Police profanity and public perception of use of force

Swearing, cursing, profanity...whatever it is called, is part of the human experience (Patrick, 1901). It is also part of police culture. And just as profanity varies in nature, content, function it serves, and acceptance across cultures, so does it in the world of policing. The differing views of police profanity have been addressed in several articles already on PoliceOne.

Klugiewicz (2005) asked whether police officers should swear at subjects, and, based on the communication work of those like Dr. George Thompson (Verbal Judo), he answered with a resounding NO. He suggested that using profanity in law enforcement situations can "set someone off," make an officer appear unprofessional and uncontrolled, and have a negative impact on court proceedings. He further argued that intensity and tone of voice, facial expression and body language are the factors that provide emotional and behavioral impact more than a profane word itself.

Marcou (2014) supported this view, stating that the number one way to "avoid poking the bear" in law enforcement situations is to avoid using profanity. He, too, noted that foul language can make a situation worse and an officer look bad. Glennon (2010) acknowledged the above issues but also observed that in the real world of policing, "a well-placed profanity is sometimes necessary." He also argued that profanity may indeed also have a role in training.

Profanity affects perception

Perhaps the most important reality acknowledged by all three authors and many others is that profanity affects perception. This seems especially important in today's climate and culture where there is extreme scrutiny of use of force and where such actions can co-occur with profanity.

Of particular concern, of course, is "excessive" use of force. There are various definitions of "excessive" that have been offered: Excessive force occurs when officers use an amount of force greater than what is needed to gain compliance in a situation (Micucci and Gomme, 2005), more force than an "experienced" officer would employ in that situation (Klockars, 1996), or more force than what is recommended by administrative, professional, or legal guidelines (McElvain and Kposowa, 2004).

Given the varying views of police use of profanity and force, research in this area is particularly important for training and policy. Overall, officers do not often use physical force during arrest, but when they do, eight to ten percent (Hickman, 2006) to as much as one-third (Worden, 1995) of these arrests are determined to contain excessive force or warrant officer disciplinary action. Research has shown that younger officers, less experienced officers, male officers, or those with less education are more often the subjects of excessive force complaints (Garner, Buchanan, Schade, and Hepburn, 1996; McElvain and Kposowa, 2004; Worden, 1995).

Improper police action, unprofessional conduct, and excessive force are described as the top three reasons for citizen complaints (Harris, 2010), as well as, acts of "extra-legal aggression," or when police do things which violate departmental regulations and may come to cause psychological or physical harm to others. Verbal extra-legal aggression, including racial slurs, gratuitous threats and profanity, is humiliating, frightening, and degrading to citizens (Brunson and Miller, 2006).

When police use profanity in the context of an arrest, they are viewed by the public as less friendly, less professional, and less fair (Baseheart and Cox, 1993). Although police may intentionally use profanity to gain compliance or to convey a sense of urgency, it is associated with negative public evaluations (White, Cox, and Baseheart, 1988), and could result in alienation from the police, police misconduct allegations, the perception that the officer lost control during the arrest, or a "clouding of the issues" pertaining to the arrest. Though some departments and training agencies have specific policies regarding use of profanity, many do not explicitly advise officers against it — which could create a poor image, if not an outright liability when it comes to interacting with the public.

Examining the issue

Despite the use of profanity, use of force and issues around it, there has been no research examining whether police use of profanity could also be associated with a greater tendency to rate force during arrest as excessive. Research from West Virginia University, in collaboration with a State Police Academy, has shed some light on this issue, finding that the presence of police profanity during a use of force incidents does lead to greater negative perceptions of the incident, as well as a greater likelihood that members will rate the force used during the incident as excessive.

For the study, a traffic stop, bench warrant arrest scenario video was developed and filmed by experts at the State Police Academy and another state agency. In it, a subject was shown as passively resistant (i.e., resisting arrest without using physical force) after having exited the vehicle during the traffic stop. The officer attempted to control the subject using physical techniques, to which the subject responded in kind. Officers making the arrest in the video either used profanity or did not use any profanity while attempting to subdue the subject. Therefore, the content and action of each scenario was the same except for the presence or absence of profanity and variations in the gender of officers and subjects.

Next, 640 participants (320 community adults and 320 undergraduate psychology students) were recruited and asked to view the video of the mock traffic stop and answer questions about the appropriateness of the police officer's use of force during the stop. Participants also answered questions related to their attitudes about police performance in their neighborhoods, police use of force generally, and overall police effectiveness. They were also asked to describe whether they had ever been arrested, knew someone who had been arrested, had friends or family who were police officers, or viewed news stories about police online or in the newspaper.

Results of this study showed that when officers used profanity, not only were their interactions with subjects rated as significantly more negative and more intense, they were also considered to contain significantly more excessive force than the arrest scenarios in which profanity was not

used. When asked about what led to their decision to rate force as excessive, participants mentioned things like “the officer cursing and yelling,” “language that was completely inappropriate,” “having a problem with the profanity,” and “police using curse words when they shouldn’t have.” When the officers used profanity, they were described as “lacking self-control,” “loud and obnoxious,” “verbally abusive,” and “frustrated too easily.”

In a nutshell, participants felt that officer use of profanity led to the perception that the officer was being overly harsh, disrespectful, and out of control during the interaction, and officer profanity was just enough to tip the scale toward a rating of force as excessive. This finding held true for both male and female officers, irrespective of the gender of the subject.

Participants who rated force as excessive had significantly less trust in police performance and in police use of force. That is, they doubted whether police agencies would fairly investigate citizen use of force complaints, felt police did not always choose the appropriate amount of force during an arrest, and did not believe police treated members of the public with respect or effectively reduced crime in their neighborhoods. People who had been arrested themselves were also more likely to rate force as excessive. People who had greater exposure to online news about police behavior were more likely than those who did not to rate force as excessive.

Not surprisingly, participants who had friends or family in law enforcement were less likely to rate force as excessive. Adults in the community had significantly greater general trust of police than psychology students, but psychology students reported greater trust in police use of force. Community adults did not differ from college students with regard to overall rating of force.

What’s the lesson?

These findings are in line with previous studies on the impact of profanity use in a professional context, which shows that those in a professional role who use profanity are viewed negatively (Morgan and Korschgen, 2001), as less competent (Johnson and Lewis, 2010), and even as being out of control (White, Cox, and Baseheart, 1994). This research shows that the presence of profane language by a police officer negatively influences public perception of those actions in the incident. The presence of profanity was associated with a greater likelihood of rating force as excessive. The research supports the contentions of other previously-cited PoliceOne authors that profanity by officers can have a deleterious effect on public perception of police behavior—in this case, the very sensitive issue of use of force.

These findings have direct implications for police training and actions, such that if police officers are directed to monitor and restrict their use of profanity and other harsh language, this could result in not only improved quality of interactions between police and the public (greater impact of community policing strategies), but also a reduction in allegations and/or judgments of excessive force. While recognizing that engrained human behavior is difficult to modify and that there may well be some appropriate use of profanity by police officers, it is essential that officers know that research suggests its use will likely negatively affect public perception of their actions.