A Phenomenological Psychological Study of the Police Officer's Lived-Experience of the Use of Deadly Force

Rodger E. Broome, PhD, Utah Valley University
A Phenomenological Psychological Study of the Police Officer’s Lived Experience of the Use of Deadly Force

Rodger E. Broomé, PhD

Abstract
A police officer is sometimes required to literally make a potentially life or death decision and act on it under rapidly evolving and dynamic circumstances involving a variety of mental, physical, and emotional aspects of the deadly force experience. Because the act of using deadly force is so personally influencing, the descriptive phenomenological psychological method was used in this study to provide a qualitative, holistic, and personal viewpoint from the officers’ perspective in their lived experiences. Three city police officers were interviewed and each gave a descriptive account of their experiences with deadly force. It was found that police officers experience complex decision-making challenges requiring rapid interpretations and understandings of the situation as a lethal encounter. The phenomenological psychologically pertinent constituents found in the general structure of their experiences are Perceptions of Bullets Hitting the Suspect, Surreal Experience, Noticing Body Damage to the Suspect, Making Meaning out of the Experience, and Officer’s Understanding the Suspect(s) as Adversaries. Police officers are forced to confront death and later reflect on its personal and social meanings. The emotional impact of deadly force encounters seems to transform the officer and the deep emotional impacts may not ever become resolved.

1Utah Valley University, Provo, UT, USA

Corresponding Author:
Rodger E. Broomé, Department of Emergency Services, Utah Valley University, 3131 Mike Jense Parkway, Provo, UT 84601, USA.
Email: broomero@uvu.edu
Keywords
police, shooting, force, paradox, existential, phenomenological, survival, disruption, coping

Introduction

Police officers are granted specific authorization under the law to use deadly force in certain circumstances. The use of deadly force by police goes back to the 1800s when police first began carrying duty firearms (Tennenbaum, 1994). At the beginning, the police use of deadly force in America carried over from the English Common Law, which allowed police to use any means necessary to stop and capture a felon. At that time, there were very few felony crimes (which were punishable by execution) and firearms were not an available means to police for stopping criminals (Tennenbaum, 1994). As American law enforcement evolved, firearms became standard issue and were also an available means by which a fleeing felon could be stopped legally under the law.

A landmark decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of Tennessee v. Garner, in March 1985, the decision was rendered that police could no longer shoot to stop a fleeing felon. Police may use deadly force only in situations when the perpetrator poses a threat of serious bodily injury or death to the officer or another, or the violent offender poses a significant threat to the life safety of the community if his or her capture was delayed (Callahan, 2003; Tennenbaum, 1994). According to Tennenbaum (1994) many states and departments had already gone to more restrictive requirements for the use of police deadly force. Most of the reasons for the higher restrictions were motivated by the increasing emergence of civil suits for wrongful death filed against police; also political pressures from various groups were increasing (Tennenbaum, 1994).

When one looks at the psychological aspects of deadly force in contemporary law enforcement, two major themes tend to emerge. First, the issue of shooting performance in terms of the officer managing the stress, decision making, shot performance, and overcoming innate aversions to killing another human being (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Grossman, 1996, 2007; Murray, 2006). The second main issue is regarding the trauma and coping with having experienced a deadly force encounter (Blum, 2000; Kirschman, 2007; Miller, 2008). It seems like these two main concerns come from the larger social issues of (1) police using deadly force in a controlled way according to its use as sanctioned by the people and (2) administrative concerns about officers acquiring mental problems from their deployment of
deadly force. I think an important psychological issue that has not been sufficiently addressed is “What is it like to use deadly force as a police officer?” A general description of the lived experience from the officers’ perspectives is provided to help us better understand how this kind of event unfolds for the police. Therefore, I use the descriptive phenomenological method of research in psychology to analyze the first-person psychological perspective as it unfolds in the context in which it was lived (Giorgi, 1985, 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

**Literature Review**

There are a number of expectations placed on the police officer in terms of doing his or her duty. Tennenbaum (1994) describes society’s shift in its expectations regarding police using deadly force as expressed through the law of the Garner Decision. Additional public policies and police training developed, subsequent to the more restrictive standards (Callahan, 2003; Murray, 2006). These changes shifted the police culture, which psychosocially guides police behavior. Bonifacio (1991) and Kirschman (2007) address the strength of the strong in-group cultural dynamic among police officers. Expectations to perform according to subcultural norms are very strong, particularly when it comes to doing one’s duty. One of the greatest fears a police officer has is the disapproval of his or her peers (Bonifacio, 1991). Police rely on one another in terms of officer’s safety and backing up one another. Perhaps the court’s decision relieved the police of a “duty to shoot” any fleeing felon which ran against their natural innate aversion to kill. Moreover, many officers’ personal sense of morality may have run counter to the any felony rule that was the standard prior to the Garner Decision. Therefore, the drop in shooting rates are, at least in part, explainable by the officer’s own internal aversion to shoot except when necessary and within the scope of his or her training and duties (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Freud, 1933/1970; Grossman, 1996; Klinger, 2004; Miller, 2008; Murray, 2006). It seems that Tennenbaum (1994) rightfully addressed some externally based influences but did not address the internal-motivational and intentional dynamics that may have played a role in the decrease of police shootings following the Garner ruling. As such, an inquiry into the subjective psychology of police shootings is called for to provide insight into the minds of the officers.

