) and provided demographic data. The data describing traumatic incidents on the LEC-5 were used for thematic analysis. The LEC for DSM-5 is a self-report measure designed to screen for potentially traumatic events in a respondent's lifetime. The LEC-5 assesses exposure to different events known to potentially result in PTSD or distress (Weathers et al., 2013). Demographics were also collected.

2.3. Analysis

We used a systematic thematic analysis approach to analyze the responses; our approach was based on Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, and Townsend (2010) integration of thematic analysis, grounded theory, and narrative analysis into a single method (Floersch et al., 2010). Two coders independently coded the responses into themes. The coders then reconciled the themes and developed a master code list. Codes were then grouped into themes.

Thematic techniques do not provide statistical tests of significance. Reliability and validity are essential criteria for research rigor in quantitative research. However in qualitative research, dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability are the criteria for research rigor. The dependability of the themes was achieved through consistent coding steps that were followed by two independent coders. To assess the credibility of the emergent themes, member checking was used (Floersch et al., 2010). Since the purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand the

phenomena of interest from the participant's eyes, the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results. The themes were discussed with a former law enforcement officer who verified that the themes were appropriate and resonated with his law enforcement experiences. Transferability was assessed by literature searches to ground the emergent themes in existing knowledge and through thorough discussion with the research team. Confirmability of the themes was achieved by obtaining corroboration through interviews with officers who had experienced critical incidents.

3. Results

3.1. Demographics

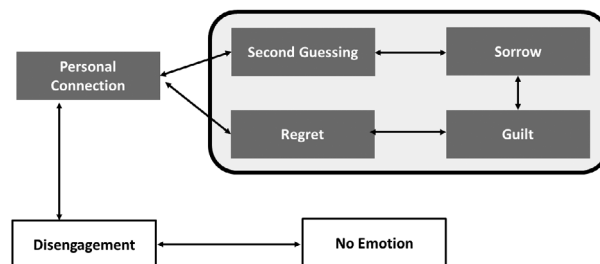
Sample composition. Greater than 90% of the officers were men. Race was distributed: 16% Black, 1% Asian, 2% Native American, and 81% white. Educational attainment was distributed: 9% high school, 19% associate degree, 33% some college, 31% bachelor's degree, and 5% graduate degree. The majority of officers were married (71%), 14% were single, 11% divorced, 3% separated, and 1% widowed. Forty-six percent (46%) had been divorced at least once. Only 30% served in the military; of those 35% have been combat deployed.

Years in law enforcement ranged from 2 to 44 years. Current assignments were: Patrol 31.0%, Traffic 2.0%, Narcotics 3%, Warrants 2%, Investigation 21%, and Other 41%. Ranks ranged from Patrolman 18%, Corporal 7%, Sergeant 19%, Lieutenant 8%, Captain 6%, Chief 5%, Sheriff 1%, and Other 36%. The majority of officers ($n = 246$) did not supervise other officers; however, those in supervisory roles had 10–500 subordinates with most supervising 5–20 officers. Most 45% worked an 8-h shift, though, 30% worked a 12-h shift and the rest had varied shifts. Department sizes varied, most of the officers came from small to medium departments (22.3% from departments <25 officers; 25.3% from departments of 25 to 50 officers; 17.2% from departments 52 to 75 officers and 35.3% from departments > 75 officers). The psychometrics for the LEC-5 were Cronbach $\alpha = 0.973$ ($n = 307$). Inter-item correlation ranged from 0.684 to 0.897. The mean score was $x = 16.89 \pm 12.9$ and the range of scores was 0–49. Score distribution was as follows: 81 scored 0; 133 scored <25; and 93 scored >25.

3.2. Emergent themes

Thematic analysis revealed that officers' responses to critical incidents varied from complete disengagement to a cycle of regret, second guessing, sorrow, and guilt (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Thematic analysis of officers reporting of traumatic incidents.



Both disengagement and a cycle of regret were related to the officer's personal connection to the incident. Personal connections to the incidents ranged from "knowing the person involved" to "being a parent" to "recognizing the situation." Officers talked about the stressful incidents their profession exposes them to on a daily basis and that they never knew what the next call might bring. "I have watched more than one person die in my presence."

Officers said they were stressed but compartmentalized the stress by "being professional" or disconnecting from the situation (Morash, Haarr, & Kwak, 2006). If the officer was disconnected, the word choices and language when describing critical incidents showed complete disengagement and most of the time was devoid of emotion. They talked of victims and suspects, perpetrators, even if they knew the people involved. "... *my close friend was the offender and his children the victims ...*" Instead of using given names, they talked about the xyz victim (i.e. white male 34 year old) rather than saying "name who is my neighbor" or they talked about their "partner" rather than saying their name.

My partner was shot by a suspect on a traffic stop. I carried him, put him in my unit and transported him to the hospital where I carried him in and assisted the doctor with stabilizing him.

