Improving Mandatory Firearms Training For Law Enforcement: An Autoethnographic Analysis of Illinois Law Enforcement Training

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ABSTRACT

This study employs autoethnographic analysis of the author's experiences in a mandatory police firearms training course in the United States. I first review relevant literature on firearms training as well as autoethnographic methodology. Afterward, I present my experiences and analyze them in the context of literature on police use of force, representative bureaucracy, and accountability. Based on this account, I offer suggestions for improving the course by integrating concepts from the literature on officer decision-making, community-police relations, and group dynamics. I conclude by recommending more course time be devoted to the decision to use force, rather than simple firearm proficiency.

Introduction

Police use of force, particularly deadly force, in the United States has been on the forefront of scholarly and practitioner discussions for the past decade. This topic has been such a focal point in conversations related to police reform in the United States that the President's Task Force on Policing in the 21st Century mentioned "use of force" 39 times in their final report (President's Task Force, 2015). While many recommendations have been made to reform the process by which the use of deadly force is investigated and managed post hoc, I will argue that substantive revisions in police firearms training curricula are as important. In this article, I will begin by presenting relevant literature on police firearms training curricula in the United States and other nations. After, I will present an autoethnographic account of my own experiences as a trainee and graduate of the Illinois 40-hour law enforcement firearms training course. Based on this data, I will offer recommendations for revising and enhancing this course, particularly when it comes to the amount of time spent discussing the appropriate use of deadly force. I will conclude with future research suggestions on this topic.

Firearms and deadly force training in the 20th and 21st centuries

Internationally, arming police officers is the default. Of the 197 nations that McCarthy (2020) studied, only 18 do not arm their officers for routine duties. In the United States, almost all sworn officers carry a firearm while on duty and 93% of agencies responding to a Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) survey indicated that at least some of their officers are equipped with rifles and 94% of responding agencies equip at least some officers with shotguns (PERF, 2013). Moreover, a recent Pew Research

Center survey of a nationally representative sample of nearly 8,000 police officers found that 27% had used their service weapon at least once while on duty (Morin & Mercer, 2017). Given this information, it is prudent to explore police firearms training.

Literature on police firearms training

To develop a succinct understanding of the firearms and deadly force training area, one might peruse a representative textbook. In this case, one might look at a respected work of this variety such as Johnson's (2007) book, *Crucial Elements of Police Firearms Training*. The book provides rich, comprehensive data and prescriptions for more accurate marksmanship, devoting entire chapters to teaching fundamentals related to details such as one's grip on a handgun, proper breathing while shooting, developing a solid stance, and following through after squeezing the trigger. These features of the shooting sequence are heavily emphasized in firearms training classrooms. Notably, out of 385 pages spread across an impressive 18 chapters of text, only one chapter engages laws related to firearms and their use by police. Moreover, Dayley (2016) finds that 8.9 hours of training time is dedicated to use of force with a firearm for every single hour of training time spent on teaching and practicing de-escalation techniques. Given my experience as a trainee in a state mandated firearms training course for police, this does not surprise me. In fact, the ratio of shooting drills to discussions of case law in the firearms training course I will describe below was higher.

The literature on police firearms training has, heretofore, emphasized training outcomes in terms of skilled use of a sidearm, often operationalized in terms of the accuracy with which a trainee shoots a stationary target while standing still in an open firing lane on a range. Thus, historically, the single greatest focal point of an introductory firearms course for law enforcement is the use of a duty pistol. Despite this emphasis, Morrison (2003), looking primarily at sidearm accuracy, suggests that law enforcement firearm training is fraught with questions regarding its validity and usefulness. Still, other scholars have found that a typical firearms training course increases the accuracy with which an officer shoots and reduces the time an officer requires to perform basic procedures such as loading a handgun magazine or clearing an ammunition jam (Charles & Copay, 2003). Furthermore, Alpert & Fridell (1992) observe that firearms training has advanced over the decades since its inception, and these advances may be linked to changes in the use of deadly force with a firearm.

These are certainly lofty benefits and ought to be appreciated. Still, Morrison's (2006a) study using survey data indicates that while firearms training is seen as effective in

developing firearm use skills, firearms course instructors note that training on decision-making is incomplete and could be expanded. Morrison (2006, p. 331) later suggests that the chief quandary with law enforcement firearms training is the lack of uniformity and the “wide range of policies and practices among departments.”