Police deadly force training has been influenced by the findings of military psychology and its training methods. Grossman (1996) found that factors such as physical proximity, social distancing (objectification of the adversary), and the natural instinct to fight, flee, bluff, or freeze were common
influences on military shooting performance. Furthermore, it was discovered in the military that the more realistic the training was for a soldier, the more likely he or she was in effectively shooting and killing enemy combatants. Reality-based training (simulations of various types) is a standard methodological approach to bringing one from being a civilian to a warrior both in military and police applications of deadly force (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Grossman, 1996, 2007; Murray, 2006). The ideas on which simulation training is based are to provide real-time experience and practice in decision making and psychomotor skill automaticity. By training and practice, an officer can develop the ability to more efficiently and accurately assess a lethal threat through situational and behavioral cues of the suspect and take action with his or her firearm (Murray, 2006). Freud (1933/1970) and Lorenz (1966/1970) opined that technology allowed human beings to kill without leaving time for the innate aversions to have their natural influence. Of course, they focused on technology in the sense of weapons, but contemporary police training in the use of deadly force implements psychological aspects as well. Therefore, training in the use of deadly force for police is an essential aspect of understanding how police killings meaningfully differ from those (murderous killings) researched by Athens (1997).

Athens (1997) found that violent criminals are motivated by self-interests in either acquiring or protecting property, or some to defend or bolster things such as reputation, pride, or criminal self-identity. He found that through life experiences in a culture of violence, most violent criminals become such over time. Samenow (2004) discovered that violent criminals actually have different patterns of thinking than the average person. Similarly, he found that criminals tend to think first about what they have to gain by using violence without much or any sympathy for the victim. He describes something like a risk–benefit analysis with the violent criminal often not placing the value of the victim as a person over and above getting something he or she desires. In contrast, the police culture highly values life-saving and seemingly paradoxically uses deadly force as a last resort to stop a violent actor. Police value deadly force as a last result and sanction its use when other options are seemingly unavailable or unlikely to work (Klinger, 2004). Therefore, motivations are an important psychological quality in the police deadly force experience.

The psychological changes in a crisis or life-threatening situation are not a set of absolutes, but rather some common phenomena that are experienced by people living through them. Artwohl and Christensen (1997) list diminished sound, tunnel vision, automatic pilot, heightened visual clarity, slow motion time, memory loss for parts of the event, memory loss for some of your actions, dissociation, intrusive distracting thoughts, memory distortion,
intensified sounds, fast motion time, and temporary paralysis as common and possible perceptual distortions in lethal encounters. Simulated shooting situations are the way that many police get an approximation of what being in a shooting might be like (Murray, 2006). This is intended to help the officers cope through the ordeal. Additionally, Klein (1998) found that cognition becomes focused on finding the quickest satisfactory solution to combating the crises at hand as the primary mode of crisis planning. Unlike other models of comparative analysis decision making, people in crisis situations pattern-match the event with similar kind from the past and match it with a rough plan that represents the typical response to the situation. Stereotyping the event in this sense means to pattern-match features of the situation with a certain kind of situation from past experience or something learned so that a response decision or set of strategies is more rapidly formulated. They run the plan forward mentally searching for a glitch or problem that would cause the plan to fail. Klein (1998) calls this mental simulation. If the plan survives the mental simulation, it is put into action and adjusted as the situation unfolds. However, if the plan is found to have a terminal problem, the person goes to another option and plan for response and mentally simulates it for failure aspects. Likewise, simulation training is intended to help officers build decision-making cognitions and psychomotor responses in order to stay alive and make appropriate choices. It is believed that the more prepared an officer is through reality-based training, the more psychologically resilient he or she will be in the aftermath of a shooting (Murray, 2006).

Even when legally justifiable, police officers have been found to place stricter personal delimitations on their use of deadly force than both the law and departmental policies do (Klinger, 2004). The implications are that the officers are more likely to hold their fire when presented with a legally justified shooting situation than to take the first opportunity to shoot. It seems that officers typically have internalized the idea that deadly force is truly a last resort (Klinger, 2004). Is this a failure to disinhibit the innate aversion to killing that Grossman (1996, 2007) says is the purpose of training? Murray (2006) explains that many officers have learned that their priorities for life safety are themselves first, then their partners and citizens. When combined with the traditional model of the force continuum, an officer may hold his or her fire because of not feeling personally threatened and thereby not appropriately responding quickly enough to defend the life of a third party. This psychological dynamic is problematic because the duty of the police is to use deadly force when their own life or another’s life is in danger of serious bodily injury or death (Murray, 2006). So one of the advantages that Murray (2006) says reality-based training provides is the officer’s practice of shooting when there is a life in the balance rather than when experiencing a personal sense of
life-threat and peril. Again, it seems logical that simulation better prepares the officer to make better decisions, but to get at the motivations and other psychological aspects that enter into the pull of the trigger, we must look at the subjective psychology of the lived experience of a real shooting.

