FORCE SCIENCE® NEWS

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I. Top award to FS researcher for new vest study presentation

Three researchers with Force Science credentials presented new study results at the recent annual conference of the Society for Police and Criminal Psychology in Austin, TX.

One, Dr. John O'Neill, a behavioral scientist on the staff of the Force Science Institute, was cited with special recognition. After reviewing all the conference's presentations, 64 in total, a judging committee bestowed on O'Neill the prestigious Shaffer Award for Best Research Presentation. The honor is named for the late Dr. Charles Edward Shaffer, a founder of the Society known for his unwavering "commitment to solid research."

The Society, with international professional membership, is devoted to drawing on scientific knowledge about "the full range of human behaviors" to create "practical solutions" to problems in law enforcement, corrections, and the criminal justice system, according to its mission description.

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VEST FINDINGS. O'Neill's presentation focused on some surprising findings from a new Force Science study he led regarding public perceptions of ballistic vests. As we all know, some of the complaints of vocal activists and the media after the Ferguson riots and other OIS-related disturbances have centered on the alleged "militarization" of law enforcement, including police clothing and equipment.

In brief, O'Neill's team took one item of police gear that's often highly visible in public confrontations—external ballistic vests—and surveyed samplings of civilians as to their perceptions. These included their impressions of how various vest models and their attachments affected officers' approachability, "militarized appearance," intimidation, confidence, and other qualities, as well as the "confidence instilled in the public." Also the participants were asked to rank the relative importance of these various attributes.

"Obviously, public interaction is a large portion of the job for police officers," O'Neill explains. "And how the public perceives officers, including LEO appearance, has an influence on every interaction."

The six vest models assessed ranged in appearance and utility from one "designed to look like a dress shirt with buttons down the center and pockets in the chest area with no attachments" to a "complex" version that featured five attachments: "a radio, taser, handcuffs, magazine pouches, and a body-worn camera."

REACTIONS. "Vests with more external attachments were rated as more militarized and intimidating," the researchers found. Probably no surprise there.

However: "Participants rated militarized appearance and intimidation as the least important attributes when considering external ballistic vests," O'Neill reports. What the civilians said mattered most was the confidence that a vest instills in the officer wearing it, "followed closely by how confidence-inspiring the vest is to the public.

"While more complex vests (3-5 attachments) were rated as more militarized and intimidating and less approachable, [they] were also rated as more organized, professional, recognizable as law enforcement, and as inspiring more confidence in the officer and public"—all positive attributes.

"Given these findings," O'Neill concludes, "it is possible that the public may prefer officers to perform duties while wearing more tactical-styled vests with outer carriers than vests that appear similar to an officer's buttoned-up shirt or vests that are not equipped with attachments.... [M]ilitarized and intimidating appearance might not detract from the public's overall acceptance...."

He suggests that "educating the public on the function" of external vests "might decrease" whatever negative perceptions do exist and "help the public feel safer, more connected, and trusting of their local law enforcement personnel."

O'Neill told Force Science News that he anticipates publishing a detailed report of the study in a peer-reviewed professional journal later this year. He can be reached at: john.oneill@forcescience.org.

UDs & ExDS. Also featured at the Society conference were two other researchers with Force Science affiliations. Staff behavioral scientist Dr. Dawn O'Neill presented a study she headed regarding unintentional firearms discharges, which we reported on preliminarily last August [see FSN #317]. Among other things, her findings pinpointed where and when officers are at highest risk of experiencing UDs and what precautions seem most likely to prevent them.

Simon Baldwin, a use-of-force analyst with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police national headquarters, described findings from research he led into Risk Factors of Excited Delirium Syndrome in Non-Fatal Use-of-Force Encounters.

Baldwin, a PhD candidate in psychology at Carleton University, is among the small, hand-picked cadre of basic Force Science graduates to earn advanced-specialist certification in Force Science Analysis. The research team for his ExDS study included Force Science faculty members Dr. Christine Hall and Chris Lawrence.

COMING UP. The next annual conference of the Society for Police and Criminal Psychology is scheduled for next Sept. 13-16 in San Diego. More information is available at the group's website: www.policepsychology.org

Meanwhile, Dr. John O'Neill and Dr. Dawn O'Neill will be appearing on the program at the annual convention of the Assn. for Behavior Analysis International, May 25-29 in Denver. They are expected to disclose significant findings from a major Force Science investigation currently underway, regarding law enforcement training practices and motor skills retention. Executive Director Dr. Bill Lewinski is heading that research.

II. New video training program seeks to counter biases in OISs

New scenario-based training intended to reveal and overcome biases in shooting decisions is being offered to departments by a research team from Washington State University-Spokane.

Called Counter Bias Training Simulation (CBTSim), the program takes shoot/don't-shoot video to a new level of authenticity and performance assessment, according to its principal developer, Dr. Lois James, a native of Ireland who is now an assistant professor at WSU.

"I was very keen on this not being typical deadly-force decision-making training," James told Force Science News. "I wanted to create a bias training program that uses decision-making as a vehicle for learning and as a way to generate meaningful conversation."

