Utah Valley University

From the Selected Works of Rodger E. Broome

Winter 2013

The Lived-Experience of Leading a Successful Police Vehicle Pursuit: A Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Inquiry

Rodger E. Broome, PhD, *Utah Valley University*

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/rodger_broome/32/

The Lived-Experience of Leading a Successful Police Vehicle Pursuit: A Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Inquiry

Rodger E. Broomé

Utah Valley University

Abstract

Police vehicle pursuits are inherently dangerous, rapidly evolving, and require police coordination to safely stop and arrest the suspect. Interviews of three US police officers were conducted and the descriptive phenomenological psychological method was used to analyze their naïve accounts of their lived-experiences. The psychological constituents of the experience of leading a successful chase and capture of a fleeing criminal found are: (1) Alert to Possible Car Chase, (2) Suspect Identified, (3) Anxiety and Excitement About the Chase, (4) Awareness of Primary Chase Role, (5) Radio Coordination with Others to Take Actions to Stop the Suspect, (6) Ongoing Evaluation of Chase Situation and Persistence, (7) Reading the Suspect's Driving Behaviors, (8) Car Chase Transition to a Coordinated Physical Capture, and (9) Making Sense of the Experience Through Inquiry. Insights garnered from this study may be useful to police, policy makers, trainers and others interested in emergency and crisis decision-making.

Keywords

police, psychology, pursuit, chase, driving, escape

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore police officers' experiences during police vehicle pursuits. Police vehicle pursuits are an experience that many, if not most, police officers will have during their careers. Vehicle chases are inherently dangerous, highly dynamic, and involve many psychological aspects that, up to this point, have mainly been studied

quantitatively. This study explored the subjective psychological perspective of three participants in order to synthesize a general psychological structure of what it was like to be in a police vehicle pursuit (Giorgi, 2009). The descriptive phenomenological psychological method provides us with a first-person perspective of what it is like for the officer to lead a vehicle pursuit. The first-person perspective provides us with insight to psychological aspects of an experience like motivations, perceptions, anticipations, worries, thoughts, etc. The general public finds interest in police car chases due to their dynamic, risky, and often dramatic outcomes. The purpose of this study is to empathetically and systematically analyze the officers' points of view to learn more about these events from the "driver's seat" of the squad car, in a psychologically oriented way (Giorgi, 1985, 2009; Wertz & Churchill, 2001).

Police vehicle pursuits began emerging in the attention of the public during the 1980s and have continued to evolve as a controversial issue of public policy and safety (Alpert & Dunham, 1990; Alpert & Fridell, 1992; Lum & Fachner, 2008). Alpert and Dunham (1990) noticed that police pursuits were resulting in public outcry and significant civil litigation against offenders, officers, and law enforcement agencies because of their often disastrous outcomes. At that time, a few police agencies had chase policies and those that did based them upon conventional wisdom and anecdotal evidence. As a result, Alpert and Dunham (1990) launched an empirical study investigating the factors influencing successful and tragically ending police pursuits. Their and other's work, over the most recent decades, have led to a national law enforcement gathering of data and analysis, along with the formation of model chase policies for police agency adoption (Lum & Fachner, 2008). At the present time, the model chase policy and ongoing statistical database are the largest and most influential voice in law enforcement management pertaining to pursuit philosophy and practice.

The present study departed from the large scale factor analysis studies initiated by Alpert and Dunham (1990) and it takes a qualitative research focus through the descriptive phenomenological psychological method. This method of psychological analysis enabled me to examine the officers' experienced psychological qualities and aspects such as, motivations, thoughts, observations, sensations, emotions, perceptions, and more (Giorgi, 2009).

Literature Review

North American law enforcement has historically been a reactive entity for controlling crime and keeping the peace in society. In the past few decades, an emerging combination of society's desire (and expectation) for proactive crime control strategies coupled with modern technology has led to increased likelihoods of criminal suspect vehicular flight from police (Lum & Fachner, 2008). Alpert (1998) points toward a narrower conceptualization of the competing values as the officers' and their supervisor's perceived need to apprehend the suspect and the potential harm and risk to the public. Two considerations that are always part of Pursuit-Decision-making are (1) police pursuits are always dangerous, and (2) officers in pursuits can become so "involved" in the chase that its original objective gets subjectively obscured for the officer (Alpert & Dunham, 1990). It is believed that a combination of sensory stimuli (lights, radio-chatter, siren, etc.) which results in neurophysiological events in the officer's limbic and endocrine systems (i.e., adrenaline surge) can shift his or her perception about the situation and reduce his or her estimations concerning the dangers of the chase (Alpert, 1998; Schultz, Hudak, & Alpert, 2009). As early as 1990, the trend of the police pursuit discourse was moving away from the defensive driving aspects and moved toward focusing more on the mental aspects of the officers' attitudes, such as, overconfidence, false sense of experience and proficiency, and impatience (Alpert & Dunham, 1990). Understanding these subjective psychological aspects is important to understanding an officer's decision-making process during a pursuit.