Police use deadly force as a part of their vocations as protectors of society. They are legally authorized to do so when a person presents a threat of exigent violence to the community. Such authorization has become delineated today through a history of philosophical and legal evolutions of thought (Callahan, 2003). But the sole purpose today for police deadly force is to stop a violent person from seriously injuring or killing another person (Klinger, 2004). Grossman’s (1996, 2007) work shows that substantial training is needed by protectors to enable them to use deadly force as authorized and intended by law. The technology of the training systems today has enabled the police officer to practice in simulated situations so that the real-to-life application on the street involves fewer mistakes, better shot accuracy, and more expedient neutralization of the violent suspect, regardless of whether or not he or she dies. The training is also designed to help the police deal with the stress, anxiety, and perceptual distortions that influence their decision making and psychomotor skills (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Blum, 2000; Grossman, 1996, 2007; Miller, 2008; Murray, 2006). But even with all the training and psychological preparation, a line-of-duty use of deadly force seems to always affect the officer personally (Klinger, 2004). The officer is subject to administrative and legal inquiries, as well as his or her own post hoc judgments about the shooting (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Grossman, 1996, 2007; Kirschman, 2007; Murray, 2006). Nevertheless, officers do understand that the possibility and duty to act are part of their vocations as protectors.

The standout difference between a police use of deadly force and a murder is in the meaning and purpose of the actions. Dodd (2009) says force is applied for the purpose of restoring or maintaining the natural social structure in a society. In other words, it is for the maintenance of peace and harmonious living among persons. Murderous violence, however, is purposefully directed at some level or aspect of destruction against that which is decent and orderly. Dodd’s (2009) distinction is not merely a position of “might is right” if it is sanctioned by government. Rather, he says it is directed at mitigating the very violence that undermines humankind’s natural sociality. So, it does not exclude acts of resistance against a rogue government or tyranny which are malevolent. It seems to me that this distinction is the same in comparison with murderous killing motivated by jealousy, revenge, greed, thrill, and so on, and the legal and appropriate use of deadly force by society’s protectors—the police. One important aspect of shootings that is not addressed by the other literature
is how an officer arrives at his or her personal meaning about the experience. Again, the extant psychological literature on police deadly force aims at performance and efficacy in shooting or in psychological coping and recovery from being involved in a traumatic event. The purpose of this study is to discover what it is like for an officer to shoot a person in the line of duty and how such a lived experience affects his or her life.

The purpose of a phenomenological psychological study is to explore the subjective psychological perspective of the research participants’ lived experience (Giorgi, 2009). I believe that this study has helped us gain a deeper understanding of a police officer’s experience of using deadly force and its subsequent impacts on his or her life. The extant literature on police deadly force is limited. A previous study on deadly force training for police was conducted using the descriptive phenomenological method in psychology. It was discovered that anxiety, decision making, perceptual distortions, and other structures of the experience seemed to represent what one might think approximates a real shooting. However, absent from the structure is the felt life-threat and sense that shooting the adversary was “killing a person” (Broomé, 2011). A main reason for conducting this study is to find out if the existential realities of the life-and-death conflict are much different and how it might be so. Some of the psychological aspects of the student police officers’ experiences were consistent with the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dynamics described by police psychologists on whose work reality-based training was developed (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Grossman, 1996, 2007). The descriptive phenomenological method shows us how the phenomenon was experienced and not simply that certain psychological aspects occurred. Furthermore, this is in the context of a police officer who actually causes the death of the person who he or she intended as his or her target.

Method

The descriptive phenomenological psychological method is a five-step system of research that holds Husserlian phenomenology as its philosophical foundation. Because Husserl was a philosopher, Giorgi (2009) needed to modify Husserl’s method to be useful for psychology. In doing so, Giorgi’s (1985, 2009) five-step method provides the systematic rigor of science while not being reductionistic in its treating of the persons studied. Furthermore, the method is discovery oriented rather than verification oriented. In this study, I describe the structure of the psychological phenomenon so that it can be understood in a deeper, holistic, and more comprehensive way than other methods can provide. In this study, it is the first-person meaning(s) of the experiences rather than mere objective interpretations of behaviors.
The participants for this research are from an exclusive population of people. Police officers who have used deadly force in the performance of their duties are relatively few in number within the greater law enforcement officer population. As a former law enforcement officer, I had personal access to the law enforcement community through my vocational ties that other psychological researchers do not necessarily have. Therefore, I contacted local law enforcement acquaintances seeking their assistance in recruiting three officers who have used deadly force in the line of duty. It is important to make the distinction here, that it is the experience of using deadly force that was of interest, regardless of whether or not the force’s outcome was fatal for the suspect. Police officers are trained to stop the violent behavior of the suspect and not kill him or her (Klinger, 2004; Murray, 2006).

