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An Empathetic Psychological Perspective of Police Deadly Force Training

Rodger E. Broomé

Utah Valley University

Abstract

Police officers must be able to make an accurate appraisal of a lethal encounter and respond with appropriate force to mitigate the threat to their own lives and to the lives of others. Contemporary police deadly force training places the cadet in mock lethal encounters, which are designed to simulate those occurring in the real lives of law enforcement officers. This Reality Base Training (RBT) is designed to provide cadets with experiences that require their reactions to be within the law, policies and procedures, and ethics while undergoing a very stressful, emotional, and physically dynamic situation (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Blum, 2000; Grossman, 1996; Miller, 2008; Murray, 2006). Three police cadets provided written accounts of their deadly force training experiences in the RBT format. The descriptive phenomenological psychological method was used to analyze the data and to synthesize a general psychological structure of their experiences. The results reveal the perceptions, thoughts, feelings and behaviors reflecting the role of consciousness and psychological subjectivity in the participants' understandings and decision-making in the simulated situations.

Keywords

deadly force, lethal encounter, police, Reality Base Training, training

Introduction

Police officers in the United States are armed with firearms for the purposes of using deadly force for self-defense and the defense of the citizenry. The use of deadly force has been a controversial topic in society since the late 1800s (Tennenbaum, 1994). The controversy has not necessarily been based on whether or not police officers had a need for the firearm as a tool

of self-defense, but more based on its application beyond defense of life. Tennenbaum (1994) chronicles this by pointing out that the early news editorials challenged an officer's use of a firearm as a means of "capturing" a fleeing criminal. The controversy in US law enforcement went undecided in society until 1985 when the US Supreme Court's Garner decision was enacted. This decision is considered the principle legal standard restricting police deadly force to life protection only (Tennenbaum, 1994). The law therefore, provides the police officer with both the authority and the duty to protect life via the use of a reasonable degree of force that is necessary to protect life. This authority and duty covers the use of deadly force.

Police deadly force ascended into the public eye in the 1980s and became a focus of public policy for US law enforcement. Stakeholders from civil rights groups, minority groups, and the law enforcement community engaged in a social discourse regarding the nature of police deadly force and the legal boundaries that should contain its application on citizens (Mays & Taggart, 1985). As a result, research, discourse, and policy administration have served to define and direct the police officers' use of deadly force as part of their police activities (Skogan & Frydl, 2004). Pertinent here is that the body of research involved in these social processes has been guided by the *natural sciences* (or positive sciences) model of research with its underlying values of objectivism, quantification, and abstraction from the social contexts in which the police work. Scholars, including psychologists and sociologists (to name a few) have commented on the dubiousness of applying such methods of research on human affairs for a number of decades (Giorgi, 1970; Mills, 1959; Romanyshyn & Whalen, 1989). Prior to this, philosophers like Edmund Husserl (1983/1913) raised challenges to the underlying philosophy of positivism that promoted the idea that only objective and material evidence could be used in the inquiry of human affairs, as well as, in the subsequent interpretations of their findings. Husserl (1983/1913) suggested that a more comprehensive philosophy to guide psychology would necessarily include the subjective and objective aspects of the human experience. Using this as his foundation, Giorgi (1985; 2009) developed a phenomenological psychological method of research which has been guided by Husserlian phenomenology and its *descriptive* approach and its *discovery-orientation* toward human experience. By methodological design, the descriptive phenomenological method in psychology is an *empathetic* approach because its interest is the subjective

psychology of the human person in the lived-context (Churchill & Wertz, 2001; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). I propose that it is exactly this methodological approach that can be vital for our getting at the deepest and richest information that will enable us to better understand what it is like for a police officer to use deadly force.

I will present an example of a descriptive phenomenological study of police training in deadly force. My intention in doing so is two-fold. First of all, I want to demonstrate how important *empathy* is in our attempt to understand the experience of our police in the training for and in the performance of their duties. Second, I seek to provide such an empathic viewpoint through the descriptive phenomenological method so that practitioners and researchers may see its valuable contribution to psychology, the law enforcement community, and society at large.