Firearms training has evolved as technology and scholarly research have opened avenues for improving firearms training, especially through the use of simulations and role-play activities. A RAND Corporation study of firearms training in the New York City Police Department suggests that scenario-based training and simulations are far superior to traditional classroom instruction. The authors go on to recommend that the NYPD offer more frequent in-service firearms training after the initial firearms course and more often than annual or semi-annual handgun qualification shoots (Rotsker, et. al., 2008). In this vein, Beighton & Poma (2015) call for more “expansive” training settings beyond the traditional classroom and range, asking higher education organizations and police training institutes to partner in creating and utilizing these settings. Such settings are important as Cordner and Shain (2011) note that the environments and contexts in which firearms training takes place are ever-dynamic, as is the technology available to facilitate training. Additionally, Andersen, et. al. (2016) note that highly realistic scenario-based training, often facilitated with advanced technology can most closely mimic real-world use of force decision opportunities and should thus be used when possible.

Curiously, though ideas of this ilk have appeared in recent scholarly studies, they can be traced at least as far back as Brown’s (1984, p. 133) observations about the state of firearms training, where the author expresses dismay that “[f]irearms training too often involves only stationary shooting from a fixed position.” The greatest need for enhancing such training is the inclusion of “carefully monitored role playing based on actual shooting incidents” as well as “continuous inservice training” bent on improving recruits’ “awareness of the legal and ethical aspects of the use of deadly force” (Brown, 1984, p. 133). A related concern evinces itself in the work of Doerner and Ho (2012), as these scholars lament that the vast majority of research on firearms use by officers is limited to the use of deadly force, rather than other potential outcomes such as a de-escalation or a less than lethal shooting, though there are some prominent exceptions to this general trend (e.g., Fridell, 2016). This is disconcerting as Prenzler, Porter, and Alpert (2013) find that police agencies can often perform their duties with less force required than is typical. Additionally, the literature recognizes the need for training that includes practice in dealing with mentally ill individuals (Price, 2005). Additionally, while Rowe and Garland (2010) are encouraged by international efforts to

train police officers in diversity and race relations, they find that this is difficult and time-consuming as the trainer is attempting to change attitudes rather than help trainees to develop cognitive or tactile skills.

Thus, the current consensus on law enforcement firearms training is relatively simple to convey in two sets of conclusions drawn from the literature: (1) firearms training can result in heightened proficiency in using a firearm, often improving an officer's accuracy with the gun; however, firearms training needs to continually adapt to changing contextual, environmental, and technological factors; and (2) firearms training courses should devote considerably more attention to the officer's decision to use force and the types of situations and individuals she is likely to encounter when decisions of this variety must be made. I will address each of these broad sets of conclusions as I present and discuss the autoethnographic case study of my own firearms training course. Before I present this case, I will briefly describe the strengths and weaknesses of my chosen methodological approach.

Benefits and drawbacks of autoethnographic research

Autoethnographic research is unique as a research approach. This approach is based on lived experiences rather than armchair conjecture and allows the researcher to communicate a series of first-hand perceptions rather than relying on self-reports from those who have experienced a phenomenon. While related to ethnography and participant observation, autoethnography is a distinct approach as it allows for a more pronounced reflection on the researcher's own perceptions. Wall (2006, p. 146) explains, "[t]he intent of autoethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural and to make room for nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression." According to Chang (2005, p. 1), this narrative approach requires a researcher to simultaneously consider "self, other[s], and culture" to thoroughly present and analyze the lived experience of a case. Ultimately, the goal of this research technique is to provide a scholar with the opportunity to consider her relationship with cultural norms and expectations as a means by which the scholar can understand phenomena of which she has been a part (Ellis et al., 2011). Within this area, Anderson (2006) suggests that meaningful analytic ethnography will be produced by full members of the population being studied. This essay meets this criterion as I was a sworn reserve deputy sheriff at the time of my training. This vantage point is ideal for my chosen methodology, though according to Reed-Danahay (1997), an autoethnographic scholar should be mindful of the ways in which her narrative is

designed to represent herself as she attempts to discuss the past self through present lenses.