The raw data for this study are the naïve descriptions of the deadly force experiences from and in the words of the participants. For Husserl (1931/2008), “natural cognition begins with experience and remains within experience” (p. 5). So the naïve description is the first-person account of the experience as it was lived and understood by the participant in his or her everyday commonsense mode of understanding. I captured an audio recording of separate in-person interviews with each of the participants about his or her experience. To initiate the telling of their experiences, the initial question for the participants was very simply presented like, “In as much detail as possible, tell me what it was like for you to use deadly force on a suspect as a police officer?” This general question is open ended and intended to offer the participant a wide range in which he or she can verbally describe the experience. As the participant related the experience to me, I made mental note of verbal transitions in which I sensed more could be said about something or that the participant incidentally veered away from which naturally occurs when people are speaking. When the participant reaches a point that he or she has said all that can be said spontaneously, I asked one or more follow-up questions like “You spoke about such and such, can you tell me more about that?” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The follow-up questions are not purposefully “leading” in the sense of trying to “pull out” of the participant particular information of a kind. Rather, it is an interviewing technique intended to “reopen the door” to an aspect of the account that was presented but not fully and expressly described by the participant. As the researcher, I wanted to acquire a verbal “re-living of the experience” expressed by the participant, to the greatest possible degree.

The method’s five-step method of data analysis based is on some principles of phenomenological philosophy (Amedeo Giorgi, personal communication). In each step, I will explain the procedure and its corresponding philosophical concept that supports its purpose and character. Therefore, the data analysis is
done once the interview has been transcribed and the text has become the “empirical evidence” to be analyzed for its psychological implications.

The first step of the phenomenological psychological method is for the researcher to assume the phenomenological attitude. The phenomenological attitude is different from the natural attitude or everyday way of understanding the world. In the phenomenological attitude, the research “brackets” his or her everyday knowledge to take a fresh look at the data. In other words, the researcher puts aside his or her presuppositions, theoretical, cultural, experimental, or otherwise.

The second step in the data analysis requires that I read the entire “naïve description” to get a sense of the whole experience (Giorgi, 1985, 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The “naïve description” provided by the participant was taken in the natural attitude in the way that he or she would experience things in the mode of everyday living from the nonreflective way of understanding. This is done without a critical reflection on the experience. However, I remained in the phenomenological attitude that “puts out of action” all commonsense presuppositions in order to conduct a critical reflection about the participant’s experience to describe how it was phenomenally experienced (Giorgi, 2009; Husserl, 1931/2008).

The third step in the data analysis is the demarcation of “meaning units” within the narrative so that the data can be dealt with in manageable portions (Giorgi, 1985, 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

The fourth step I took was transforming the meaning units into psychologically sensitive descriptive expressions of each of them. The researcher takes the phenomenon at the psychological level to practice science rather than the transcendental level which is to practice philosophy (Giorgi, 2009). The psychological level is an individuated, worldly, and personal level rather than a transcendental (universal, unconditional, and independent of experience; Giorgi, 2009). It is in this third step that the first change is made to the data in the analytical process. The meaning units are reexpressed in the third person while remaining faithful to the meanings expressed by the participant. The change to the third-person language does not change the meaning content but assists the researcher in remaining in the phenomenological attitude by not being empathetically drawn to the participant’s natural attitude (Giorgi, 2009).

The fifth step in the analysis is the synthesis of the general psychological structure from the psychological constituents of the experience. Constituents differ from the concept of elements because they are context dependent (Giorgi, 1985). Constituents therefore cannot be independent of each other, but are necessarily part of the whole structure. The purpose of this procedure is grounded in the phenomenological concept of parts and wholes. Sokolowski
(2008) points out that concept of parts and wholes is not original in phenomenology but was actually developed by Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Nevertheless, the concept expresses the idea that the “whole” of some things or states of affairs are irreducible to their parts. In other words, the value of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Results

The first participant (P1) was a new patrol officer responding to a “robbery just occurred” at a residence. He located the possible suspect in the area and attempted to stop and speak with him. The suspect began to flee and P1 gave chase. During the foot chase, the suspect began firing a handgun at P1 who returned fire in his own defense. The final exchange of gunfire took place within a perceived arm’s reach distance. The second participant (P2) was executing a no-knock search warrant on a drug house and was confronted by two suspects who were perceived to be armed. Perceiving that he and his partner were drawing gunfire from the suspects, he shot them both with a machine gun. One suspect died and the other survived. Participant three (P3) responded to a special dispatch to a barricaded mentally disturbed suspect of a domestic assault. The suspect had assaulted his female partner and patrol officers found him intoxicated, hostile, and barricaded in his home threatening to kill police. After hours of trying to negotiate and resolve the situation through nonlethal means, P3 and others were ordered to force entry into the home and apprehend the suspect. When inside, P3 was attacked by the suspect with a knife and shot him in self-defense at a range of less than 5 feet. Each officer described the postshooting activities and coping strategies used, that he lived-through in the aftermath of the events. All three participants were White male police officers working in a large city in the Intermountain West region of the United States.