Deadly Force Law

Prior to the Garner decision, US police in many regions were allowed to shoot a fleeing suspected felon. This refers to what has been known as the “any felony rule” which means that the commission of a serious crime would justify the suspect’s apprehension by any means available (Callahan, 2003; Tennenbaum, 1994). The use of a firearm as a means of capture evolved from the concept found in English Common Law that the police were allowed to apprehend by any means available. This precedence, however, was set in England and merely carried over into the law in the US. However, while the regular police in the UK do not carry firearms, the US police service procedures have evolved in such a manner that firearms are considered a standard enforcement tool (Tennenbaum, 1994). The legal means for capture, on the other hand, had not been narrowed with the addition of lethal weapons carried by police.

Theoretically, the law acts as an embodiment of the significant will of society and perhaps could be seen as a reflection of the collective conscience (Dodd, 2009; Durkheim, 1982/1895). As such, while not in a literal or perfect sense, the law expresses and imposes the norms of society. The Model Penal Code was written in a form that was adoptable into law by political jurisdictions (American Law Institute [ALI], 1985; Callahan, 2003; Tennenbaum, 1994). The Model Penal Code has codified the ideas

behind the “Defense-of-Life” rule and the “Forcible Felony” rule that authorize an officer to shoot a violent person to stop the threat he or she is posing, or to shoot a perpetrator whose serious violent felony is an indication that he or she likely poses a general danger to society if not apprehended (Alpert & Fridell, 1992). In either case, the officer must *reasonably believe* that deadly force is necessary to stop or mitigate the violent threat to him or herself, or to others (American Law Institute, 1985).

The Model Penal Code’s language includes the subjective perspective of the officer in formulating the deadly force decision. *Reasonable belief* is based on the concept that the officer draws on his or her training, knowledge, and perceptions of the given situation to determine that deadly force is the needed action (American Law Institute, 1985). Therefore, if we really want to know what the deadly force situation is like from the officer’s perspective, we need a methodology that allows for the subjective perspective to be analyzed. I propose that the descriptive phenomenological method provides psychology with such inquiries in a systematic, methodical, and critical way to reach the deeper and more meaningful aspects of a lived-experience that may provide general knowledge that is usable in society (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

Police Deadly Force Literature

The majority of literature in the context of mainstream law enforcement that addresses deadly force encounters basically falls into two main categories, (1) Stress Management, and (2) Performance Enhancement. The stress management literature is typically aimed at preparing an officer for the psychological impingements that he or she is likely to experience when confronting a lethal encounter. Many of these writings cross-over with the performance literature, but the stress management literature tends toward helping officers avoid or deal with stress related psychological disorders (PTSD, Anxiety, Depression, etc.) (Blum, 2000; Kirschman, 2007; Miller, 2008). The perspective of the stress management literature tends to aim at the activity of the autonomic nervous system reaction to a perceived threat, the cognitive functioning under pressure, and the disturbing perceptual aspects that tend to be bases for “reliving triggers” associated with stress and anxiety disorders (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000).

The purpose of the stress reaction literature is to help officers prepare for lethal encounters and understand what some of the typical or “normal” reactions are that officers have had when they have been involved in a shooting (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Blum, 2000; Grossman, 1996; Kirschman, 2007; Miller, 2008).

The performance literature is aimed more at the officer’s skill efficacy in the shooting situation. Like Lorenz (1966/1970) and Freud (1933/1970), Grossman (1996) says that there is an apparent innate aversion for killing another human being, in most people. He acknowledges the exceptions of those diagnosed as having Antisocial Personality Disorder (APA, 2000; Grossman, 1996). But Grossman (1996) introduces the Sheepdog metaphor describing those “protectors” in society that can kill another human being in the defense of life context or the protection of the community. The Sheepdogs (police) can make the Sheep (citizens) nervous because of their shared qualities with the predatory Wolf (violent criminals). But the Wolves are predatory beings that seek to harm the Sheep, so the Sheepdogs bark to keep the Sheep together (law and order) so that they are safe and protectable from harm. But they also have to attack a Wolf that has gotten among the Sheep from time to time (Grossman, 1996). The metaphor seems to resonate with the ambivalent relationship between the police and the citizenry (Bonifacio, 1991). Apart from these “natural” Sheepdog types, others need to be trained to help disinhibit them from their normal inhibitions to kill others. It is through training in a Reality Based Training model that most law enforcement officers are prepared for a deadly force encounter (Murray, 2006).