In addition to being mindful of self-representation, one must also be mindful of biases that can evince themselves in a plethora of ways. Foremost, humans have a collective tendency to engage in confirmation bias, causing them to look for ideas, patterns, and normative values that are compatible with their own pre-existing worldviews (Nickerson, 1998; Klayman, 1995). While my account is rooted in objective events, I will undoubtedly make subjective observations related to any one or all of what Oberweiss and Musheno (1999) would label my relevant subject positions (e.g., my demographic characteristics, my occupation, other lived experiences, and my goal with this essay, to name a few).

I will, as a human being, use a variety of unique heuristics, schemas, and mental representations of the world as a means of processing information and environmental stimuli more efficiently (Siddique, 2011; Tarantino, 2016). These can certainly influence my account of events, and I must be mindful of the ways in which my personal biases influence my interpretation and reporting. To that end, Ortlipp (2008) suggests reflective journaling as a transparent means by which a researcher can face and consider such inescapable biases. Prior to drafting this study, I created a reflective inventory asking myself questions such as “How did/do I feel about the experiences I am relaying?” and “What features of the experience did I devote more or less attention to?” In this respect, I have attempted to incorporate Chenail’s (2011) “Interview the Investigator” approach as I draft this essay, especially since I was a member of the population being studied at the time of my narrative.

While it may be true that bias is unavoidable, I would like the reader to consider that I bring many facets of bias to this study. Foremost, I am familiar with firearms use due to my familial background (with a father and two brothers serving as law enforcement officers) and decades of experience with firearms. Thus, I might not be able to fairly analyze the amount of time one ought to have in basic firearms use and maintenance training. Similarly, because I have shooting experience, it is likely that I underestimate the need for such an enormous portion of the course to be devoted to range training and live fire drills. Beyond these case-specific features of my lived experience, my individual status and the privilege I enjoy as a middle-class caucasian male university professor in the United States can cause me to see and experience the world in ways that might be different if any of these features were to change. Despite these sources of potential bias, I believe the account I provide still offers an excellent window into

the strengths and weaknesses of this firearms training course and has important implications for firearms training courses writ large.

Autoethnography: The mandatory Illinois 40 hour firearms course

The state of Illinois requires all armed officers to complete a firearms training course. While this is typically part of the overall police academy curriculum, firearms training is also offered a la carte for auxiliary officers, part-time officers, and those who have not completed police academy training (e.g., coroners). For auxiliary deputy sheriffs in Illinois, the requirements are as follows: (1) 21 years of age, (2) possession of a Firearms Owner Identification Card (or, colloquially, FOID card), and (3) filling out an application, passing a background check, and interviewing for the position. No prior or current law enforcement training beyond the 40 hour firearms course is required, though several optional modules are typically available over the course of a calendar year (e.g., TASER training, CPR/First Aid, Pepper Spray (OC) training, etc.). As a result of this requirement, I applied to be a participant in the 40 hour firearms course.

Training days

It is early April when my auxiliary deputy sheriff colleague and I leave our small town and head toward a mid-size city for the first of two weekends of the mandatory 40 hour firearms training course hosted by a regional mobile training unit. In order to carry a sidearm on duty, a requirement of the position, we must complete and pass this course through demonstrated proficiency in marksmanship and a written multiple choice exam. Upon arrival, there is small talk and severely burnt coffee. Much of the time is spent comparing sidearms with classmates and discussing the unseasonable chilly weather. We are called to order by our two instructors, each a mid-level manager in a local police department.

There is a brief welcome, followed by a stern and somber refresher on gun safety and appropriate presentation of a weapon to the instructor and our classmates (slide locked back, magazine unloaded and out of the pistol). The instructors take a few minutes to saunter around the room to check our weapons and ensure that we are capable of field stripping them for cleaning. Along the way, we are reminded of each component piece of our respective weapons and how they function (e.g., striker-fired pistols vs hammer fired pistols; anatomy of a pistol cartridge; dealing with misfeeds from pistol magazines, etc.). This process, along with settling in and introducing ourselves to our instructors and classmates, takes up the first half day of our 40-hour

training course. We are invited to take a quick restroom break and finish the remnants of bitter coffee.

