



EMOTION'S ROLE IN USE OF FORCE

Wearing the unemotional mask of professionalism

by Brad Fawcett

Educating police and the public about emotion and its evolved role in threatening events may better prepare officers and mitigate public response when police must use force.

Several studies have aimed to determine how first responders and other high reliability professions – those who work in environments where normal accidents can be expected due to risk factors and complexity – make decisions.

Gary A. Klein (1998), a research psychologist famous for pioneering in the field of naturalistic decision making, developed the *Recognition-Primed Decision Making Model*. It was based on his study of fire commanders in Cleveland, Ohio in order to improve the decision making of US battlefield commanders.

Klein and his associates learned that fire commanders did not engage in a formal multi-stage decision making process but, rather, quickly sized up the situation based on training and experience. They focused on the most relevant information, quickly determined a course of action based on expected outcomes, looked for unusual variables, modified their plan if necessary and then put it into action.

This formal decision making process and recognition-primed model pay little attention to what role, if any, emotion plays in decision making. In general, people believe that good decisions should be made in the absence of emotion and immediately suspect emotional decisions. Emotion can be used to mitigate culpability for criminal acts, as exemplified in the Extreme Emotional Disturbance Defense,

an affirmative defense to a charge of murder.

More recently the theory of Naturalist Decision Making (NDM) has been gaining attention (*Rahman, 2009; Barrett, 2007*). It is discussed in the literature in conjunction with high-velocity human factors (*Rahman, 2000*). From the perspective of NDM emotions serve an important evolutionary role in helping us survive. Emotions such as fear and anger assist us in immediately marshalling resources in response to an environmental stimulus requiring our attention.

It's important to remember that these emotions are involuntary – the sense of dread one experiences approaching a cliff edge does not come about through rational processing. It is generated subconsciously in an attempt to focus one's attention on a potentially life-threatening feature in the environment. In short, emotions prepare us for action.

The Snake Detection Theory (*Ohman, 2001*) suggests that the fear of spiders, snakes and other potentially hazardous creatures is not learned but is, rather, an evolutionary response necessary to protect us until we can tell a dangerous snake from a safe one. In simple terms, it is safer from a survival perspective to misidentify a garden hose as a snake than to misidentify a snake as a garden hose.

We routinely misidentify people and situations but the consequences for doing so are often trivial; perhaps an apology to a stranger believed to be a good friend, for example. In a policing context, misidentifying people and situations can have tragic consequences for all involved.

Our potential for misidentification is driven, to some degree, by a visual system which scans for patterns, movement, contrast, etc. and selects visual cues not relevant to our search. We make survival-oriented, subconscious assumptions about what we see, hear and feel, accompanied by survival-oriented, subconscious emotional responses. As a result, we may shoot a garden hose misidentified as a snake.

The issue of emotions in law enforcement is difficult. Officers may feel compelled to deny experiencing anger or fear out of concern that it makes them appear unsuitable for the profession, or that their use of force was based on fear or anger rather than demonstrated subject behaviour. Officers are expected to "... wear the unemotional mask of professionalism....".

Police expressing fear or sadness often find themselves the lead story on the local news, which is often followed by accusatory blog comments regarding their perceived unsuitability for police work. Comments such as the following:

- "A decrepit old man with an X-acto knife caused him to be the most scared he's ever been and then proceed to spray bullets into this helpless person? What a freakin' joke of a cop."
- "He did not follow orders to get on the ground. Ah, ha! Disobedience! He has become dangerous. He turns, he has taken action, he must be about to do something more dangerous than mere disobedience to heavily armed men. And so I shoot in

preemptive self-defense – mind-reading the first shooter. Do they come like that or are they trained?”

A central concern emerging from the understanding that emotional responses are natural, evolved responses to threats is the general belief that they are unreasonable and can be controlled and overridden through training and rational thought. This contradiction between an involuntary, subconscious process, which exists to aid our survival, and the public/occupational expectation that police remain unemotional participants in troubling events, can leave officers in an untenable position when testifying in subsequent investigative proceedings.

An officer has two choices:

- Admit to experiencing fear and/or anger and, in being honest, accept that their use of force may be discounted because they acted emotionally and therefore unreasonably.
- Simply state that their actions were based on a situational assessment, during which they precluded other force options before rationally concluding that the one used was the most appropriate under the circumstances.

It is simplistic to state that the officer should simply be expected to tell the truth. With distance – temporal, emotional and physical – we all know what “should” be done, but when we are faced with the choice, our “wants” often become primary (Tenbransel, 2014).

The research suggests that the variety of

perceptions, recollections and responses to threatening events (and we all have a different “threat metre”) defies generalization (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997; Novy, 2013). An officer may (or may not) experience perceptual narrowing, perceive time as speeding up or slowing down, etc.

How will your officers answer when asked, “Were you angry when you applied force to my client?” Who will explain on their behalf that emotions such as anger and fear are evolutionary and play an important role in marshalling our survival resources to a perceived threat?

Perhaps more importantly, do the courts and public want to hear the explanation?

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