The Reality Based Training model uses a combination of didactic and psychomotor skills training to prepare the trainee for the lethal encounter simulations (Murray, 2006). Some of the didactic portions of the training involve mental skills and emotional management training found in the performance literature (Asken, Grossman, & Christensen, 2010; Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Miller, 2008). The performance literature helps the officer to develop strategies and skills for operating under pressure but also for building a resiliency toward traumatic stress. In order to do this most effectively, Reality Based Training in simulated police scenarios have been developed to give the experiential practice of thinking, moving, and coping through a facsimile of a shooting (Murray, 2006). The scenarios use police trainers as actors and various equipment props including vacant

buildings, automobiles, radios, and handguns loaded with special “marking paint ammunition” also known as simmunitions or simguns. It is posited in the literature that repeated experiential practice is the most effective means of disinhibiting the officer from his or her natural aversion to killing, of preparing him or her for combat stress, and of helping him or her to perform more effectively to increase the likelihood of prevailing and surviving in a deadly force encounter (Asken et al., 2010; Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Grossman, 1996; Miller, 2008). To do this, the simulated lethal encounters have to be as realistic as possible. Because of this, I decided to conduct a descriptive phenomenological research on police deadly force training to discover what the subjective psychological experience was like for the participants (Broomé, 2008).

Method

The Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method is a qualitative research approach that is not inherently anti-quantitative, but orients toward the subjective qualitative personal meanings of the participants. The method uses a five-step approach guided by Husserlian philosophical phenomenology but modified for use in psychology (Giorgi, 2009). In the past, Giorgi (2009; 1985) has consistently delineated the descriptive phenomenological method in psychology as a four step method, but this included the researcher’s assumption of the phenomenological attitude as a fundamentally preparatory step. However, in order to create more emphasis on this vital aspect of the method, he has now directed me (and others) to make this the first of a five step method in the studies we are conducting under his direction (Amedeo Giorgi, Personal Communication). Therefore, this five step explication is not a modification or an innovation of the four step method, but merely an updated expression of the same procedures as before (Giorgi, 2009; 1985).

The researcher gets an account of the experience from the participants in his or her own words and in his or her own everyday attitude. This is referred to as a “naïve account” of the experience. The researcher records the naïve account and later transcribes it or has it transcribed for analysis. There are other methods of data gathering, but they have been described and explained elsewhere (Giorgi, 1985). Once the data is in a written form,

it is regarded as the “raw data” and the means by which the researcher will be able to “observe” the experience through the subjective perspective.

The first of the five-step method requires the researcher to assume a phenomenological attitude. Taken from Husserl (2008/1931), the researcher reserves the positing of the existential nature of the things experienced by the participant. So the researcher withholds a tendency to judge whether or not aspects of the experiences were based on objective facts or not.

In the second step, the researcher reads through the entire naïve account while in the phenomenological attitude and with his or her own perspective *bracketed* to get a sense of the whole (Giorgi, 1985; 2009). More than one overview reading may be needed for the researcher to capture an adequate sense of the whole experience. But once the researcher grasps the “big picture” of the experience, he or she is ready to move on.

The third step is the delineation of *meaning units* which simply means to read through the account again and make marks where the researcher senses a meaning shift. The delineation of the meaning units is not a precise task and there are no wrongly established meaning units. However, the researcher may find that some are longer or could be combined later in the analysis that improves the clarity of their delineation. The overall quality of the analysis is what is important and the meaning unit delineation does not change the data, it just simply articulates it so that it is manageable (Giorgi, 1985; 2009).

The fourth step is the transformation of the meaning units into psychologically sensitive statements but avoiding the use of theory-laden terms associated with any particular brand of psychology. This tactic guards against meaning being added to the transformation that comes from formulated theoretical constructs (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The use of Husserl’s (2008/1931) imaginative variation to find the essential meaning in each meaning unit is required to access the full psychological quality of each of them. Imaginative variation is the researcher using his or her mind to make variations in the meaning unit to see what is and is not essential about it.

Finally, the meaning units are all compared across the participants’ transformed data to find the common constituents of the experience. Those constituents (psychological aspects or qualities) that fit into general categories are given a descriptive title that expresses their psychological essences. The researcher must avoid nominalizing or labeling, but provide

a word or short phrase that describes the psychological constituent as precisely as possible (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The constituents are analyzed to see if there is a cohesive general structure that consists of essential interdependent parts (Giorgi, 2009). The general structure is a coherent statement of all of the constituents in paragraph form, describing how the structure of the experience was lived by the participants in general. The general structure is the findings that are the basis for elaboration and discussion regarding the lived-experience.