General Structure of Police Deadly Force Experience

For P, the experience of using deadly force as a police officer against an adversary begins with a preliminary alert that a dangerous situation is unfolding because of threatening conditions generated by a violent person(s). P coordinates with other officers through planning and positioning to take actions intended to renormalize the situation while aware that such interplay with the suspect(s) may have lethal consequences for himself or herself or others. As P actualizes the plan, the adversary(ies) dangerously threatens P and his colleagues and P responds with defensive action that kills or severely wounds the suspect(s). P’s defensive actions bring closure to the situation
providing him or her a sense of relief from the danger while concomitantly experiencing strong emotional responses to the deadly force event and to the official procedures used by authorities charged with investigating P’s actions. It is not clear that P ever resolves the disruptive feelings triggered by the deadly force experience.

**All the Constituents Found in the General Structure**

The constituents found in the general structure are listed under descriptive titles as follows: (1) Alerted to Threatening Conditions, (2) Role Identification in the Situation, (3) Information Gathering to Anticipate Events, (4) Observations of Hazardous Actions of the Suspect, (5) Interpretations of the Situation, (6) Desire to Take/Maintain Control, (7) Tactical Planning and Deliberations, (8) Communication With Other Police About the State of Affairs, (9) Horrified Vulnerability From Lethal Attack, (9) Volitional Fiat to Shoot, (10) Perceptions of Bullets Hitting The Suspect, (11) **Surreal Experience**, (12) **Noticing Body Damage to the Suspect**, (13) Sense Support and Valuing by Other Police, (14) Sense of Alienation/Stigma Like a Criminal, (15) Postshooting Anxiety, (16) Felt Sense of Relief When Life-Threat was Believed to be Gone, (17) Misunderstood by Others, (18) **Making Meaning out of the Experience**, (19) Coping Through Action, (20) Postshooting Psychological Disruptions, and (21) **Officer’s Understanding the Suspect(s) as Adversaries**.

The italicized constituents are highlighted to focus the reader toward their pertinence to the focus of this report. The focus of this report is on how the personal experience was lived and subsequently reflected on afterward by the participants to make personal sense of it. The participants said they felt a change had occurred in them. They had a sense of new self-identity associated to the highlighted constituents, even though the other constituents also played their own part. Table 1 includes these highlighted constituents and provides the reader with some evidence in the form of exemplary examples rendered from the actual statements of the participants’ accounts.

**Meaning Making**

The participants’ attempts to understand their suspects better through talking to others, pulling records, or gathering information from other sources seemed to be a coping strategy to their anxieties and meaning-making processes. I highlight this aspect of the study because how the aftermaths of the shootings were experienced and the actions taken by the participants to better understand their experiences were important to their self-concepts.
Table 1. Pertinent Constituents of the Structure Along With Empirical Variations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituents</th>
<th>Participant 1</th>
<th>Participant 2</th>
<th>Participant 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Horrified</td>
<td>... then when he gets about a half of a block down, he turns around and he has a handgun; a silver handgun—a revolver. And he turns around and he fires down the sidewalk.</td>
<td>... a black handgun in his hand and it was pointed at us.</td>
<td>... and he pulled out a knife of a sheath. And he pulled it up just like this [ice-pick style knife grip] and we’re this close ... we’re three feet away from each other ... tried to take a step back ... he’s coming at me, look ... take a step back and there’s no place to go because my entry team is trying to get in there and stuff like that ... and this is just a tiny little room, we’re in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>I remember thinking, “You’re not going to take me away from my family ... I am going to see my kid. You will not take that away from me.”</td>
<td>The next guy ... with a silver revolver in his hand; like a matt-finished silver revolver. And he pointed at us and he fired it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Lethal</td>
<td>And I was furious ... That’s the one emotion that I remember most above anything, is that I was so mad. I was so furious that he had done that ... he was trying to take me away from my family. It infuriated me.</td>
<td>and he said to me, “Are those guys shooting at us?” And I said, “You’re goddamned right they are!”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack</td>
<td>... he popped up from around the tree and sticks the gun up right at me. And it was close enough that I could have reached out and grabbed the muzzle. And remember how close that muzzle was.</td>
<td>So he thought they shot at us too. So did I. In fact, we thought that to the point where, when it was all over ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table 1. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituents</th>
<th>Participant 1</th>
<th>Participant 2</th>
<th>Participant 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... he shot two times ... when he popped out from around the tree and fired that shot from three feet away from me ... I remember feeling something right here [pointing to the center-top of his chest] and thinking that he had shot me. I did not want to put my gun away. My gun was all my cover that I had.</td>
<td>we were standing in the front yard waiting for detectives, etc. We were checking each other for holes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Bullets Hitting the Suspect</td>
<td>I can hear him grunting and I can hear him, just making the sounds like he'd been hit. So I knew I was getting hits on him. ... I can hear him grunting and falls down behind this tree. He fell down, he rolled on top of his hands and I could hear him just gurgling.</td>
<td></td>
<td>He just went down really slow ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noticing Body Damage to the Suspect</td>
<td>I got him several times in the heart and lungs and everything ... ... and I could hear him just gurgling.</td>
<td>The first guy ... two of the shots missed him and the third ... one of them caught him in the upper chest. The second guy had a very different experience with getting shot. And he got hit by all three rounds ... of them, I believe, hit him in the pelvis area and then went shooting out his thigh. Another one hit him in the middle of his chest and shot out his armpit.</td>
<td>The first shot hit him ... as he's coming up with the knife ... it hits him in the wrist. And it went into his chest. And the second two hit him in the chest. The fourth one hit him in the head.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constituents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Making Meaning Out of the Experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I knew I was justified in shooting that person, but I was confused on . . .</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . whether me being so angry and me being so mad at him, at that time that I shot him, whether that made it wrong. Whether that made it bad. That I was so angry and that is why I shot him.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I remember feeling very confused on, “Why don’t I feel bad that I killed somebody?”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Participant 1 |
| . . . the third one hit him in the middle of the forehead, but kind of right at his hairline? |
| There were parts of his hat stuck to the ceiling. I mean, it blew his head off from the hairline up. |
| . . . second guy was . . . doesn’t get any deader than that. He was instantly killed. |

