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Police Use of Force Decisions – A Gender Perspective

Tina Jaeckle, Ph.D., Barbara Benoliel, Ph.D. Orville Nickel, Ph.D.

Problem

Policing can be stressful work, and men and women respond differently in stressful situations. The decision for the application of physical force during an arrest is specific to the profession of policing and can generate a significant stress response for the officer. We did not find literature that addressed possible gender differences in police officers decisions to use force in the course of their daily duties.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to explore police responses and decisions in common policing activities and propose a theory that modeled gender differences in police use of force.

Significance

This research addressed a gap in the literature on specific decision factors that both men and women respond to under confrontational conditions within police culture. The comparative analysis to previous studies using similar methodology allowed for broader conclusion and possible contribution to policing policy, police training for the field and policing strategies within communities.

Social Change Implications

The application of physical force during an arrest or in pursuit of a suspect is a decision specific to the profession of policing. A police service that causes injury to a citizen can result in significant public grief or criticism about the service, and unreasonable use of force can be in itself a crime. Understanding police officers' reasons for using force during the course of their daily duties might impact developing a better detailed approach to use of force in the future.

Theory or Framework

Based on theories that focus on conflict control, Taylor's (2002), Psychological Theory, on human nature implies that violence is a learned response that may be more prevalent in human males, hormonally. She indicated that human biology is structured to instinctively respond to stressful situational circumstances while addressing these circumstances with problem solving strategies. Males, like females are also nurturing by nature although hormonally more aggressive. Men release more adrenalin which generates energy but blocks access to calm thinking. Female hormones, such as oxytocin are released in women triggering a nurturing like response.

Relevant Scholarship

The literature indicates that, policewomen do the same work as their male counterparts and they do it equally well or better in some circumstances (Garcia, 2003; Novak et al., 2011). Two studies define the concepts of gender in policing, a Canadian study that encompassed various police agencies and a similar study within a southern U.S. police agency. Although, the results of the two studies demonstrate some cultural differences, there were some significant differences in the gender-based decisions to use physical force in the course of law enforcement duties.

Although the capacity to use force as an instrument for the achievement of state mandated goals is ultimately important to the police role, its application can be complex (Waddington et al., 2009). When used appropriately, police use of force is a functional and necessary aspect of living in a safe and healthy society (Kuhns & Knutsson, 2010).

Research Question

Conflicts between democratic ideologies and the work of maintaining social order and control place a range of demands on the police officers as agents of law enforcement and public safety. Three key questions explored during this review were;

- 1) What does it mean for a police officer to gain and maintain control?
- 2) Does it have to be physical confinement that measures control or do psychological features count?
- 3) Does gender play a role in the decisions for managing circumstances that threaten conflict?

Participants

The participants providing the data were selected from a pool of volunteers from a southern U.S. police force through convenience and purposeful sampling techniques with a stratified distribution of gendered features, cultural differences, age group influences, and included considerations of length of police services of the participants. A series of four focus groups were formed; half of the groups were active duty, female police officers, and the other half were groups of active duty male police officers who were attending a routine day training session in a police training facility

Procedures

The format of the U.S. study followed a study plan that was designed for a qualitative inquiry, utilizing thematic content analysis of a sample of police officers' narrative data collected by way of focus group interviews. Focus groups were presented with vignettes depicting scenarios involving citizens at various degrees of illegal activities, with escalating risk to the public, and asked for their response strategies and actions. Data were collected in audio recordings and notes, later transcribed to text.

Analysis

Data were first analyzed independently by the three researchers using content analysis and constant comparison, and then thematic analysis was conducted with the assistance of qualitative software (Nvivo)

Findings

Taken in concert with other research, it would appear that culture, whether defined by the larger society or organizationally, sets the stage or presents the attitude in a police/offender encounter, while education and gender influence the response decisions. Women attempt to take control by negotiation first but move to force quickly if there is risk to others. Men take physical control first then move to negotiate when the subject is contained. The deadly force considerations by both gender groups indicated that the female group would consider that level of force earlier such as when the subject was still running away, albeit he was running toward a busy shopping mall with a high level of public risk.

Interpretation

There are different perspectives on why the behavior of female officers may differ from male officers. Differences or predispositions suggest that men and women are biologically different and from infancy are socialized differently (Novak et al., 2011). The training academy influences would likely be insignificant in changing gender socialized values and attitudes, yet the occupational socialization perspectives suggest that individual characteristics like gender or race significantly become muted once individuals are assimilated or socialized into the police work environment (Novak et al., 2011). The gender differences observed in this US study are reflective of Novak's comments. There appears to be strong differences in the gender-based decisions in the use of force context

Limitations

Vignette methodologies are not without limitations. There are still limitations with selection bias. Random selection is not a characteristic of this study. Convenience sampling limits the sample's representativeness within the target population. Focus group participants may not share personal beliefs in group settings. These limitations were considered in data collection and multiple responses were requested over extended time to allow participants ample time to share complex responses.

Recommendations

The responses to complex and/or confrontational circumstances by female police officers strongly indicates that mediation, negotiation and communication tactics can be successful and replace some use of force considerations. It is logical, based on current data to investigate the female successes in policing and move to adopting some strategies and tactics that make them successful.