Department policies governing pursuits are becoming more and more restrictive and basing their criteria on similar factors to be considered by officers and their supervisors when making the "chase/don't chase" decision. Most, if not all, department policies grant the supervisor the responsibility and authority to order a pursuing officer to terminate the chase (Alpert, 1998; Falk, 2006; Lum & Fachner, 2008). The issues that are typical for continuing versus terminating a chase are: (1) the officer has probable cause to believe the offender has committed a violent felony, (2) the officer's perceived need to immediately apprehend the suspect outweighs the risk to the public, or (3) the officer(s) are assisting another police agency who are pursuing under the circumstances of both criteria one and two (Falk, 2006). Within the risk to benefit analysis, the officer(s) and police supervisor(s) tend to first consider the perceived need/duty to apprehend

as their primary factor. The officers and their supervisors varied some in their risk assessments pertaining to traffic congestion, geographical area of the chase, and weather/road conditions (Alpert, 1998). Nonetheless, under the pressures of a chase, officers and their field supervisors have to make decisions balancing the risks and benefits of apprehending violent fleeing felons (crime control) versus termination (general public safety). At this point, to what degree these values are prioritized by police have been studied via self-report questionnaires by criminologists (Alpert, 1998; Schultz et al., 2009). Self-report questionnaires provide a lot of data that can generate strong statistical support for the findings. However, they rely on the officer's memories of chases that are from the not so frequent past. This casts some question about the accuracy of the information. Admittedly, no research method is completely free of distorted or forgotten aspects of the experience when utilizing self-reported data from the participants (Giorgi, 2009). However, survey questionnaires tend to pre-categorize things concretely enough that the data is fairly reliable even though it might not provide much depth about "why" or how the "same" questionnaire response was formulated by different officers operating under specifically different circumstances. Therefore, a qualitative approach to researching the officers' psychological phenomena is likely to elucidate or add to our present understanding of officer attitudes and so forth.

Method

The descriptive phenomenological psychological research method was used in the present study. Three police officers currently working for a department of 100 to 150 sworn personnel in the Western region of the U.S. volunteered to participate. Each participant was interviewed regarding a police pursuit in which he or she had initiated and continued with it until its resolution by the surrender or apprehension of the suspect. I audio recorded the interview accounts of the participants' experiences and I later transcribed them to serve as the raw data to be analyzed using the descriptive phenomenological psychological method.

Once the transcripts had been generated, the five step descriptive phenomenological psychological method was used to analyze and transform the data to synthesize a general structure of the experience (Giorgi, 2009). Even though multiple accounts were used in the proposed research, I will

describe the data analysis of a single account which of course is the same for all accounts provided by the participants. Step One (1): I assumed the phenomenological attitude which means that I took a theoretically neutral position (bracketing) toward the participant's account of the experience. I neither take a position of skepticism nor one of confirmation of the whole or any parts of the participant's account; a theoretically presuppositionless attitude (Husserl, 1983). Step Two (2): I read the entire account to get a sense of the *whole* experience. Step Three (3): I re-read the account and inserted a forward slash into the places where I sensed the meaning shifted in the text. The portions of narration between the slashes are called *meaning units* which allowed me to manage the volume of data and analyze the experience by examining these sections for their psychological meaningfulness. Step Four (4): Each *meaning unit* was transformed into a psychologically sensitive statement that expresses the essential meaning of that portion of the text. Giorgi (2009) explains this as, "with the help of imaginative variation, one is able to discriminate and clarify the psychological meaning for the particular meaning unit and then one tries to express it as accurately as possible" (pp. 136–137). Finally, Step Five (5): I used "these transformed meaning units [to] form the basis for the writing of the general structure of the experience" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 137).

Essentially, the general structure of the experience was synthesized using imaginative variation to examine the meaning units and discern those that could be categorized as "the same" in their essential meaningfulness across the different participants' accounts (Giorgi, 2009). In other words, those psychological aspects of the participants' experiences that were "shared" or "the same" for them all are assembled into the descriptive general structure. On the other hand, what things were left out of the general structure were those aspects of the experience that are not psychologically essential (Giorgi, 2009). The general structure was subsequently used as a basis for elaboration about those psychological aspects that were different in terms of the variations of the officers' experiences and their individual differences. The structure provides deep and valuable insights to the experience of being a police officer in a car chase (Giorgi, 2009). The descriptive qualitative nature of the results in this study may be useful to trainers, policy makers and pursuit review committees responsible for evaluating officers' decision making and actions. Police officers may also find new insights and understanding of pursuits that could influence their performance in future

chases. The officer's perspective is given "voice" in this phenomenological psychological research.

Each participant was provided with information so they can provide *informed consent* to participate and also how the data they will provide will be used by the researcher. Pseudonyms were used when transcribing the data and no identifiable information was used in the research report. All law enforcement sensitive information has been safeguarded so as to avoid providing a means for it to fall into the hands that might exploit or misuse it.

Results

Overview

The participants were three police patrol officers who were interviewed and provided verbal accounts of their experiences in police vehicle pursuits when being the primary chase unit. In each pursuit, the officer learned about a crime in-progress over the police radio and decided to get involved in its mitigation. The first participant was responding to intercept a police vehicle pursuit that was headed toward his jurisdiction from a neighboring city. The second participant, who was a veteran sergeant, responded to an attempted murder with a firearm call when he spotted the suspect leaving the scene. And the third participant waited in the path for an undercover officer following a possible stolen car to initiate an investigative vehicle stop. In each situation, the participant spotted and identified the suspect vehicle, initiated police car lights to give the suspect a visible command to stop, and then pursued the suspect when he fled, up to the point that his car was disabled and he was subsequently arrested.

In each situation the suspected law violation for which the suspect was being stopped was different. Nevertheless, in each case, no one was injured as a result of the vehicle chase and all three suspects were captured. While each participant describes a different pursuit, common aspects of their experiences emerged providing us with a general psychological description, through the phenomenological reduction of each transcribed account oriented on the psychological level. Table 1 below provides each constituent with empirical examples from the officers' expressions.