Results

Training Scenarios

The three written accounts from the participants were based on three different kinds of lethal encounter situation. Real police officers acted in the roles of the *suspects* in which the cadets were intended to engage according to the simulated situation. The first participant was given a *traffic stop* scenario in which the suspect is found to have outstanding warrants for his arrest. When the participant begins to arrest him, the suspect pulls out a knife to attack the participant and his peer cadet partner. Participant number two experienced a *suspicious person* parked in a vehicle. Upon approach, the suspect jumped out of the car with a handgun pointed at his own head. After a while, the suspect redirects the gun at the cadet's partner which posed the simulated lethal threat. Finally, the third participant was matched with three peer cadets on a *school burglary* scenario in which the suspect ambushed the group of cadets while they were searching for him in a locker room. The cadets provided a written account of their first-person perspective experiences of living-through these deadly force training exercises.

General Structure of the Deadly Force Training Experience

The participant (P) as a police trainee was presented with ambiguous circumstances and experienced moderate anxiety regarding his or her inability to foresee and understand the situation clearly, despite awareness of the rules governing such situations. P used information and planning strategies to anticipate possible outcomes and experienced commingling of real-world and in-role thoughts during mental deliberations about his or her situation. P understood the atypical behavior of the suspect as indicative of

danger and, when it occurred, became aware of an attentional focus on dangerous possibilities and experienced emotional shock and vulnerability when met with a lethal assault. During times of felt intense distress, P experienced time distortion and was aware of his or her unexpected performance abilities. During the scenario, P sought confirmation of his or her actions and judgments by comparing other trainees’ actions with his or her own. At the end, P was aware that he or she was able to regain control over the aggressors and sufficiently resolve the crisis.

Elaboration of the Findings

The phenomenological analysis of the experiential reports shows that the structure of this experience has 12 constituents. The constituents and their supporting empirical data are presented in Table 1. Each constituent is elaborated on to elucidate its qualitative meaningfulness, based on the lived-experiences of the participants.

Table 1. Structure of the Experience of Police Deadly Force Training

Constituent	P1	P2	P3
Ambiguity	On patrol looking for violations... by a certain car make (brand name).	Investigate... suspicious vehicle (occupied)... “did not know what to expect.”	During building searches the trainers put us in a position where we were to go into a locker room in a middle school and secure it. We knew that there was a SWAT team member in there prepared to shoot us when he got the chance.
Anxiety	My first scenario (inexperience)... ...my heart rate was already high and I was very nervous during my approach... I was freakin’ nervous. He followed my orders well but I still felt an anxiousness about him.	The scenario I felt left the biggest impact on me was about a suspicious vehicle call. As I nervously watched the suspect come closer to my car I noticed he was holding a gun to his head.	...we were put in situations purposely to raise our heart rates and stress us out. ...to get us used to working under these types of conditions.

Table 1. (cont.)

Constituent	P1	P2	P3
Commingling of Real-World and In-Role Experiences	I radioed the dispatcher and told her... we would be... in the South parking lot of the Academy. Even though I knew that this was not for real, it sure felt like it was.	<i>Implicit</i>	We knew that there was a SWAT team member... prepared to shoot us... ... the SWAT member was able to advance on us. Between the SWAT team member and us was a brick partition. I saw the paint rounds coming at me...
Planning	I approached the passenger side... The whole time, I was thinking about possible outcomes of this scenario. I told her to keep an eye on him while I checked his info. Out, 'cause I just had the feelin' like something was not right. I approached my partner and told her that I think we should arrest for the warrant. I knew that I outweighed the suspect so what I thought was to pin him against the car so that he could not turn around.	... I decided lethal force was not justified at that time...	We had a four-man team... I was one of the flankers that entered the room first. I looked into the room to find four rows of lockers on the left... and showers and toilets on the right side.
Perception of Dangerous Behavior	After talkin' to the driver for a minute I noticed that he was not makin' eye contact with me when he was answering questions and he seemed to keep his answers short.	... the suspect would not listen to either of us, but at that time was not threatening anyone except himself. ... it was like he didn't even know we were talking to him.	... I started to hear gunshots coming from the far row of lockers.