| Participant 2 |
| . . . it just seems like the blood starts coming out of the top of his head. |
| . . . the paramedics were . . . working on him. They rolled him over and there was just blood everywhere. |

| Participant 3 |
| . . . later on it turned out that it was a “suicide by cop” thing is all this was. |

(continued)
I remember thinking that after a couple of days, “Well, what if, when he pulled out his gun, what if I would have tasered him? What if I would have shot him with my asp?” I mean, there’s some other recourse I probably could have taken.

And then I remember thinking, if . . . the analogy I came up with in my mind, was that if I saw that guy . . . drowning in a pool, I would have jumped in to save that guy. I would have jumped in and brought him out of the pool and saved that guy.

. . . because “SWAT team kills two drug dealers from Mexico,” . . . It is not a very controversial headline, you know . . . there were no family members around or anything. I mean, they didn’t know what to do with the body of the dead-guy . . . I don’t think anyone ever claimed him.

Strangely enough, most of the guys . . . also reported hearing shots from a handgun. Because the gun I was using makes a very different sound than a handgun. It’s extremely loud, very uncomfortable to be next . . .

And . . . yeah, that’s . . . everybody said they heard shots. But we never did find a second gun.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituents</th>
<th>Participant 1</th>
<th>Participant 2</th>
<th>Participant 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Officer's Understanding the Suspect(s) as Adversaries</td>
<td>... after I read the reports, he had a small child and a girlfriend/wife-kind-of-thing, that he had tried to kill them three years or something before. He had shot at them, this guy’s a horrible shot, he missed them, shot their car, and he ended up ... the case was dismissed against him. I was furious that that case was dismissed because he should have been in prison. That there were plenty of cases that should have been holding him in prison. He had several firearms violations, several aggravated assaults, that were all dismissed on technicalities and witnesses not showing up.</td>
<td>... on some Mexican National drug dealers. It turned out they were cartel guys ... very high on the matrix. He went to prison ... after he got out of the hospital he went to prison for a year locally. Then when he got out of there, he went to probably Kansas to a federal pen to do his five years for the Agg. Re-entry. So he's probably out now. ... there were no family members around or anything. I mean, they didn’t know what to do with the body of the dead-guy. I think they buried him ... I don’t know ... somewhere. I don’t think anyone ever claimed him.</td>
<td>... the guy was off his medication and supposedly and he had just beat up one of his girlfriends or something like that. So he just kind of ... they figured he was off of his medication at that time. ... right on the fence is a handwritten note that said, “To all cops, I’m ready to die.”  And we’ve always trained that there is one-percent of the population that gas doesn’t work on and he was it. ... because we shot this mentally unstable guy. ... I guess one of his best friends was killed before by a police officer and so he had this vendetta against the cops.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants described feeling different in their self-identities after the shootings. It seems much of the felt changes in themselves were formed by the officers investigating, making sense of what they learned and attributing to what it all meant about them. Going back to the beginning of their experiences with the initial alert to threatening conditions, the participants sought to find consistency in the context and events as they unfolded. They wanted to be as certain as possible that their shootings were the right thing and the only thing to do. They found that their suspects’ actions had created the circumstances that made their decisions to shoot defensive in nature and necessary as a last resort. Understanding their suspects as malevolent and violent people helped the participants conclude that there was no malice or wrongdoing on their parts in the events as they transpired. In other words, seeing their adversaries as “bad guys” supports their self-conception as the “good guys” in the “battle between good and evil” context.

Summary of the Results

Each participant’s experience began with information given to them indicating that their lives or the lives of others could be lost or serious harm could result. The events unfolded in a manner that increasingly clarified and constituted the situation so that the officers’ shooting the suspects in self-defense seemed to them inevitable. It is the interdependency of the constituents that shows each event unfolding not only in a manifold complex experience that in a sense seems like a chain reaction but also in a very nonlinear holistic experience for the participants. We might consider each constituent one at a time, but the structure gives us a way to see that there really is not a sequence of events. So it is important that we understand that these constituents cannot be divided out from one another if one is to really capture an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants and how it transformed their lives. The highlighted constituents are raised out of the structure for the sake of the following discussion.