Table 1. Constituents of the Structure Along with Empirical Variations

Constituents	P ₁	P ₂	P ₃
Alert to Possible Car Chase	I was listening to the radio traffic . . . several agencies were involved in the pursuit . . . hearing the pursuit was headed Southbound.	I suddenly heard a three-beep come across the radio, it was a shooting . . . which I was just around the corner . . . being the closest one, I responded. I . . . passed the suspect vehicle as he was leaving . . . I turned around and gave chase . . .	I heard [another officer] on the air say she had just had a car come past her in the parking lot with the car alarm sounding . . . normal people don't drive with their car alarms on . . . I was thinking, "OK, this is a stolen car" . . . at that time we could still chase stolen cars.
Suspect Identified	I saw the pursuit coming toward me . . . and saw the vehicle matching the description; I saw one male in the vehicle . . .	I was pulling onto River Oak Road and passed the suspect vehicle as he was leaving. Dispatch basically said it was a green Honda, it blows right by me. I said to myself, "Oh shit!	I noted that [the other officer] is in an unmarked car and so I pulled out when they passed by . . .
Anxiety and Excitement About the Chase	I was kind of nervous, it was my first pursuit and I did not want to sound stupid on the radio.	As I was sitting there, I heard the three-beep, and I takes off thinking, "Oh man, is this night ever going to end?"	I was already thinking, "OK, this is a stolen car" and getting ready for it. I felt the need to multi-task . . .
Anxiety and Excitement About the Chase (cont.)	My adrenaline pumped . . . the heart almost went into the top of my throat and I had to take a deep breath. I seemed to want to try to stay on the radio and give detailed information . . . I get really tunnel-locked and really excited . . .	I said to myself, "Oh shit! Right then I had to make the decision . . . And that was my decision making on that. I did not want to because I do not like 10–80s [pursuits] . . .	And it was all those weird things going through my head as we were cruising . . . I . . . thought, "I'm going 100 MPH! . . . I'm in a pursuit at 100 MPH and this is what they call a 'high speed' pursuit, and man!" I was just so [adrenaline] dumped.

Table 1 (cont.)

Constituents	P ₁	P ₂	P ₃
Awareness of Primary Chase Role	<p>... it was my first pursuit, so kind of nervous about, you know, getting in my first pursuit. I didn't want to sound stupid on the radio ...</p> <p>I remember, two other K-9. It was kind of funny, it was the only time three K-9 vehicles were all in the pursuit together, so I was like, this is interesting ...</p>	<p>So, it was actually dispatched to Officer McKelly, however, me being the closest one, I responded. ... knowing that Officer McKelly was on his way, I turned around and gave chase to the vehicle which had just passed.</p> <p>I decide, well I've got to chase this guy.</p> <p>I had no choice. I had to chase the guy.</p>	<p>Jenny is in an unmarked car and so I pull out, you know, they pass by and I pull out right behind them, I instantly light'em up.</p> <p>I instantly call out that I'm in pursuit. ... at the time I was like, "I'm in a pursuit at 100 miles per hour and this is what they call a 'high speed' pursuit and man!</p>
Awareness of Primary Chase Role (cont.)	<p>... because I was thinking now, I got three K-9 vehicles, I'm the number one vehicle ...</p> <p>I'm going to want to deploy my dog, but obviously as a primary, you're responsible for vehicle and the occupants in it, so it takes me out of the K-9 position.</p>	<p>I didn't want to because I don't like 10–80s. But I had no choice so.</p>	<p>... it's my first pursuit. I want to make a good showing, you know. So the guys know I can handle a chase.</p> <p>... as I'm chasing him, I'm thinking, "OK, my-my radio traffic" I'm completely oblivious to the fact that Dave was behind me and ready to call it for me, I felt a need to multi-task ...</p>
Radio Coordination with Others to Take Actions to Stop the Suspect	<p>I was listening to the radio traffic ...</p> <p>I was trying to get out to ... intercept that pursuit so if the driver did exit his car and run, I could deploy my dog.</p>	<p>I notified dispatch that we're 10–80 (in-pursuit) ... at about five to 15 miles per hour or something like that.</p> <p>I was giving out directions, keeps</p>	<p>I heard [another officer] on the air say she had just had a car come past her I the parking lot ... and she was following it.</p>

Table 1 (cont.)

Constituents	P1	P2	P3
	I took a deep breath and broadcasted that I was in pursuit . . . trying to get all the information out of there.	wondering and waiting to hear [another officer] arrive at the scene because there was a victim that had been shot.	I was chasing the suspect and thinking, "OK, my . . . my radio traffic . . ." I felt the need to multi-task, callout the speeds . . . Chris [Sgt.] is going to terminate me . . .
Radio Coordination with Others to Take Actions to Stop the Suspect (cont.)	I also listened to the other vehicles coming . . . Listening to the radio traffic was hard to do. I seemed to want to try to stay on the radio and give detailed information, but had to listen too; listen to the radio traffic of other officers coming to my area. I was listening to another officer saying he has spikes set up. . . .	So at that time, I said to dispatch, "I'm going to have to call this a 10–80." I stopped my cruiser and let dispatch know what was going on, and asked for North River to come and help . . .	I heard an officer on the air that said, "I'm arriving, I'll secure the cars." And I was like, "OK, sweet!" and then we went up and over [the fence.] I thought I had had good communications at the time. I thought I was giving out road conditions, speeds and everything.
Ongoing Evaluation of Chase Situation and Persistence	. . . the other agencies had terminated, I believe, because the speeds were getting a bit higher. I was going back to my training . . . kind of trying to remember; it's winter time. That time of the morning, there was no traffic or anything.	I was mindful that it was snowing like crazy and the roads were snow packed. I saw the suspect kind of like, "am I going to run or am I not going to run?" and then he starts and takes off. I note that speeds are five MPH . . . because the roads are treacherous.	. . . it was coming down the car alarm was going off and stolen cars always run, and it was already built in my mind that if the suspect did not immediately pull over that that's what it was. I was chasing the suspect and thinking, "OK, my . . . my radio traffic" . . .