Once we have reconvened, a PowerPoint presentation is projected and we are provided xeroxed packets of course information. At the onset, we are instructed to always remember that we are in the “combat quad,” and that we are “warriors” who must “kill or be killed” if we hope to go home after a shift on patrol. This immediately brings to mind recent discussions of the mindset of American police, namely the dichotomy between the guardian and the warrior (Stoughton, 2014). To reinforce this mindset, we are shown that there is a finite amount of time to react to threats and introduced to the 21 foot rule associated with the Tueller Drill. This drill indicates that a person armed with a knife will have time to attack an officer before he or she is able to unholster, aim, and fire a service weapon (Martinelli, 2014). Succinctly, there is very little time to think in a situation that may require the use of deadly force on a hostile antagonist.

We are encouraged to practice, especially through dry firing an unloaded weapon, the process of target acquisition and the use of the front sight press for quickly developing sight picture and sight alignment. It is abundantly clear after this first day of training that the majority of the materials used in the course have been borrowed from United States military training manuals, drills, and rituals.

I am a bit concerned at the wholesale importation of military training materials into the education and preparation of police officers. While it is certainly true that municipal police organization itself has long been fashioned as a paramilitary organization, I am reminded of Robert Peel’s principles of policing wherein one is reminded that “the police are the public and the public are the police.” Rather than fighting a war with another sovereign state’s armed forces, local police agents are tasked with protecting and serving the residents in their respective service jurisdictions. There does not appear to be room for community engagement when such impermeable firewalls are erected between the police and the citizen, though this may be an intended mechanism to ensure that an officer does not dawdle and miss an opportunity to eliminate a threat. Curiously, we are instructed that our job is not to kill people. Instead, and perhaps euphemistically, we are tasked with “eliminating threats.” This, of course, serves to dehumanize antagonists/offenders and make the decision to pull the trigger easier.

We begin our range training with dry fire practice in our respective lanes. We are eventually instructed to load one round into the chamber of our pistols and fire at the

paper target at nearly point blank range (i.e., 1 yard away). We are instructed to take a step back and repeat the previous exercise. We do this, taking one step back at a time, until we approach the 7 yard line. We are drilled at 7, 15, and 25 yards for the remainder of the afternoon. I am beginning to understand why we were asked to bring 650 rounds of ammunition as the instructors take turns providing individual feedback about flinching, grip, trigger pull, and other observations they have made. We are instructed to police the brass shell casings from the range yard, return our target boards, and report to the classroom where we are quickly debriefed and this session is adjourned.

There is a pro forma drill for the use of a pump shotgun. We are each instructed to stand on the 25 yard distance markers, where we are further commanded to load and fire one 00 buck shot round at our cardboard targets. The instructors do not evaluate accuracy or shot placement. Instead, they use this chance to discuss the fact that shotgun pellets tend to spread greatly in a short amount of distance. This is another reason our instructors wish we were receiving carbine or rifle training, as they see the shotgun as an ineffective tool for securing a perimeter or shooting a distant target.

At the final stage of our range training, we participate in the qualification drill that we have practiced *ad infinitum*. We must fire 50 rounds from three distances (30 rounds at 7 yards, 12 rounds at 15 yards, and 8 rounds at 25 yards) , with two mandatory magazine changes. Though the course manual indicates that this drill will be timed, there is zero emphasis placed on timing and no indication that either instructor is using a watch or other device to keep track of time. To pass this portion of the course, a participant has to hit the paper target on the cardboard dummy with 35 bullets out of the 50 that are fired, ergo a participant must hit the paper target 70% of the time.

Upon completion of the qualification drills, we are invited to participate in a “fun” lowlight/night shoot course with various glowing targets (e.g., bowling pins, swinging metal medallion targets, etc.). After everyone has had at least one chance to go through the night shoot course, we are quickly assembled with instructions for the following day and this class day is adjourned.

The final training session takes place on a Sunday. We arrive and are immediately tasked with collecting the empty brass shell casings littering the firing range. Once we have policed the brass and tidied up the firing range, we are brought back into the classroom. A local defense attorney provides a presentation about the legal questions and implications related to using deadly force. We learn some fundamental case law and hear some examples of improper use of force in other agencies. The attorney

concluded her presentation in approximately 45 minutes. Once she left, the class was treated to a review of the important facets of the 40 hour training module and we practiced answering questions we would be expected to answer on the written examination.