Thus, some officers may self-select into law enforcement positions because they already have the capacity to cope with violence (Morash et al., 2006). But there was a demarcation with some officers talking about personal connections which can make the incident more difficult for them to disengage,

I only have issues with Child Homicide cases. The main one is the Death of a 4 year old female at the hands of her Step Father. At the time my Daughter was the same age.

Once they were not disengaged, their language shifted:

I was involved in the execution of two search warrant on a duplex. Officer <name> was murdered during the operation. I had known him my whole life.

The officer shifted from describing an incident where shots were fired to talking about an officer being "murdered." The word choice "murdered" evoked emotions and feelings. Officers in carrying out their everyday duties cut themselves off from the emotional norms surrounding grief until an incident breaches their disengagement.

Officers also describe feeling of second guessing and replaying the incident to make sense of it and to determine what they will do in the future if confronted with a similar situation.

Accidental Shooting Death ... the unknown of exactly what happened creates questions in my mind and during training exercises.

Guilt emerges as a theme and it appears with another theme of second guessing and the feeling that they should have responded differently,

... two of my close friends shot while in the line of duty. This was hard for me because if I had been there then this would not have happened.

Officers reflected on what they could have done differently and replayed the incident(s) trying to figure out how to change the aftermath. Many emotions appeared and the emotions gave the impression that the officer cycled between emotional feeling of second guessing, sorrow, regret, and guilt.

Sorrow appears as a theme for some officers, their word choices to describe the incidents are very different than officers who are disengaged.

Performing CPR on two young children and feeling the life leave their bodies ...

But when officers are disengaged, they describe incidents in a detached manner,

Answered a call of a child's death. Upon arrival we found a five (5) year old white male which had been starved to death ...

The dichotomous way of describing a child's death is reflected in the word choices of the respective officers. Noticeably, the first officer was feeling and the second was disengaged. Keys to the meaning of the described incidents for the officers were found in the anchoring words the officers used that reflected their preferred meaning. The incident's meaning is produced from and within language and representation of the incident or crime images (Police, 2014).

An interesting finding was that disengagement bled over into the officer's personal lives. When traumatic incidents occurred to them on a personal rather than professional level, many still chose words that completely disengaged them from the situation, "I responded to a traffic fatality" vs. "my son being killed in a car accident." Another described a traumatic life-threatening personal injury in a detached disengaged manner,

Was a passenger ... when the vehicle we were riding in swerved to miss wildlife ... I was ejected from the vehicle and the vehicle then ran over me causing serious physical injury ...

The officer described the vehicle accident that seriously injured him in dispassionate terms. As a way to appear less weak or less vulnerable, initial law enforcement training imbues a sense of "superhuman emotional strength" which helps officers disengage from the situation at hand (Violanti, 1996).

4. Discussion

Law enforcement previously controlled the dialog and the stories about urban spaces, crime, drugs, policing, and incidents (Boyd et al., 2015). Law enforcement defined the meanings of each incident in the way they labeled the participants: perpetrator (the deviant), victim (the aggrieved citizen), and neutral arbitrator (the officer). A simplistic victim/predator binary runs throughout law enforcement language (Police, 2014). Incidents were attributed meaning by reducing the people involved to simple characteristics and disengaging from the human aspects of the situation. A situation became an incident, with incident being more detached and the officer as a neutral observer or sometimes actor in the scene. Our work shows similar language usage, where characteristics were disengaged from an actual person or situation; allowing the officer (i.e. law enforcement) to efficiently process an incident.

However, incident reporting is changing with the advent of social media and citizens posts of real-time incidents. "Law enforcement agencies must also consider how their own actions are reported to the public through social media. Nearly any public action of a police officer may be recorded on a mobile device and can be instantly uploaded to a social media site ... officers [need] to always behave in public as if they are being recorded, because that very well may be the case" (Police, 2014). Law enforcement is changing and missions are becoming more multifaceted, the simple mission of responding to crimes and reporting on incidents through the neutral officer is no longer valid. "... police departments are far more complex than they were a generation or two ago. They still respond to calls for service, and they still investigate crimes, but that is where the similarities end" (Police, 2014). The complexities of modern law enforcement, the technological advances, and the skepticism of the public all combine to change in practical situations that officers now confront. Trust between the community and law officers is fragile; "trust extends beyond narrow public assessments

that police perform their duties effectively and efficiently to include a sense that the police understand the needs of the community” (Murphy et al., 2014).

Trust can be broken if a community feels that they are not being treated with dignity and respect; a disengaged officer may be perceived as not treating individual’s fairly. Officers may not be able to remain a disengaged observer whose version of the incident is regarded as absolute truth because communities may read other meanings into officer disengagement (e.g. hiding something or discrimination rather than the officer being disengaged so they can perform their job without breaking down). Police-initiated contact with the community (e.g. if the police is disengaged) can be perceived in the community as unfair leading to a sense that the police and the community are not linked (Bradford, 2014; Murphy et al., 2014).