Table 1 (cont.)

Constituents	P1	P2	P3
Reading the Suspect's Driving Behaviors	<p>he's . . . the guy is kind of weaving, he's not stopping; speeds are staying probably about 70 miles per hour. He's staying pretty much in his lane.</p> <p>And we got confirmation that he got two tires. Continued going southbound . . . guy was still not yielding, still driving on the rims, the tires are coming off, and as he comes around, he tries to make a turn but the tires don't, so goes into the field and starts driving in the field.</p>	<p>It was kind of weird, because he saw me as I saw him, and he slowed down.</p> <p>I activated my overheads and he was kind of like "am I going to run or am I not going to run?"</p> <p>And then he starts . . . he takes off.</p> <p>. . . he's driving on the wrong side of the road. But I mean it's, you know, it's the weather such as it is, I'm not exactly sure what he was trying to accomplish, but like I said, I could tell he intentionally ran into this chain-link fence which stopped the chase.</p> <p>. . . the guy actually just does a crank and runs into a fence and then gets out.</p>	<p>. . . we end up going through 7800 and Redrock and I instantly call out that I'm in pursuit.</p> <p>I already had it built in my mind that if he didn't immediately pull over that that's what it was.</p> <p>And as we started cresting the hill I thought, "I'm going 100 miles per hour" you know.</p> <p>. . . but that light just East of Redrock starts to . . . I'm guessing, starts to sputter out. And he started to go, and I'm instantly going, "OK, he's going to bail, OK . . . ah, what's he going to do?"</p>
Car Chase Transition to a Coordinated Physical Capture	<p>I got three K-9 vehicles, I'm the number one vehicle, who's going to deploy the dog? And I'm thinking, gall this kind of stinks, because I'm like, if this guy runs or anything, I'm going to want to deploy my dog, but obviously as a primary, you're responsible for</p>	<p>Finally . . . the guy actually just does a crank and runs into a fence and then gets out.</p> <p>I stop my cruiser, let dispatch know what's going on, ask for North River to come and help, and I can actually . . . I think North River had been monitoring because I can actually</p>	<p>. . . remembering "ok, I need to try and remember to get a description of the guy."</p> <p>And he started to go, and I'm instantly going, "OK, he's going to bail, OK . . . ah, what's he going to do?" and I found myself creating some distance.</p> <p>When he got out</p>

Table 1 (cont.)

Constituents	P1	P2	P3
	vehicle and the occupants in it, so it takes me out of the K-9 position. (Officer) . . . deployed his spikes there and spiked the guy. And we got confirmation that he got two tires. . . the guy was still not yielding, still driving on the rims, the tires are coming off, and as he comes around, he tries to make a turn but the tires don't . . .	suddenly hear sirens coming from the south, so I'm assuming it's North River. he's kind of running around in a circle with his hands up because he can see me. I keep yelling commands, keep yelling commands, and as Officer Kinney pulls up, I say "I don't think he can understand us" and I go "cover me" . . .	and he kind of slipped on the snow . . . As we're running through the yard and getting ready to go over the fence, um . . . I remember thinking, "My car's still unlocked . . . and do I need to stop and run back and lock up my car? Or do I . . ." And right in front of this little, it was kind of a little day care, or quasi-storefront thing, he just pulls over and bails out of the car and takes off over a fence.
Car Chase Transition to a Coordinated Physical Capture (cont.)	I remember saying "Stay back! Stay back!" you know, "We've got the dogs here, let's play this out, call him out" so the other guy got his dog out, we called him out. The guy was kind of compliant. He came back, we got him cuffed up, and got him . . . took him to the cars and everything else.		Evanston [police] brought one of their K-9s over and we ended up finding him hiding in the back of a broken down car in the backyard. And we challenged him with the dog and he gives up. Turns out, the car had run out of gas. He stole a car that was pretty much on empty.

Table 1 (cont.)

Constituents	P1	P2	P3
Making Sense of the Experience Through Inquiry	I talked to the guy and (he said) “yeah, I had the mushrooms and was tripping hard and I just thought this whole thing . . . and you know . . .” ... just kind of interviewing the guy, “why are you running?” he had mushrooms and . . .	So later on, we get him back to the car and he obviously doesn’t speak English. North River has a Spanish speaking officer they communicate with him and he’s extremely intoxicated and said that he’d been in a fight.	Turns out, the car had run out of gas. He stole a car that was pretty much on empty. ... it’s my first pursuit. I want to make a good showing, you know. So the guys know I can handle a chase and listening to the tape afterwards, I realize why some of the concerns came up.
Making Sense of the Experience Through Inquiry (cont.)	... so he thought this whole thing was a video game he was playing and had no idea that realistically . . . he thought this was all fantasy. But you know, we had to stop this guy and get him stopped for the possible DUI, but . . . it ended great, everyone went home. The bad guy went to jail and we didn’t have anyone seriously hurt.	And so anyway, we get that taken care of, go back to the scene, and the fire department is just removing the victim who had been shot, but it wasn’t going to be life-threatening. They had gotten into an argument out in front of the house over spilling a beer and it got into a fight, he pulled out a gun and shot him. And I’m calling out to him, and obviously I can tell that he looks Spanish. So I’m thinking, “I wonder if he speaks English?” Anyway, so I saw	Because I wasn’t doing quite the job that I thought I was doing at the time. I thought I was giving out road conditions, you know, speeds and everything. You know, in my mind I’m going, “this is textbook, this is absolutely textbook.” And listening to it afterwards I’m like, “why am I not talking?” You know, “is the tape recorder broke or something?” And then all of a sudden, I’d spit something out and I’m like, “oh man . . .” OK, so that’s it.