Discussion

A police officer’s use of deadly force is a life-affecting and personally transforming experience. Officers begin their careers understanding that their deployment of deadly force against a human being might be necessary to save their lives or the life of another person(s) (Klinger, 2004). Officers acquire their understandings about deadly force through rigorous training which teaches them to think and act in a variety of life-threatening situations and scenarios (Murray, 2006). But it is the confronting of their own brush
with death and the suspect's death, along with the overall meaning of the event, that seems to be at the center of the officer's transformation. In the beginning, much of the officer's thinking is tactical and strategic. Officers gather as much information as possible through observation and communications to help them interpret and understand the unfolding situation as accurately as they can. But there are uncertainties about whether or not the officer is actually going to have to ultimately pull the trigger. Actually, the officer tends to strategize toward taking positions and actions that would promote the surrender by suspect while reducing his or her exposure to harm from the suspect. Grossman (1996) says that people can be trained to overcome their natural aversions to killing and the purpose of intense and realistic training is aimed at facilitating this. In this study, I found that officers still have to make a very personal decision to shoot or not. Their training informs them about the legality of their situations, but even officers who are justified in using deadly force often hold their fire in hopes that the event will take a turn in another direction (Klinger, 2004). But when the situation becomes immediate and lethal, officers experience a volitional fiat that initiates their automated firing sequence that makes shooting the suspect seem like it is really beyond their control. Their preceding tactical and strategic thinking and positioning, which still feels very much under their control and deliberate, evolves into a reaction to survive that seems like it runs its own course with the officer not fully driving the process.

Although the officers feel a sense of relief once the shooting of the suspect eliminates the personal life-threat to them, the officers have emotional reactions stemming from their personal meanings about the shootings. This is what I have termed the deadly force paradox. The deadly force paradox brings the officer to an experiential place of exacting the horrible life-negating injuries on the suspect, which simultaneously becomes life sustaining or preserving for himself or herself. The most horrible act of the officer's life is also the thing that saved it.

A main aspect of meaning making by the officers is how they view themselves in relation to the suspects in the “good-guy/bad-guy” dichotomy. It seems like the more clearly the officer is able to verify that the adversary was a malevolent person, the more the situations seems to make sense. It can be seen in the contextual differences between P1's and P2's situation when compared with P3's incident. P1 and P2 found that their suspects had significant criminal records and other aspects about them that were attributable to their “bad characters.” But P3 suspect was understood by him and the other officers as suffering from a possible “mental illness.” This framing of the suspect puts him into a possible “victim” role rather than a pure “criminal” role. Although his criminal history indicates that he was not a “law-abiding
citizen," the issue of possibly being deranged or not fully in control of his mental faculties created dubiousness about the "justice served" by the outcome of the incident. Therefore, the clear distinction of P3 as the "good-guy" and the suspect as the "bad-guy" seems to be at the root of his emotional disruptions following the shooting. This means that the shooting being deemed "justified" by the authorities is part of the meaning-making process, but the officer has to subjectively believe that the shooting was necessary and served justice to moderate the negative aspects of the deadly force paradox. The officers seem to formulate such beliefs out of their own reflections and ruminations of the events, the reactions of peers and others in the situation and aftermath, and finding evidence or information that supports the attribution of criminality or malevolence to the dead suspect. Therefore, the meaning making of the experience begins with the initial alert and unfolds continually beyond the incident.

An important contribution that this study makes is that the perceptual distortions have very much to do with the meanings objects, spaces, and time have in relation to the officers' survival. Rather than simply an overload of the psychophysiological systems of the officer alone (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997), it seems the perceptions of things are seemingly enhanced, constructed, or otherwise distorted depending on their direct association to the officer's ability to defend and preserve his or her own life through competent shooting. For example, P1 described how much thicker he perceived the tree that the suspect went down behind and how it obstructed him have a clear shot. Another example is how P2 described seeing a gun in his second suspect's hand as part of his general description that the suspect emerged in his sight running from the same place and in the same direction as the first who really did have a gun. Only later after the shooting did P2 learn that the second suspect never actually had a gun. A personal mystery for him is how he saw a particular kind of gun and the suspect firing it, but then found out it never was there. Finally, P3 searched behind a sofa that was up against the wall to make sure no other threats were behind it, when actually there would have not been enough room. The officers experienced some exaggerated perceptions of those things that represented threats to their safety or inhibitions to their success in the fight. This is an original finding of this research because it shows how personal meanings influence the perceptual experiences of people in crisis.

The officers had mixed conclusions about their experiences. None of them said that they felt like the shooting was a good thing. P2 said that he is glad that it happened, but clarifies that it was because it confirmed for him that he was capable of pulling the trigger, if necessary. He experienced stress and anxiety stemming from the incident, but felt more secure about his abilities to
protect himself and others after having had to do so. P1 said that when he hears that another officer has been in a shooting, he secretly wishes that it was him because that way another officer would not have to needlessly go through the experience. P3's situation unfolded leaving him feeling like he was forced to shoot and kill the suspect without his “say” in the matter. In other words, P3 came to understand that shootings were not fully the decision of the officer. In fact, it might be that P3 came to understand that shootings have less to do with the officers’ will than that of the suspect he or she faces. This lack of control over the situation seems to be a significant source of distress for P3. The police training in deadly force focuses on the officer making the appropriate assessment and decision to shoot (Murray, 2006). But the experience of shooting seems more like it flies out of the hands of the officer and is driven more by other forces. The combination of the volitional fiat and automated response in the face of one’s mortality renders the officer feeling out of control of the situation and themselves. The automated response means that the officers had been trained so proficiently in the use of their weapons, that to actuate them in an armed conflict takes little conscious thought to put the actions to shoot in motion. Therefore, the situation is understood as kill or be killed (volitional fiat) and the gun-firing sequence is actualized in the shooting of the assailant.