Immediately, the multiple choice exam was distributed. After approximately one half hour, everyone had finished this exam. We were then told to score our exams based on the answer key provided by the instructor as he went over each written exam item. Once the exams are scored, information is recorded to ensure that each trainee's home agency will receive confirmation that the trainee has passed the course and is now certified. We are dismissed.

Expectations and realities In the 40 hour course

As the reader may have discerned, the course, colloquially called the "40 Hour," is primarily focused on enhancing technical proficiency with the use of firearms and inculcating a basic understanding of the mechanics thereof. The training classroom and range, even during the most procedural instruction, are designed to create an emotionally charged environment to reinforce the warrior mindset which instructors hope to create in trainees. There is an undertone of alarm and danger, with steady reminders that one is being trained to combat an enemy or enemies (e.g., check over both shoulders for an unseen assailant before holstering the weapon). Ostensibly, one might argue, this is moderated to some degree by the instructors' reminder that "we don't shoot to kill, but shoot to eliminate threats." Because this reminder is careful to include the word "threats," however, what is actually being taught is a form of dehumanization. While the cardboard target features a menacing man pointing a snub-nosed revolver at each participant, we are reminded time and again that the only shots that count are those that strike the sheet of paper stapled to the center of the cardboard cutout, representing the chest and torso of the man depicted in the target.

Another observation I made as a participant in this training course is that the time spent on the range completing firing drills made up the vast majority of the 40 hour course requirement. While this is an understandable component, passing the live fire shooting test, or "qualifying," is only one of two tests. The other is a written exam containing questions about firearm maintenance, operation, and use. Again, very little time or effort is invested into helping trainees to make appropriate use of force decisions. No instruction is given on the use of de-escalation techniques or the use of less than lethal weapons. There are certainly other courses available, many of them mandatory for police academy graduates or initial POST certification, but these

courses are not required of all armed police personnel in the state (e.g., auxiliary police officers and deputy sheriffs). As many college and university professors can attest, it is nearly impossible to cover every important topic in a semester long course that meets three times a week over the course of 16 weeks (just over 40 hours). Thus, it might come as no surprise that instructors of a 40 hour firearms training course conducted over the course of two long weekends would be forced to omit lectures, discussions, and/or activities bent on exploring deeper concerns about the appropriate use of force.

Despite the empathy with which I approach the truncated course material, it is important to understand that failing to discuss a concept or theoretical framework from the political science literature is unlikely to have the same potential for severe consequences as leaving out in-depth, intentional conversations about unjustified use of deadly force. This is especially relevant in the wake of several controversial decisions to use deadly force against unarmed African-American boys and men (e.g., Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Mike Brown, George Floyd, etc.), a phenomenon which gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement. Simply put, the current structure of the course is inadequate and more comprehensive courses should be required prior to allowing an officer to carry a firearm in the performance of her duties. I will offer some suggestions for modifying and augmenting curriculum for the course in later sections of this paper. For now, I must address another emergent concern based on my experience related to the demographic composition of the course participants and instructors.

Of the 20 or so participants in the firearms training course, all were Caucasian and all but one were Cis men. While Hassell, Archbold, and Stichman (2011) find that the experiences of male and female police officers are more similar than different, and Smith (2003) finds that no significant relationship, in the aggregate, exists between departmental racial and gender diversity and use of deadly force, other scholars have long clamored for a more representative bureaucracy in law enforcement (Krislov, 2012; Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006). This need has been highlighted in many federal government publications, from the Department of Justice's investigation into the Ferguson, Missouri, police department after the Michael Brown shooting to the final report of the Obama-era President's Task Force on Policing in the 21st Century. Furthermore, scholars such as Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Lavena (2014) explain that gender diversity in law enforcement agencies affects processes in a way that is more difficult to measure than simply counting use of force encounters. The authors explain that more (gender) diverse police agencies are perceived as more fair and more

trustworthy by citizens, thus “ the symbolic representativeness of the police does causally influence how citizens view and judge a law enforcement agency, and thus in turn perhaps their willingness to cooperate in the coproduction of public safety outcome” (Ricucci et al., 2014, p. 537).