Table 1 (cont.)

Constituents	P1	P2	P3
		that and it was kind of weird, so I knew that it was kind of a unique situation.	I think I had it so worked up in my mind stolen cars always, you know, they always run.
Making Sense of the Experience Through Inquiry (cont.)			And so, I already had it built in my mind that if he didn't immediately pull over that that's what it was. When I listened to the tape afterwards, from the time I called out 10–60 to the time I called out that we were in pursuit, it was five seconds. You know, there hadn't been an overt act to do it, so I think that a lot of that was . . .

General Structure of Police Vehicle Pursuit Experiences

The Participant (P) hears a police radio alert involving a criminal situation involving a suspect in a car who might flee. P feels compelled to join with other officers in taking collective actions to stop the suspect due to the danger the suspect poses to others. P, as the primary officer role in the chase, realizes responsibilities associated with being the leader in the situation. P operates his car while using the police radio to coordinate with other officers to intercept the suspect. P experiences significant anxiety while continuing the chase and seeks understanding through observations, radio communications, and reflections on training and protocols that would warrant its cessation. P observed and made interpretations of the suspect's driving behaviors to surmise his mental state and anticipate his

escape actions. P realizes that the suspect car had become disabled and coordinated with other officers in the physical capture of the suspect. P investigated the situation further to better understand the circumstances of the chase experience.

Elaboration of the Results

In this study, each of the participants was alerted to a criminal event that was in progress in which it was possible or perhaps likely that the suspect would attempt to flee in a vehicle. In P1's situation, the suspect was already being chased by police from a neighboring jurisdiction. P2 was responding to a shooting in which the dispatcher advised him that the suspect was leaving the scene in a car. P3 waited for a peer-officer in an unmarked police car who was following a suspected stolen car, to pass his location so that he could assist her; vehicle auto thieves typically lead police on high speed chases. In all three of these situations, the initial alert did not necessarily place the participant in a primary chasing officer role. However, the alert initiated the participants' anxiety and excitement about being involved in a chase or potential chase.

The experienced anxiety increased and decreased throughout the events depending on the circumstances. Naturally, the officers' anxiety was experienced to greater degrees in proportion to the risks of the chase and the amount of perceived control they had over the unfolding action. Specifically, anxiety rose when the officers realized that they had become the primary chasing officer whose responsibility for decision-making, communications to others on the radio, and anticipations of suspect's actions were required of them. In each instance, the participant located and identified the suspect vehicle, and initiated the pursuit to apprehend the suspect with the anticipation that a chase was likely. As one can see, pursuit began with an alert to participate in taking action to capture the suspect turned quickly into my participants realizing that each had become the primary chase officer with all of the associated responsibilities and actions to be taken by them. Their initial anxieties were associated with the dangers and risks involved in police pursuits, as well as, how others in the organization would evaluate their decisions and performance of the tasks during the chase. The "spot-light" of the primary chase role therefore, initiates and sustains anxiety for the officer in a psychophysiological sense due to the crash risks, but also in a socio-vocational sense because competence and the officer's

ability to control his or herself when under pressure are under scrutiny. All of these psychological aspects involve the officer's radio communications and coordination with others through that medium. If we were to eliminate the use of modern police radio communications, much of the socio-vocational evaluation from other police would likely not be part of the officers' pursuit experiences. Moreover, the radio communications are audio-recorded for the purposes of review by administrators, investigators or other interested parties. So the participants' role as the primary officer becomes embodied in the recording of his or her leading the chase, coordinating efforts with other officers and the dispatcher, while operating a motor vehicle under potentially hazardous conditions. Therefore, the experienced anxiety is interdependent in the psychological structure with these other constituents because they are both a source of anxiety while also being influenced by it.

The officers experience being motivated to continue chasing the suspect vehicle while evaluating the risks of doing so. The officers understand the state of affairs through considering what they perceive as the present conditions (in terms of physical risks), procedural aspects they learned in training, regulatory parameters in law and policy, against the benefits of stopping and apprehending the suspect. The officers experience their thoughts running over these issues to make an ongoing evaluation of their initial decisions to pursue the suspects. It seems that the officers seek a "veto-factor" or "deal breaker" that would function as the trigger to terminate the pursuit. In other words, the initial grounding for the chase is re-evaluated in light of the circumstances as they unfold within the framework of policy, training and perceived general risks. This re-evaluative process has a psychosocial dimension among the other officers and their leadership because much of the present environmental conditions, speeds, direction of travel, suspect driving behaviors, etc. are shared over the police two-way radio. The officer is in the lead position of the chase but is ever-presently aware of his or her collective context within the group and under the leadership's authority, either directly or indirectly through policy and procedures. The collectivity and coordination with other officers emerges to the forefront of the structure when the chase terminates through the suspect stopping his or her car and exiting. It is at this juncture, that officers must now make a physical arrest through the collective efforts of two or more of them; even under the circumstances that the suspect is surrendering.

The lived-experience of a police chase entails the capture or escape of the suspect. In fact and practicality, the goal of the chase is to capture the suspect which is to go beyond simply stopping the suspect's car. Therefore, in the horizon of the police pursuit is ever-present the goal of putting the suspect into physical custody through arrest. Reading the suspect's driving behaviors is part of the officers' anticipatory planning toward the end goal of bodily seizing the suspect. In order that the arrest can be done as safely as possible, officers coordinate efforts during the pursuit and at its termination to take physical custody of the suspect. Had the suspects in this study successfully escaped, the officers' lived-experience with the pursuit seems likely to have changed significantly. Logically speaking, since the main essential goal of a police pursuit is to capture the fleeing suspect, then the successful escape of the suspect would turn the overall type of pursuit experience from a victory into a defeat. In other words, the bad-guy wins and the good-guys lose. Moreover, the overarching mission of the police is for "good" to triumph over "evil." Therefore, the meaningfulness of the police pursuit experience is contingent upon the success or failure to capture the suspect.