Table 1. (cont.)

Constituent	P1	P2	P3
	He was not angry or aggressive just short and to the point.		
Experienced Shock	<p>... he made a quick movement into his shirt sleeve.</p> <p>... I heard my partner yell "he's got a knife."</p> <p>He lunged at me...</p>	<p>Then all of a sudden, the suspect took the gun from his head and pointed it towards my partner and started to fire.</p>	<p>I got hit twice. I saw the paint rounds coming at me from the gun.</p>
Attention Focus	<p>All I could think about was giving my partner enough time to move into a better position.</p> <p>At the point I remember my sights align on the center of his body...</p> <p>I fired one shot that hit him right in the middle of the chest.</p>	<p>I was so focused on the actions of the suspect... I had not taken my seatbelt off.</p>	<p>I saw the paint rounds coming at me from the gun.</p> <p>The rounds being fired at me were slower moving and I may have been able to dodge them...</p> <p>I... froze and was unable to move.</p> <p>The biggest problem I had was not being able to move.</p>
Time Distortion	<p>Everything kinda slowed down a little bit.</p>	<p>Everything happened so quick you don't get much time to think and make decisions.</p>	<p>At this point, there was what felt like five minutes...</p> <p>The whole scenario felt like it lasted about an hour, when in reality it was only about 15 minutes long.</p>
Vulnerability	<p>I didn't have mine [gun] out quite yet so I guess I was the easier target.</p>	<p>Everything happened so quick you don't get much time to think and make decisions.</p>	<p>I... froze and was unable to move.</p> <p>... we weren't provided cover and the SWAT member was able to advance on us.</p> <p>We had no idea where he was; only that he was about 10 feet from us and could jump out and kill us at any time.</p>

Table 1. (cont.)

Constituent	P1	P2	P3
Awareness of Partner's Behavior	I looked over and saw that my partner had drawn her weapon...	My partner... started to tell the suspect to drop the gun as well... I decided that lethal force was not justified at that time and my partner must have felt the same because he didn't use deadly force either. ... my partner and I both engaged the suspect firing multiple shots.	I remember not being able to move, and felt completely helpless because I wasn't behind cover and didn't know where to find it. The biggest problem I had was not being able to move. ... but during this process, we pretty much threw all tactics out the window and ran for our lives, with our tails between our legs. I noticed I my commands didn't make sense.
Awareness of Performance	I knew that I outweighed the suspect ... I pushed with all of my strength against him onto the car. I pushed off as hard as I could to try and create as much distance from the suspect as possible.	I was so focused on the actions of the suspect... I had not taken my seatbelt off. ... I wasn't even sure how many shots I actually had fired...	I... froze and was unable to move. I remember not being able to move... The biggest problem I had was not being able to move. I couldn't get the cuffs on. It took several tries before finally being able to.

Table 1. (cont.)

Constituent	P1	P2	P3
	I couldn't help but notice how natural all of that came to me.		
	I fired one shot that hit him right in the middle of the chest.		
Control Restoration	At the point I remember my sights align on the center of his body and I gave one last stop command. I then fired one shot that hit him right in the middle of the chest. He fell to the ground, I continued to move... I gave him commands... which he complied with. I cuffed him... ... I finally had a chance to breathe...	... my partner and I both engaged the suspect firing multiple shots, the suspect was hit 3 times and fell to the ground. I kept cover on the suspect as my partner secured him... When it was over and my heart rate slowed down...	We gained a good position at the doorway and commanded the assailant to come out to us. As he did, he followed our commands. ...finally being able to [handcuff the suspect].

Discussion

In the presented study, I examined the psychological structure of the lived-experience of cadets participating in deadly force training scenarios in a police academy basic training program. The academy conducts exercises using simulation scenarios of real-world lethal force situations to provide cadets with experiential opportunities for developing greater automaticity and efficiency in their decision-making and deadly force responses. Such experiential training has been found to increase performance that translates into behaviors in the real world (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Blum, 2000; Grossman, 1996; Murray, 2006). Further, some literature suggests that people who experience stressful events and learn to positively cope though them can be “inoculated” psychologically, reducing the likelihood of their developing post-traumatic stress disorder and resilience to other

stress-related disturbances (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Blum, 2000; Murray, 2006; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998).