Given what scholars have discovered regarding the advantages inherent in communicating with someone who shares one’s “subject position,” this may represent a missed opportunity for developing consensus and shared meaning in a given situation (Oberweiss & Musheno, 1999; Harmon, 1981). I will offer some suggestions that might be useful even if the trainee demographics remain relatively homogenous.

As a course participant, I engaged in a great deal of emotional labor to cultivate and maintain the “warrior” facade. This required that I practice a specific type of masculinity in which feelings and emotions were set aside to make room for my mindset, at least ostensibly, to become that of a combatant training to be deployed to a war zone. Given that law enforcement decision-making has been my research niche for over a decade, I was and remain well-aware of the nuances inherent in the priorities officers ascribe to their decision patterns. Unfortunately, very few of the factors known to influence officer decision-making were mentioned during the course. Though rapid and inadequate, some lip service was paid, of course, to minimizing legal liability concerns as a decision-maker. Departmental policies and standard operating procedures were also mentioned in the abstract, but because the course was conducted by a mobile training unit whose officers were employed by a single agency, it was impossible for trainers to know or speak confidently about firearms and/or use of force policies at trainee’s respective agency (ranging from a county coroner’s office to multiple municipal and county-level agencies). In sum, the focus appeared to be on universal and absolute best practices from the profession rather than one’s home agency.

Absent in our curriculum were discussions of the way in which one’s personal values or moral compass would influence her decisions. Moreover, there was little discussion of the ways in which community norms or expectations might influence firearm use or other policing decisions despite a vast literature that describes the benefits of community-oriented policing systems (Goldstein, 1987; Peak & Glenser, 1999; Zhao, 1996). Similarly, the instructors gave no overt consideration of political pressures from elected officials, clients, or voters or the ways in which these pressures can shape agency-wide and individual decisions. Surprisingly, trainees were not asked to think about informal organizational dynamics, such as patterns of behavior and unwritten

rules and agreements among peer officers. Lastly, trainees were not given an opportunity to reflect on how their respective decisions could affect relationships with other agencies and their command staff, an important informal accountability mechanism in local government (Mirzamani, et. al., 2019). In sum, the course could have focused on firearm use decisions and the concomitant considerations related to these decisions. In plain terms, the course seemed to be geared toward training what might develop, with hours of practice, into instinctive behavior bent on individual survival in a war zone. By grossly oversimplifying potential use of force scenarios and equating them with military intervention in a hostile area, the instructors and the curricular supplements we were provided appear to prioritize the creation of rigid heuristics and rapid cognitive shortcuts at the expense of thoughtful, deliberate decision-making processes. At first blush, this makes sense as it prepares the trainee to act quickly when a life-threatening situation arises. This may, indeed, be imperative in many law enforcement situations, but one must remember that such hasty action can result, and has resulted in tremendously egregious actions and a host of grave consequences for some or all parties involved. Somehow, the demand for rapid response clouds out the very real potential for an unjustified action. We are told that our number one job on shift is to “come home” after, seemingly by any means necessary.

In addition to oversimplifying use of force rationale, there is also very little discussion of group dynamics and how they can influence decisions (e.g., groupthink, deindividuation, or Zimbardo’s “Lucifer Effect”). It is not just that we are taught to survive in our respective combat zones (i.e., service jurisdictions) that is troubling. Another heavily implied feature of the decision environments we are to enter is that we will often, if not always, be acting as lone individuals fighting “the enemy.” This helps to explain the dearth of discussions related to well-known factors such as community norms, political pressures, informal organization and other group dynamics, or relationships with other law enforcement agencies. It is not hyperbolic to equate the training rhetoric and activities (especially occupying a single lane on the firing range for endless hours) with training to become John Rambo from the eponymous movie series. Warriors should be trained to survive alone in hostile territory, but there are probably more effective pedagogical techniques and content for those officers who might consider their role as that of guardian instead.

Suggestions for curricular revision

Based on the experiences I have related in my autoethnographic account, I will offer suggestions for improving the course content and the methods by which this content is delivered in mandatory firearms training courses for local police officers. The suggestions I offer are broad and allow for the specific contexts of local or regional training coursework. The extent to which these suggestions are already in use will certainly vary. Nevertheless, the ideas that I present below are worthy of consideration for training programs which have not yet incorporated them. Before presenting these revisions, it is important to note that police reform in the United States is a decidedly uphill battle, given the relatively sacred status of law enforcement agencies that citizens and policymakers often ascribe to them (Coe & Wiesel, 2001; LaFrance & Placide, 2010).