The meaning making process began with the alert that a criminal situation likely to involve a pursuit was received by the officers. The officers used the initial dispatched information to identify the suspect vehicle and continued sharing information over the police radio. The meaning making process was a collective effort via the police radio and shared meaning is synthesized among the police involved and responding to assist. However, a fuller sense of the experiences was desired by the participants after the suspects were in custody. It was through taking further investigatory steps that the officers reached, what was for them, an adequate understanding about the motivations of the suspect to flee, how this validated them in their role as "perpetrator" or "criminal," which becomes a part of the validation for the officers decisions to chase and see it through to its conclusion. In other words, the post-chase investigation served to validate the participants' perceptions, decision-making, understandings, and actions taken to capture the suspects. Conceptually, the validation of the suspect as a bona fide "bad guy" reflexively supports the officers' identification as the "good guys." Overall, the pursuits are regarded by the participants as successful because they correctly located and identified their suspects, lead the pursuit without accident or injury to anyone as a result, and successfully

captured their suspects who they are able to verify were violating the law in a manner that was serious and their captures were important.

Dialog with Relevant Literature

Police pursuits are the result of the suspect's non-compliance with an officer's signal (lights and/or siren) to stop. In some cases, the officer may be intending to make contact for traffic enforcement actions or investigative purposes. In either case, the suspect refuses to stop and responds with evasive driving actions to get away. In order to truly escape, the suspect at some point must abandon the automobile and run away. Conversely, in order to capture the suspect, the officer must be there when the suspect abandons the vehicle so that capture is possible. Therefore, the *ideal goal* or outcome of the officer's deliberate and automatized actions directed toward the outcome of bodily capturing the suspect (James, 1962). While law enforcement has come to see police pursuits as dangerous enough to be regarded like an act of deadly force (Alpert & Fridell, 1992), the officers in this study do not take an attitude about the suspect's capture as a "dead or alive" proposition. Husserl emphasized the distinction between the *leib* and *körper* to distinguish between the lived-body (embodied consciousness) and the physical object body (Zahavi, 2005). It is an important distinction to bring up here because the officers' mindfulness to the risks to themselves, the public and the suspect are taken in the context of stopping the danger and bringing the accused to justice. However, it was not with the same attitude of deadly force being the last-ditch effort to stop the suspect's dangerous behavior. Rather, it was balancing the risks of safety with the goal of criminal capture for the purposes of bringing him or her to justice. Therefore, the officers pursue to successfully capture the suspect alive and not simply just physically stop them, as in deadly force deployments.

The experienced anxiety and its vicissitudes are associated with the primal anxiety human beings have about their own mortality, real and symbolically (Becker, 1997; Kierkegaard, 1980; May, 1996). P1 and P3 are eager and anxious to be involved in a pursuit because there are particular skills and abilities they have that they want to actualize. P1 was a canine handler that saw the pursuit as a chance to deploy his dog in anticipation that the car chase would transition into a foot chase. P3 merely desired to demonstrate his ability to perform well in such a big police event. P2 expresses negative

anxiety or dread because of the inherent dangers of police pursuits. One can see in this difference that the younger officers regard their chases as opportunities and the veteran sergeant regards his chase as a dangerous challenging duty. Categorically, the anxiety is part of the experience but I found here that the personal meaning of the situational context influences how it is experienced: excitement or dread.

The personal meaning of the anxiety seems attached to the level of responsibility that the officer has in the context of the chase. All of the participants found themselves in the lead or primary position of the chase. However, P2 keeps his supervisory role over the entire working police group with all of its attached duties and responsibilities, regardless of his position as the lead in the chase. Schneider (1999) explains that anxiety can be a suffocating experience when the person understands the circumstances to be personally overwhelming. P2 was responsible for his actions and decisions, as well as, the actions of the entire police group who were responding to a possible homicide and vehicle pursuit. Moreover, the whole night's work had him feeling overwhelmed from answering a lot of radio calls in treacherous weather and road conditions. P2's responsibility over the (*presumed*) homicide scene while also finding himself in the primary position to catch the shooter were exacerbated by the emergence of the car chase. In contrast, P3 is concerned that his announcements of high speeds might trigger his sergeant to order his chase terminated. This would rob him of his chase performance opportunity. P1 and P3 express their motivations in terms of expansive anxiety which springs forth from their actualizing potential associated with desiring to have a peak experience as a police officer (Maslow, 1995; May, 1996; Schneider, 1999). When one considers Alpert's (1998) findings that officers and supervisors have differences between them on their prioritization between crime control and the risk to the public, this study shows that level of responsibility influences subjective perspectives and goals in the general risk-benefit analysis. Not only did the supervisory role influence the quality (negative or positive) of my participants' feelings about chases, but P2's experience of chase being directly preceded by an overwhelming and hectic night seems to have a deepening effect on his felt dread.