Law enforcement training instills discipline and that the officer is charged with maintaining society’s discipline. Discipline creates “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1977) which are then easier to process than dissenting skeptical individuals (Foucault, 1977). Violence escalation was more common during incidents when individuals felt that the officer was disrespectful (Murphy et al., 2014). Officer language can contribute to increasing or decreasing aggression.

The “blue wall of silence” is the most well-known component of law enforcement culture (Crank & Crank, 2015; Lee, Lim, Moore, & Kim, 2013). The wall embodies a code of conduct and a way of describing incidents through disengagement that permeates law enforcement officers and separates them from the rest of society. Law enforcement tradition and training is embedded in a culture that expects the public to be as disciplined as they are. Officers are trained to a disciplinary standard that clearly demarks power to the officer and subservience to the citizen who has broken “the rules.” Intensive socialization process occurs during training to prepare the officer “for the realities of potentially dangerous jobs that incorporate the use of force” (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). Training instills an *esprit de corps* to form a tightly bound officer community. But, law enforcement training also creates a solidarity that excludes the public. Innovative programs to encourage community–police interaction have had disappointing results with “the presence of narrowly defined traditional roles for participants ... whereby police were expected to deal with public safety issues and residents accepted a passive police-dependent role ...” (Graziano, Rosenbaum, & Schuck, 2014).

Officers walk a line between their officer comrades and the public that they are engaged to protect. However, there is a perception shift occurring, the officer is no longer viewed as the neutral arbitrator of justice; thus, an officer’s disengagement may be perceived by the public as “uncaring” or “bullying” rather than neutral. The paramilitary disciplinary reality of the officer’s work can conflict with both the public’s reality that they are free and the politician/ administrator’s reality that all individuals are members of participatory democratic society. Law enforcement legitimacy is being questioned, and the disconnect between law enforcement, the public, and administrators is widening (Police, 2014).

The discussion of urban neighborhoods are “filtered ... creating a conceptual place of dangerousness, deprivation, and contagion, that complements media depictions of the neighbourhood and the people who live there (marked as ... dangerous), which serves to substantiate a need for policing solutions/interventions ...” (Boyd et al., 2015). However, the meaning and language used to describe a place are multifaceted and disputed depending upon who defines the space. Law enforcement, the public and administrative language is very different. Depending upon who is the speaker, the language differences may be misconstrued. Discussions of “taking back the neighborhood, creating a climate of order, and aggressively enforcing minor law and order infractions; all in an effort to cultivate healthier communities” (Kraska, 2007) may not be met with acceptance by the public. Racial and cultural differences between the community and law enforcement may further confound the divide. Unfortunately, even with community policing strategies in place, the way officers speak can further the divide (Skogan, van Craen, & Hennessy, 2015). Officer training with focus on communication skills, cultural diversity, and problem solving are not a panacea (Birzer, 2003). The

officers' immersion in the community can bridge a portion of the divide. Our study shows that some disconnection is necessary for effectively performing their duties. Officers are taught to display a "command presence" to take charge of the situation but it can quickly be construed by the public as an overt display of dominance (Cooper, 2008). Especially in communities already marginalized because of race and socioeconomic conditions, this type of law enforcement behavior can ratchet up the tension in a situation leading to over reaction on both sides. "... central to the task of policing is the punishment of disrespect. Punishment of disrespect stems from the fact that police officers demand deference to the badge" (Cooper, 2008). Respect can be interpreted differently depending on the situation and language used and can further distance law enforcement from the community it has pledged to protect. There is considerable ambiguity in the police perceptions about those whom they protect and whether the public supports them or is hostile. These perceptions can lead officers to further disengage from the community. Calls have been made for law enforcement as a profession to bridge the disconnect between police and the communities but "If we [the police] aren't viewed as legitimate in these communities, we aren't going to be effective ..." (Police, 2014). But the way in which police officers "wield their power" through action and language could cause further community perceptions of unfairness (Bradford, 2014).

Community perceptions of unfairness have been linked to questions about police legitimacy and less community cooperation with the police.

4.1. Take away

Our study shows that law enforcement language is the language of disengagement and disconnection used by officers to cope with the stress of critical incidents. Using language that removes an officer's personal connection to the incident, the officer can function in a traumatic incident. Reactions to and emotions surrounding critical incidents can be managed; the officer's disengagement creates efficiency and functionality. However, the language the officer uses can be perceived as a disconnection from the community. Administrators and politicians can bridge the police-community disconnect by assuring clear unambiguous two-way transmission of information and that police language is interpreted correctly by the community.

4.2. Limitations

Qualitative studies have a more limited generalizability; we tried to mitigate the limitations by recruiting officers to represented diverse types of law enforcement agencies. The sample may not be representative of all law enforcement officers because all the participants were from rural law enforcement agencies in the southern United States.

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