Use the decision as the unit of analysis and preparation

While heuristics, schemas, and mental representations are helpful in making split-second decisions, arresting mental fatigue, and helping us all to avoid immediate danger, using these devices comes at a considerable cost. Foremost, we can become reliant on instinctive behaviors that might not fit the situation at hand. In some cases, officers can begin to rely too heavily on past decisions and behaviors that, at best, create the optimum circumstances for escalating commitment to failing causes and, at worst, result in a deadly mistake (Lindblom, 1959; Kahneman, 2011). On the other hand, use of what Kahneman (2011) calls "System II" thinking is often impossible in the heat of a tense interaction with a community member. In fact, fully rational decision-making would require a multistep process beginning with problem identification, listing every possible solution to a problem at hand, and choosing the very best solution. Because we are neither omnipotent or omniscient, this method of decision-making, in its purest form, is impossible (Simon, 1947). The solution to this conundrum might be found in using what Simon (1947) describes as "satisficing," or making a good enough decision while being aware of our inherently "bounded rationality."

More simply, it might be effective to simply consider the factors that influence our decisions and the relative weight we ascribe to each of these factors. Recent work on the "Target Model" of discretion provides a window through which officers may consider these factors and their relative weights (LaFrance, 2017). The Target Model allows scholars and practitioners to discuss nine factors and concepts as independent influences on a decision and compare the importance of each relative to the others: (1)

personal values/morality; (2) community norms/expectations, (3) political pressures (indirect and direct), (4) informal organizational norms/values, (5) values of other agencies and their managers, (6) standard operating procedures and agency policies, (7) professional association values, (8) accreditation body mandates, and (9) legal liability concerns (LaFrance, 2017).

A good first step of firearms training might simply ask course participants to rank these factors in order of importance when they are making a decision to use deadly force. Another use of this model, in line with the training suggestions offered in other emergent literature, would be to incorporate scenarios, simulations, and/or case studies into the use of this model. For instance, one could be presented with a decision scenario in which two or more of these factors clash and think through the process of choosing an action. Most simply of all, trainers might base curriculum on some of these decision factors and blend it with pre-existing lessons. I will describe some methods by which this may be accomplished in the following section.

Create opportunities for discussions of group dynamics

First, training programs might begin by considering the fact that individual decision-making is affected by group dynamics. As much as the lone warrior approach helps in understanding the immediacy and gravity of life or death situations, this approach can interfere with awareness and appreciation of the influence of groups on an individual's choices. This might begin with a reminder to the officers, to paraphrase Sir Robert Peel (1829, as quoted by Durham Police, 2019), that they are not only part of an agency team but they are also members of the communities they serve. This should create an environment wherein trainees are able to consider the norms and expectations of their respective communities and the amount of influence these norms and expectations have on the decisions each trainee makes.

Create opportunities for intentional discussions of outside perspectives

Ideally, officers could be asked to consider the role that political pressures and expectations play in their decisioning, as these pressures are often deeply connected to the aforementioned norms and expectations of a given community. This might be an opportunity to host a panel of local community stakeholders and representatives of various community groups (e.g., Black Lives Matter) in order to evaluate and ruminate on the perspectives they offer. Similarly, taped interviews or visits with victims of poor use of force decisions could be included into the curriculum. If this has no other effect, it will remind trainees that they are being trained to shoot actual human beings rather

than cartoon figures on the side of a cardboard box. Finally, the influence of professional associations, accreditation bodies, and other managers/agencies (especially larger, innovative ones) might be a good topic, especially for officers whose managers want to emulate or abide by the ideas and practices recommended by each of these groups.

Officers might then turn their focus inward to consider the internal groups with whom they work and whose influence is often prominent in decisions. During this portion, the formal organization, especially standard operating procedures and policies, could be discussed and each trainee could be required to learn the ins and outs of their department's firearms-related policies. This would help with the fact that curricula in these courses is often non-standardized due to the vast differences in individual agency policies.