The law, department regulations and policies, and standard procedures learned in training are the governing framework for decision-making and action-taking in police pursuits. These are the embodiment of the

subcultural values that serve, to a degree, as behavioral controls governing police. Becker (1997) says that people and groups create culture for the purpose of dealing with their existential limitations as physical beings. In other words, laws, rules, regulations, etc. serve people physically for their own safety, but also psychologically because following such prescriptions provides a belief system which lowers our death anxiety. These cultural devices were all mentioned by my participants as information they drew from in deciding whether or not to chase and continue chasing. As the officers ran the policy, procedures, and past-training through their minds, they were looking for some violation of one or more of these that would warrant the termination of the chase. This cognitive process is consistent with Klein's (1998) Recognition-Primed Decision (RPD) model of thinking in crisis situations. The officers are presented with a car chase, they determine whether or not the situation is the "type" that a chase would be justified by law, policy and circumstances, and they proceed to chase. They reflect on past experience and the governing regulations and as long as they do not discover a cause to modify their plan, they continue with the initial plan while making only situational modifications as the event unfold. The "veto factor" is the potential problem or prohibition that the officers look for in the continual mental re-evaluations of the situation as the events unfold. What we can see enables the RPD model is the phenomenological structure of inner time consciousness. The human mind synthesizes its experienced flow of time through the mental acts of retention (past), primal-impression (now-slice), and protention (anticipation) (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008; Husserl, 1991). The stream of the officers' experiences during the chase involved recollections from memory (learned data), retention of events just past, sensorial perceptions of current conditions and circumstances, and mentally reaches into the future anticipating possibilities as the events unfold. Therefore, officers are vigilant for pertinent information coming over the radio and visual scanning of the conditions, including the suspect's driving behaviors to which the officers attend to anticipate suspect actions. Again, the officers describe how suspect driving behaviors are regarded as typical or atypical with respect to the suspects' goal to escape capture or in anticipation of danger.

Klein (1998) also talks about how people in emergency decision-making situations go about a mental process of *story building* by mentally assembling their perceptions into unified themes. In this study, I found that the

participants were oriented toward story building in terms of whether or not they were following the “script” as laid out by regulations and procedures. Moreover, their post-chase investigations of what happened involved their validating that the chase was consistent within this frame, but more so that it was consistent within the duty to control crime as crime-fighters by the successful capture of bona fide criminals. In a psychosocial sense, the success of the chase was consistent with the societal role of the police officer. Police officers are protectors in the sense that Jung (1968) describes in his Hero Archetype. Bonifacio (1991) and Kirschman (2007) also acknowledge how important to a police officer it is to actualize within his or her heroic self-concept. The officers found their chases to be overall successful because they did both, controlled crime and did it without doing harm (Alpert, 1998). This is both a personal and social level affirmation of their fulfilling their vocations as police. P3 did find however, that his experienced performance was remembered more positively than he had found when he reviewed the dispatch recordings of his chase.

P3 found that he had done far less well in his police radio procedures than he had experienced during his chase. P3 described his mind racing, by reflectively reminding himself to evaluate current conditions, remember policy and training, trying to listen to the radio, and also having third-party-like realizations that he was in a real high speed chase for the first time. All of these aspects converging in P3’s mind might have been so intense of an experience that he failed to actualize what he was thinking by physically making the broadcasts. So he remembered his radio procedures as being “textbook,” but his memories were based more on his internal experience than his actual performance. P3 actually found a lot of dead air time. We do not have any information about the dispatch recordings of the other participants with which to make the same kind of comparison. But what P3’s discovery provides us with is the possibility that officers can become more caught up in the internal or mental acts of the experience than what is actually going on physically. We lack sufficient data to ascertain whether or not this internal-experiential gap with the objective facts of events occurred in P1’s and P2’s pursuits. However, both describe their minds running through policy, procedure, training, etc., to reflectively match current conditions with what was ideal. Therefore, this study shows the powerful psychological influences of department policy, training and past experiences have on police officers in high-stakes crisis decision-making situations.

Therefore, Alpert's and Dunham's (1990) suggestion that the officers' exposure to sensory stimuli and neurophysiological responses in the limbic system cause perceptual shifts might be short-sighted. It seems that P₃, who at the time was a rookie in his first pursuit, described being more caught up in his own thoughts and feelings than being impinged upon by external pressures. Moreover, his anxiety was more oriented toward his performance and doing well to prove himself as an officer than overconfidence or macho aggression. P₃'s anxiety emerged from his wanting to actualize himself as a police officer among his peer group. That is not to say the sensorial stimuli and neurophysiological responses did not play a role in his experience being surreal. It is only to point out that Alpert's and Dunham's (1990) interpretation seems biased by the traditional stimulus-response models of behaviorism and cognitive processor models of psychology. Further, P₃'s motivations seem to be more consistent with Bonifacio's (1991) and Kirschman's (2007) opinions that being a member of the strong in-group dynamic is a very powerful and central motivation for individual officers. Not only do officers need to "see" themselves as genuine police, but they also need socio-vocational validation of it. Such validation comes from successfully fighting crime within the parameters of the group's norms and values. It is reasonable to see how officers might regard a successful escape by the suspect or their chase resulting in an injury or death as an utter failure. Therefore, research examining chase experiences that ended in either of these outcomes are likely to be very different subjectively for the officers who lived through them.

Implications and Future Research

Perhaps the descriptive phenomenological approach to this psychological research can lend insight to the ongoing findings being built in the IACP police pursuit database (Lum & Fachner, 2008). The first-person perspective provides important information that a third-party interpretive approach cannot offer. Alpert and Dunham (1990) claim that more of a focus on the mental aspects, particularly attitudes of overconfidence, false sense of experience and proficiency, and impatience, are gaining the attention of police administrations and trainers rather than defensive driving strategies. However, this study found the mental aspects were related to performance anxiety, outcome focusing, and consequences oriented. These are all mental aspects that are known by sport psychologists to

increase mistakes, distraction, and confusion. In fact, negative cognition and distracting self-skepticism regarding “success” and over focused “winning” are all associated with “choking” in psychomotor skill performance (Porter, 2003, Selk, 2009). Police organizations or the officers individually, may consider consulting with sport psychology experts to cultivate performance psychology skills used by top athletes.