This study provides a holistic and general description of how the cadets' thoughts, emotions, and physiological experiences interact with the lived-experience of their deadly force training. Deploying deadly force appropriately within an officer's scope of duty is only part of the lethal encounter experience. Another part of the experience is the officer's coping with the physiological, cognitive, and emotional effects of stress before, during, and after a shooting (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Blum, 2000; Kirschman, 2006; Miller, 2008). The physiological changes associated with the stimulation of one's autonomic nervous system is considered to be the cause of perceptual distortions, changes in physical strength and coordination, and emotional states in deadly force situations (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Blum, 2000). I found that participants experienced a constellation of such physical, mental, and emotional constituents during their scenario-based training. The present study provides qualitative information based upon the relationships and interactions among the experiential constituents. The relationships and interactions of the constituents are presented in a holistic way to allow their context to aid us in comprehensively understanding them.

The fact that no one in the scenario-based training was in any real danger, particularly mortal danger, is important to pointing out that something very centrally meaningful about lethal force encounters was missing from our participants' experiences. Nevertheless, we found that anxiety, perceptual distortions, psychomotor ability changes, and cognitive workings were generally consistent with what has been reported by people who have killed another person in the line of duty (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Grossman, 1996). Therefore, the simulated scenarios appear to have provided experiences that were significantly similar to real-life lethal encounters, but without all of the psychological components of a real shooting.

Participants understood that they would potentially face a simulated lethal encounter, but did not know the timing or the exact nature of how it would be presented. Participants dealt with ambiguity by using cognitive planning strategies and running mental scenarios for anticipating various outcomes, along with noticing and interpreting the behaviors of their partners and suspects. Described by Klein (1998) as *story building*, people

access cognitive schemas in their memory to match with their current situations to conceptualize and understand ambiguous situations. The participants' descriptions also were rich with cognitive deliberations and meaning making throughout the scenarios. A constellation of information gathering, mental deliberations, and running mental simulations, along with planning and adjusting to their environment, were all ways in which the participants sought to overcome the ambiguity, reduce anxiety, and work toward fulfilling their missions.

One of the most interesting constituents of the participants' experiences was the commingling of real-world information with their in-role experiences. Information was accessible to consciousness across the "real-world" and "in-role" contexts, but was utilized under very different circumstances and for different reasons. For example, P1 made a reference to his real-world temporal location when transmitting his location to the simulated police dispatcher. It was information that he utilized in his traffic stop report because he was not given a "make-believe" address. Of course, anxiety at this point in the scenario was moderate and the use of that information was needed to complete the radio task. In other words, P1 knew that his location was an element of the radio traffic; he had not been supplied with a "make-believe" address, so he utilized the real-world location rather than leave the address component out of the skill.

However, P3 made mention of the SWAT team member's true identity, both at the beginning of his account and when he was relating the most intense portion of his experience. When describing the peak of his felt vulnerability and helplessness, P3 stopped referring to his adversary as "the suspect" and called him the SWAT member. It appears that P3's consciousness could direct his thoughts toward some aspects of reality to cope with the anxiety and vulnerability that he was experiencing. The dual-context of the personal threat might explain the salience of the SWAT member's true identity for P3.

The surprise attack by the suspects provided an emotional shock for all the participants. The emotional shock was accompanied by perceptual distortions, psychomotor performance changes, attention focus, vigilance, and vulnerability in varying degrees and with qualitative differences. Artwohl and Christensen (1997) and Murray (2006) list these and other stress reactions, basing their emergence on the autonomic nervous system-initiated physiological changes. An analysis of the participants' perceptual

distortions of time revealed that an individual's consciousness makes a comparison between his or her inner experiences and perceptions of external activity. This may explain why time speeds up for some and slows down for others. For example, P1 and P3 felt time slow down, but P2 felt time run away from him. When the emotional shock was presented to P2, his attention on the suspect was so focused that he was unaware that he was still strapped into his car seat by the seatbelt. Getting trapped with an armed suspect approaching, P2's focus shifted to freeing himself from the seatbelt, while trying to keep track of the actions of the suspect. Events seemed to be moving faster than he could keep track of mentally.