From this point, a discussion of the informal organization and peer group norms and expectations might be considered. Here, we may ask many questions to jog officers' minds. We could ask, for instance: What are some ways that each officer's respective peers hold weight over the decisions that the officer makes? or, What are some potential positive and negative outcomes associated with the influence of the informal organization? Here, too, we might remind them to be aware of the potential for groupthink, or a thirst for consensus at any cost, and the ways in which this pattern of thought can lead to negative outcomes (Janis, 1972).

Consider the guardian mindset as equally relevant to that of the warrior mindset

Most importantly, augmenting training curricula to embrace the "Guardian" mindset alongside, or in lieu of, the "Warrior" mindset might help remind trainees that they are often working with, rather than against, the community members they encounter in the course of fulfilling their duties (Stoughton, 2014). Recent empirical evidence links the guardian mindset to the level of importance officers, in the aggregate, place on communication as a priority in performing their work (McLean et. al., 2018). Moreover, Boivin, et. al. (2020) argue that the "Us vs Them" mentality evolves throughout the course of police academy training, and LaFrance and Day (2013) suggest that officers have divergent priorities depending on the length of time they have served. Thus, this mindset might facilitate the growth of empathy between community members and officers, creating room for communication that will ultimately help to minimize the number of tragedies that result from misunderstandings between the two groups. Exposure to this warrior/ guardian distinction, and training focused on it, might result

in a more inclusive guardian phenomenon. After conducting almost 80 interviews with police chiefs, Carlson (2019) observes that both the warrior and guardian mindset can exist, but this dichotomy has evinced itself along racial lines in “two racially distinct styles of police masculinity: the “warrior” and the “guardian.” She goes on to explain that “the ‘warrior’ brand of police masculinity emphasizes aggressive enforcement against (black and brown) perpetrators, the ‘guardian’ brand of police masculinity emphasizes assertive protection on behalf of (white) victims” (Carlson, 2019, p. 1).

Moreover, attention should be paid to the aftermath of the use of a firearm while on-duty. Beyond merely surviving the encounter, what are some ways that officers might develop the ability to survive the aftermath of the encounter? Without a doubt, incorporating even some of these recommendations might not be practical in a 40-hour course on police firearms use. Instructors might overcome this by making use of homework opportunities for course participants, with modules they complete between classroom sessions. Or, better yet, Illinois and other states could increase the hour requirement from 40 to 60 to allow for each of these areas to be addressed.

Limitations of this study and future research

This study is intended to provide a personal account of a mandatory law enforcement firearms training course. Here, I have been able to relate the training experience and discuss some areas where training could be improved and enhanced based. Of course, this experience is a snapshot of law enforcement firearms training. It is important to note that because depth of understanding was the aim of this study, broad generalizations about the universe of law enforcement firearms training courses are not prudent or possible to make, though it is encouraging that my findings square with those of higher *N* studies in terms of course content and concerns. Future research toward understanding modal tendencies in training curricula with a much larger, randomly chosen, sample are certainly desirable. More research could also be conducted to understand the styles, values, and beliefs held by training instructors and how these influence the training process. For instance, my trainers each held a great amount of disdain for the use of a shotgun as a perimeter control tool, and an even greater amount of disgust at the thought of the shotgun as a viable defensive weapon beyond close quarters. As a result of these expressed beliefs, shotgun training was treated merely as a box to check rather than a topic to which much instruction or practice was devoted. Other variables might include recent use of force events in a training region, variations between in-academy firearms training offered as part of a comprehensive police certification curriculum and a la carte firearms training courses

such as the one I have described. Despite these limitations, the study provides provocative insight and raises a litany of scholarly research questions to be explored.

Conclusion and implications

In this essay, I have presented an autoethnographic case study of my experience in completing the state mandated 40-hour firearms training course for Illinois law enforcement officers. Based on my observations and experiences, I have offered recommendations for improving the course and the way in which the course is delivered. This work should help provide the basis for future research on this important topic. Qualitative research in this area might focus on interviews with some of the 27% of officers who have used their firearms in the course of duty, asking what they would want recruits in a gun training course to know before being faced with the decision to use deadly force. Quantitative approaches might investigate potential statistically significant relationships between training hours spent on the firing range and the likelihood of deadly force being employed. More broadly, police training institutes may consider this work in deciding whether to supplement, augment, or restructure their respective firearms training courses. In short, lots of work remains for scholars and practitioners in this area.

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Reviews