On the other hand, P1 experienced righteous indignation and anger at the suspect during a lull in the gun fight that made him wonder if he had acted (at least in part) malevolently when he shot the suspect. He was able to reason through this matter, but it seems like there is still something emotionally at issue with it. P2 seems to be sort of dumbfounded by his having perceived the silver revolver being fired by the suspect he killed. P2 knows from training that such perceptual anomalies are possible, but he thought that the gun being an entirely different kind than the one presented by the first suspect who he shot was curious. I find this extraordinary too. Had he seen a black semiautomatic pistol like the one the first suspect had pointed at him, we might be able to explain that he had transferred that observation into the perception of the second suspect through some sort of cognitive priming (Klein, 1998). But P2 never even realized that the misperception of the silver revolver had occurred until long after the shooting when the investigators could never find it. This seems to have left an emotional loose end because P2 found that his perceptions might be subject to error. Furthermore, his reaction to other people’s opinions and judgments trigger frustration and anger in him. It seems likely that he has had to come to make sense and accept that police shootings are very dynamic, complex, and frightening situations and post hoc judgments by others who have not had such an experience lack the “right” perspective to adequately judge officers who have lived through them.
Police officers who have used deadly force in the line of duty feel like different officers afterward. Once he or she has shot and killed another person, it is permanent and the officer becomes one of the relatively few who have done it. This means, that not only do they “know” things that civilians do not seem to understand, but even other police officers do not quite understand fully because they have not crossed that threshold in their careers.

The findings of this study present us with the idea that an officer becomes a different person, to some extent, through his or her experience of using deadly force. The officer makes self-attributions based on how he or she understands the nature of the situation and the appropriateness of his or her response to the events as they unfolded. Self-criticism therefore, can be a source of significant anxiety for the officer if he or she has doubts or lacks clarity about his or her motives, competence, or sense of self-control. The volitional fiat and automated firing sequence can be experienced as a loss of some control of the situation. But this is only because in everyday life, big decisions are the ones with which we tend to wrestle. Once faced with life or death, the officers did not need to wrestle with choices but react with the solution most likely to prevent their death. It was a rapid and seamless flow of experienced action.

Feeling like a different person, officers might feel like others see them differently which might be negative or positive. What others think matters to the officers, which really separates their thinking from what has been the self-centeredness and egocentric cognitive patterns that most violent criminals have (Samenow, 2004). The idea that they are placed under suspicion, even if it is solely a matter of procedure, presents them with the horrible paradoxical idea that they may be forced into a category (murderer) that they actually fought for their own lives against. It is reasonable to see why officers can have emotional reactions triggered by this and other aspects of the aftermath that may call their character into question (Bonifacio, 1991). Even when exonerated, the officers felt like they had gone through something unique that only officers who have used deadly force understand. The participants expressed that only officers who had been through what they had been through could fully understand them.

I believe that there are counseling and therapeutic insights that can be drawn from this study. Therapists working with officers after being in a shooting can see how important self-attribution and other attribution of motive, right versus wrong, and competence are to the officers personally. For example, P3’s first visit to a therapist after the shooting really went badly for him. He interpreted the clinician’s attempts to build a rapport as sensationalizing the experience. P3 felt that the therapist was more interested in hearing the gory details of the situation than how it personally affected P3 as
a human being. The attempt to connect actually resulted in P3 feeling objectified and exoticized by the therapist. Furthermore, if a police officer were to be troubled by a shooting, this study might lend some insight into how a therapist might help his or her client toward finding personal meanings from the experience.

There may also be some insights that can help police, attorneys, civil rights groups, and other stakeholders understand what it means for a police officer to reasonably believe that deadly force is necessary to protect his or her own life. In the public policy arena, police shootings are often discussed on the macro-frame level using a sociological perspective to interpret how police shootings happen and when they are appropriate (Skogan & Frydl, 2004). However, the law makes reference to an officer’s actions being justified in using deadly force when he or she reasonably believes it is necessary to protect life (American Law Institute, 1985). This phenomenological approach allows us to see to some degree what it was like for the officer to use deadly force. Specifically, how experiencing and having lived through and lived with the deadly force paradox is an irreversible part of his or her personal history and changes him or her. The way that the lived experience unfolds from the officers’ perspectives is now given a voice in this research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References


**Author Biography**

Rodger E. Broome is a retired police officer and firefighter/EMT from West Jordan, Utah. After working in the emergency services for 22 years, he retired to take a faculty position at Utah Valley University. He is an alumnus of Saybrook University, trained in phenomenological psychological research by Amedeo Giorgi, specializing in researching the lived experiences of emergency responders and other related topics.