During times of extreme vulnerability, the autonomic nervous system, with its secretion of stress hormones, is a physiological component that helps thought processes speed up at times, but also can rigidify thinking and attention to aspects of events (Blum, 2000; Shapiro, 2001). Ambiguity regarding the state-of-affairs seems to be a constituent that influences the way consciousness interprets the experience of time. If ambiguity is related to a single object or aspect of the experience, then consciousness focuses attention on that aspect until it is satisfactorily clarified. In comparison, if there is understanding about the direction in which the experience is unfolding, attentional scanning, cognitive planning strategies, and mental simulation acts seem to automatically begin running quickly to constitute the anticipated emergence of events.

This study suggests that participants' awareness of their partners' behaviors was generally interpreted as confirmation of the participants' interpretations of their situations. It appears that collective decision-making in such important situations may have positive and negative implications for the outcome. It may add to the efficiency of making the decision to shoot, but, if it is based on a faulty perception or interpretation of events, it could lead to a collective lethal mistake.

Once the decision is formed, action is experienced as automatic, especially when the motor skills needed to perform the task have been mastered. Grossman (1996) stated that people in lethal encounters have four possible reactions, *fight*, *flight*, *posture*, and *freeze*. All four of these responses occurred for participants in the study. These responses were automatic and rapidly performed. Automaticity in skills performance and decision-making are measures of proficiency and competence in lethal force training. The more automaticity experienced, the less internal and external

strain and effort involved in completing the mission. In this study, stress and strain, and how they relate to one's personal appraisal of events, were important aspects of the participants' experiences.

The hero archetype (Jung, 1968) and sheepdog identity (Grossman, 1996) implicate the police in an expectation to valiantly do battle with violent criminals and win. Murray (2006) stated that it is important in RBT scenarios that the learners do not experience being slain by the suspect role-player. Such defeats run the risk of sending an officer out into the streets with insecurities. It is apparent that the training staff had intended to follow this model. However, it appears in P3's account that he was aware that his victory was inauthentic and not due to his own skills and abilities. Although this notion is speculative, it is reasonable to believe that an inauthentic victory was not hero-identity building after having been shot twice and chased out of the fight. Perhaps a better strategy would have been to regroup after the flight, start the exercise again, and give the cadets an immediate chance to redeem themselves. P1 and P2, in contrast, ended their scenarios in victory and "forced" their suspects into submission and control. In other words, they were heroic and triumphant in the fight.

Conclusions

This was a phenomenological study of police academy cadets' lived-experiences of role-play-simulated scenarios of lethal encounters and deadly force training. The analysis indicated that the general anxiety of their experiences was related to their performances being evaluated by the academy staff, the ambiguous aspects of the scenarios, and the psychological pressures involved in proving themselves worthy as police officers to both themselves and others present. The participants coped with anxiety by trying to reduce ambiguity through cognitive strategies, planning and coordinating with partners, and exercising as much influence over their environment as possible to increase or gain control over the situations. Once presented with a sudden lethal attack, the participants experienced constellations of physical, emotional, and psychological phenomena that constituted their surreal perceptions, contextualized understandings, and subsequent "automated" responses to the events as they unfolded. When

the participants had gained control over the simulated incident, they noticed that their anxiety diminished and their surreal perceptions became normal again.

The simulated scenarios were designed to imitate real-life police lethal encounters, and the cadets were situated to act in the role of police officers in these scenarios. Obviously missing from these experiences was the actual lethal threat to any person's mortality. The study shows that the experiences still fall short of simulating the psychological impacts of real-life police shootings. Perhaps future applications of the phenomenological method to real-life police shootings would provide more information about their qualitative differences. At this point, the gap between simulation and reality is noticeable, but not yet fully elucidated.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations to the present study involve the small sample size (3) and homogeneity of our participants as white, males, in their 20s, and living in Utah. Future research could be conducted in other cultural situations and contexts with other demographically different participants. However, the general psychological structure of the participants' experiences, found in this study, should enhance our understanding of Reality Based Training in lethal encounters.

The general structure shows the essential constituents of the psychology of deadly force training. It is not intended to have direct applicability to real shootings. However, having an empathetic perspective of this high-impact training may elucidate some aspects of this training for the cadets, trainers, police administrators, public policy makers, and clinicians for their better understanding of the value and limitations of this training. Future studies need to be done to discover how far the findings of this study can be applied to other contexts of police work and life-threatening incidents.

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