The portable, cost-effective format she designed makes it particularly practical for smaller agencies that often lack the budget and facilities for traditional simulation training, James says.

Previously we've reported on some of James' stereotype-busting research regarding alleged racial bias in police practices. In FSN #266, for example, we detailed her finding that contrary to popular perception officers tend to hesitate more and make fewer errors when shooting black suspects.

With the CBTSim program, she says, racial and other biases that may exist even

subconsciously among officers can be surfaced and addressed before they become factors in life-or-death street encounters.

"If any biases are influencing officer behavior, this program addresses them in a very practical and tactical way," James says. "It's not just an academic presentation on the subject, which may be less meaningful for officers."

RESEARCH-BASED DYNAMICS. A panel of experts that included Dr. Bill Lewinski, executive director of the Force Science Institute, helped craft the video scenarios that form the core of the program.

The scenes were carefully designed to "reflect the true dynamics of deadly confrontations, as determined from years and years of scientific data about officer-involved shootings," James says. "Our goal was to make them absolutely authentic in terms of how these tense, uncertain, and rapidly unfolding events develop in real life, in contrast to the unrealistic portrayals too often featured on simulators."

James' group ended up constructing 60 scenarios, ranging from 15 seconds to about a minute each, with varying degrees of complexity, available information to "responding" officers, and management difficulty.

Using professional actors, the episodes depict a wide range of contact situations—some turn deadly, some don't—and incorporate varieties of race, gender, age, socio-economic status, appearance, demeanor, sobriety, mental capacity, and other elements that potentially could provoke officer bias affecting how subjects are approached and dealt with.

TRAINING MODULE. In a typical training session, five officers are present and one at a time interact with and respond to a group of six high-definition scenarios projected life-sized from a portable simulator while the others watch. Armed with a training-modified Glock 22, each officer experiences a different set of scenarios.

"Immediately after a scenario," James explains, "the responding officer does a self-reflective debrief of what happened, identifying his impressions of the suspect, the decision points of his actions, and the factors he believes influenced his responses in shooting or not shooting.

"Then each peer officer is asked to reflect on the decisions and offer insights—what he or she saw differently, what they would have done differently." The aim, James explains, is to "tease out" for discussion any points at which the variables of race, gender, appearance, etc. may have influenced an officer's decisions, rather than an awareness of true danger cues being the guide.

"We're trying to facilitate an 'aha moment' in an officer that can produce a life-altering change in focus and reaction," James says. After all the scenario interplay has been critiqued, James and her husband and fellow researcher Dr. Stephen James, who conduct the training together, offer a brief summary of bias-related scientific studies. "There is no PowerPoint, no reading handouts," Lois James says. "We keep it all very practical."

RESULTS. The CBTSim program has been demonstrated at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Georgia, and field training kicked off recently with officers from the Astoria and Warrenton PDs in Oregon. More research is needed to confirm

the long-term effect of the training, but James shares some preliminary observations:

• "Officers tend to be worn out" by the end of the training session, which she believes speaks to the realism of the scenarios and the intensity of the debriefings. Based on their experimental research, they've found that direct involvement as a responder in six or so scenarios is effective, she says, but beyond that officers tend to become "less engaged and treat the exercise more as a video game" than a simulation of real-life encounters.
• "The most important part of the training, officers tell us, is learning the things their peers saw in the scenarios or in their performance that they themselves didn't see," she says. "Learning how others might have responded differently helps them self-identify the biases that might be influencing their decisions."
• "If officers consistently respond to a particular type of suspect in a certain way, they begin to identify this and start to think about what it means. 'Is there any objective evidence, like behavior cues, that the subject I'm facing is a dirt bag, or am I just feeling that he is because I'm reacting to something else about him?' This gets them to drill down through surface impressions and focus on meaningful threat cues."
• "Officers generally are good at reading people. What they're not as good at is verbalizing why they regard some people as threatening, which creates the opportunity for civilians to assume that they're reacting to some kind of irrelevant suspect demographics. Officers come away from CBTSim training better able to home in on dangerous behavior indicators and clearly articulate them."

TAILORED TRAINING. Drawing from their inventory of scenarios, the Jameses can tailor CBTSim training to emphasize specific demographics for bias testing if a department so desires. And, says Lois James, they are prepared to work with agencies of any size, anywhere in the US.

They provide and operate all equipment involved, hold a train-the-trainer session, and conduct the decision-making exercises and debriefings for a base fee of $5,000 (which covers the first 10 officers), plus $250 per additional officer, with an expectation of training up to 10 officers per day. Their fees include all expenses. What they net from their services, James says, will be funneled back into law enforcement-related research.

Lois James is a member of the IACP's Research Advisory Council and has received honors for her CJ studies that include Best Violence Research Award from the American Psychological Assn. Stephen James, also a multiple research-award winner, is a member of the California POST research advisory team and manages WSU's Simulated Hazardous Operation Tasks laboratory.

Written by Force Science Institute
2017