Officers need to be confident that their reviewers will be empathetic and understanding with respect to their post hoc analyses that judge their decisions when under pressure. This first-person perspective might help post-pursuit investigators and review boards understand the experience from “the driver’s seat.” Of course, more research needs to be done on different kinds of pursuits. For example, pursuits that involve crashes, interstates, various geographical areas, and different demographics of officers, need to be done in a phenomenological approach. The contribution of this study provides insight to the usefulness of this particular research method to this topic and perhaps other lived-experiences of law enforcement officers.

Finally, perhaps police officers themselves, will benefit from this study by finding how viewing chase experiences holistically provides a very different picture than dicing it up atomistically like factor analysis studies do. It may help them to see their own vulnerabilities and strengths when under pressure in pursuits and possibly other high stress situations. Most of all, I hope that it provides a good insight into the role of anxiety. Too often, police focus on the stress and external pressure of the work, which are considerable. However, not much seems to be mentioned about the role of anxiety in ramping up the officer in addition to external source pressures. Worrying is a natural psychological process, but when one’s job is fighting crime, dealing with conflict, and coping with human tragedy on a regular basis, anxiety can become too salient in the existence of the officer. More anxiety management, mental focus, and positive cognition strategies need to find their way into law enforcement culture through training. Problem focus and consequence avoidance are the psychological aspects leading to failure (Selk, 2009).

Limitations

The phenomenological psychological method allowed us to see the police pursuit experience from the perspective of real police officers. As such, their subjective psychology elucidated in the present study allows us to see

empirically what their values, thoughts, motivations, feelings, sensations, knowledge, and other perceptions were like for them (Giorgi, 2009). The limitations of the study include the fact that so few participants were used; we really do not know to what extent the results could be generalized to other officers of different demographics, races, genders, and other dimensions of social difference. Furthermore, the present study was aimed at police pursuits which did not end with a negative result such as an injury, major property damage, or fatality. Chases that are terminated by police by either their aggressively using deliberate vehicle force on the suspect or involving a severe crash are likely to have a different general psychological descriptive structure. Some researchers might question the accuracy of the participants' memories from which they recalled and gave their accounts of their experiences. Memory distortion and decay are always possibilities in self-report study designs (Giorgi, 2009). However, I sought a general psychological structure and one emerged among our participants accounts. Further research to study different types of police chases (longer in duration, different geographic settings, different dimensions of social difference of the officers, etc.) is needed to discover how the finding of this study are influenced or not by those variations. But overall, the present study provided some insights about what it is like to be a police officer in a vehicle pursuit.

References

- Alpert, G. P. (1998). A factorial analysis of police pursuit driving decisions: A research note. *Justice Quarterly*: JQ, 15(2), 347–359. Retrieved May 29, 2009, from Law Module database. (Document ID: 38444176).
- Alpert, G. P. & Dunham, R. G. (1990). *Police pursuit driving: Controlling responses to emergency situations*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Alpert, G. P. & Fridell, L. A. (1992). *Police vehicles and firearms: Instruments of deadly force*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Becker, E. (1997). *The Denial of death*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bonifacio, P. (1991). *The psychological effects of police work*. New York, NY: Plenum Press.
- Churchill, S. D., & Wertz, F. J. (2001). An introduction to phenomenological research in psychology: Historical, conceptual, and methodological foundations. In K. J. Schneider, J. F. T. Bugental, & J. F. Pierson (Eds.). *The handbook of humanistic psychology: Leading edges in theory, research, and practice* (pp. 247–262). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Falk, K. (2006, October). To chase or not to chase? *Law Enforcement Technology*, 33(10), 36–40, 42–45. Retrieved May 29, 2009, from Law Module database. (Document ID: 1150873371).

- Gallagher, S., & Zahavi, D. (2008). *The phenomenological mind: An introduction to philosophy of mind and cognitive science*. New York: Routledge.
- Giorgi, A. (1985). Sketch of a psychological phenomenological method. In A. Giorgi (Ed.), *Phenomenology and psychological research* (pp. 8–22). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Giorgi, A. P. (2009). *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach*. Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1991). *On the phenomenology of the consciousness of internal time (1893–1917)* (J. B. Brough, trans.). Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic.
- James, W. (1962). *Psychology: A briefer course*. New York, NY: Collier Books. (Original work published 1893)
- Kierkegaard, S. (1980). *The concept of anxiety: A simple psychologically orienting deliberation on the dogmatic issue of hereditary sin*. (R. Thomte & A. B. Anderson, trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kirschman, E. (2007). *I love a cop: What police families need to know* (rev. ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Lum, C. & Fachner, G. (2008, September). *Police pursuits in an age of innovation and reform: The IACP police pursuit database*. [online]. Retrieved May 29, 2009, from <http://www.theiacp.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=11JDjYrusBc%3d&tabid=392>.
- Maslow, A. H. (1995). *Religions, values, and peak-experiences*. New York: Penguin.
- May, R. (1996). *The meaning of anxiety*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Porter, K. (2003). *The Mental athlete*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Schneider, K. J. (1999). *The Paradoxical self: Toward an understanding of our contradictory nature*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.
- Schultz, D. P., Hudak, E., & Alpert, G. P. (2009, April). Emergency Driving and Pursuits. FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 78(4), 1–7. Retrieved May 29, 2009, from Law Module database. (Document ID: 1677878821).
- Selk, J. (2009). *10-Minute toughness: The mental-training program for winning before the game begins*. San Francisco: MacGraw-Hill.
- Zahavi, D. (2005). *Subjectivity and selfhood: Investigating the first-person perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.