What Do Police Recruits Identify as Strategies to Deal with Their Triggers/Biases to Deliver Fair and Impartial Policing?

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Introduction

Police officers have an obligation to ensure their investigations are fair and impartial; to do so they must be aware of their own implicit biases and develop strategies to mitigate their effect. This study examined the responses to scenario debrief questions from one class of police recruits at the Justice Institute of British Columbia (JIBC) Police Academy. The main objective of this project is to learn how police recruits identify their biases and what strategies they utilize to deal with such biases and triggers to ensure their investigations are fair and impartial in this scenario-based training environment.

Background

In 2016, the JIBC Police Academy moved away from the traditional lecture based curriculum delivery model and adopted a new competency based education model. Under the new curriculum the recruits learn concepts and skills through case based real-life scenarios in order to move towards professional competence. Case based learning helps the recruits utilize theoretical information in real life situations and build concrete knowledge about the subject matter (JIBC Police Academy, ca. 2015). Following application through case based learning the recruits apply their new knowledge in practical scenarios. These scenarios, though artificial, can trigger bias that have the potential to impact recruit behaviour and performance. Following each scenario, recruits are asked to debrief and examine their actions and reactions.

Research Design and Data Analysis

A qualitative research method was used for this study to analyze the recruits' responses to the questions related to bias and strategies for fair and impartial policing. The study examined the training material from one class of 48 police recruits in Block I of recruit training. This class was the first class to train in the fully redesigned new delivery model. The data was obtained from the debrief forms that recruits filled out after each scenario. The debrief forms are used by recruits to self-evaluate their performance as impartial and bias free. Using grounded theory as a method of discovery, this study analyzed the recruit responses from their scenario debrief forms. The answers to questions *"What strategies did you use, or could you have used, to ensure your investigations were fair, impartial, and bias free?"* and *"Is there anything that the subjects did/said that caused you to react negatively to them (what are your triggers)?"* were analyzed and compared across Weeks 1 to 4 and Week 11 of Block 1. The data was redacted by the Police Academy staff and it met the JIBC Research Ethics Board standards.

Results/Findings
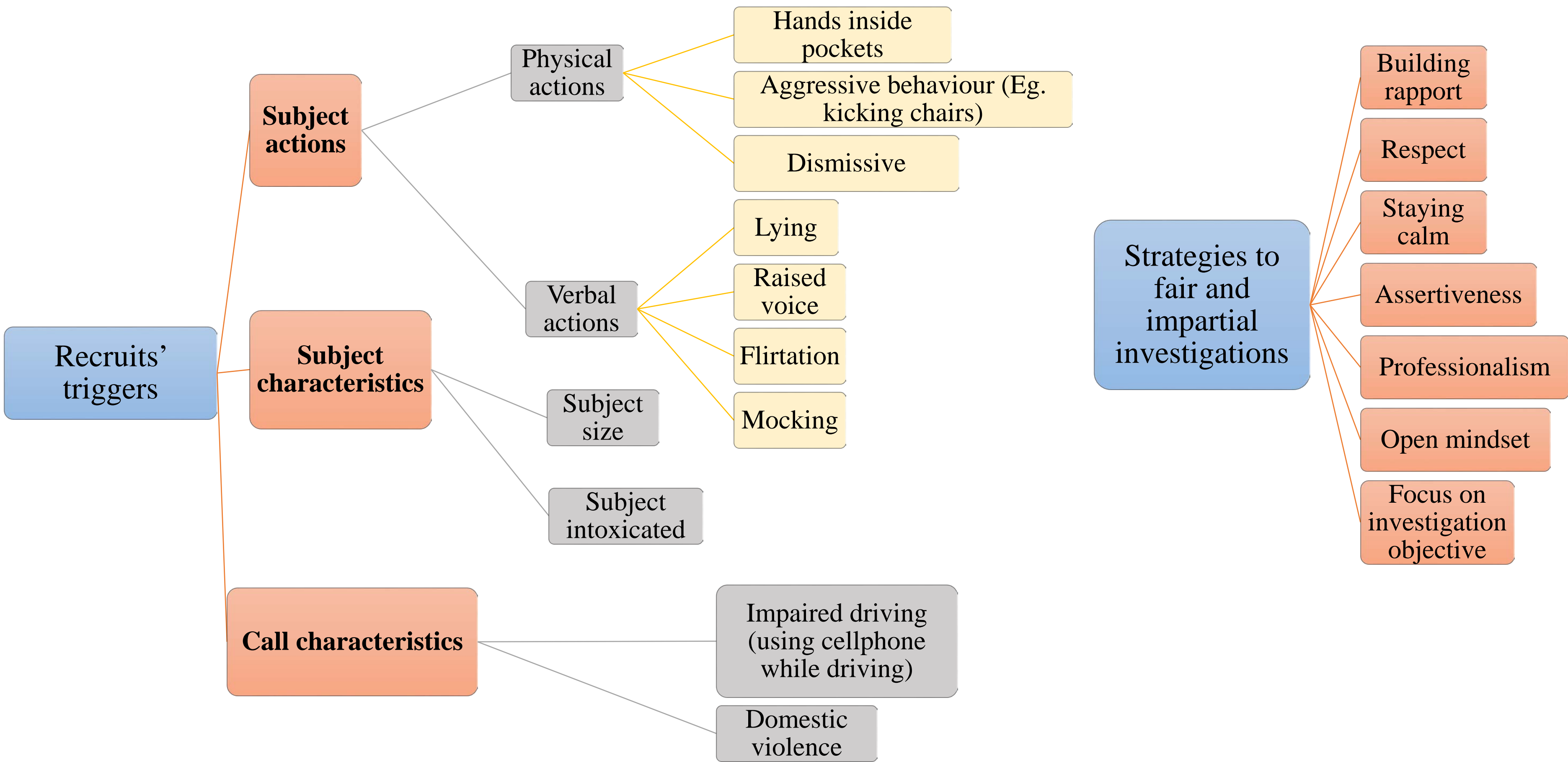
Discussion

The intent of this study was to understand what recruits identify as their triggers/biases in scenario training and what strategies they identify to deliver fair and impartial policing. The literature review provided context for the discussion on implicit bias in a broad policing context, however the literature only focused on racial aspects of bias. The majority of the literature comes from the U.S. where the racially-based tensions are different than those in Canada. Block I recruits, however, did not identify any racially based biases from their scenarios. Recruits focused on subject actions, subject characteristics and call characteristics as the source of their triggers. Some of this difference is likely due to the artificial nature of scenario training. The scenarios at the JIBC involve the recruits acting for each other, as a result the diversity in subjects encountered is limited to the diversity in the class. The literature focus also lacks a comprehensive view of implicit bias. Implicit biases are not limited only to racial friction between officers and subjects. The literature does not identify other sources of bias such as subject behaviour or call characteristics, that can be important, particularly in developing a police recruit. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature as it did not recognize other types of implicit bias that are essential for police officers to recognize in order to deliver fair and impartial police services.

Conclusions or Recommendations

Recommendations for future research include expanding the study by involving Block III recruits to find additional themes for triggers, bias or strategies to mitigate such issues. There is also potential for further research by utilizing the Implicit Association Test (IAT) by Harvard University with the recruit cohorts to determine the cognitive processes of the recruits outside their awareness and estimate their implicit association more directly (James, 2018). The results could then be compared to this study. There is also the possibility to follow up with the recruits who have graduated from the JIBC Police Academy and are working in the field. The follow up research with recruits who have graduated could be used to examine whether the self-reflection practice at the Police Academy did, or did not, actually build the reflective practice in the real world.

References

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