

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

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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.