Changes in Student Definition of De-Escalation in Professional Peace Officer Education

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Abstract—Since the release of the 21ˢᵗ century policing report in the United States, the techniques of de-escalation have received a lot of attention and focus in political systems, policy changes, and the media. The challenge in professional peace officer education is that there is a vast range of defining de-escalation and understanding the various techniques involved, many of which are based on popular media. This research surveyed professional peace officer education university students on their definition of de-escalation and the techniques associated with de-escalation before specific communications coursework was completed. The students were then surveyed after the communication coursework was completed to determine the changes in defining and understanding de-escalation techniques. This research has found that clearly defining de-escalation and emphasizing the broad range of techniques available enhances the students' understanding and application of proper de-escalation. This research demonstrates the need for professional peace officer education to move students from media concepts of law enforcement to theoretical concepts.

Keywords—Criminal justice education, de-escalation, law enforcement, peace officer communications.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE numerous high profile instances of police use of force, including deadly force, in the United States has saturated the media and initiated public policy change about law enforcement interactions. After the Ferguson, Missouri riots in 2014, President Barack Obama created the Task Force on 21ˢᵗ Century Policing. In 2015, the task force published their report, and recommendation 2.2.1 of the report stated, "Law enforcement agency policies for training on use of force should emphasize de-escalation and alternatives to arrest or summons in situations where appropriate" [1]. The findings of the task force align with academic research that has found that officers are in a much safer position if they have the skills to verbally de-escalate, or negotiate, when dealing with human behavior during conditions of emotional stress, crisis, or life-and-death decisions and personal danger [2], [3]. The practices of de-escalation are recognized as necessary to not only keep law enforcement officers safe, but to keep communities safe, since treating people with respect and dignity while avoiding coercive force can be more successful in resolving a situation safely and gaining compliance [4], [5]. This shift from the idea that law enforcement interactions are based on the premise of conflict to the idea that law enforcement interactions should be built on conflict resolution is a change in culture that needs to

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take place throughout the entire system [6].

The evaluation of law enforcement responses has taken place in the judicial system as well as in the media and public. The courts are moving beyond standards that have been set in case law and expanding the evaluation of situations involving individuals with mental illness to include the events and actions that led up to the use of force by law enforcement [7]. The courts are including specific information about the use of time, distance, and cover as tools to de-escalate the situation before necessitating the use of force in civil and criminal cases [7]. The courts, the media, and the public are demanding that law enforcement agencies prove that they have provided de-escalation training before law enforcement officers are being authorized to use force [8]. Therefore, de-escalation training must be fully integrated into college criminal justice programs as part of required curricula, rather than stand-alone workshops that only target in-service officers, to expand a future officer's understanding of the multiple tools and techniques that comprise de-escalation [9].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Defining De-Escalation

The definition of de-escalation is elusive in criminal justice scholarship with many sources assuming that the practitioner inherently knows what de-escalation consists of as part of their tactical tool belt. Much of the literature includes de-escalation as part of the first responders' primary role, along with containing an emergency, and directs officers to use their de-escalation skills to keep an interaction moving in a positive direction [10], [11]. This focus on techniques and skills, instead of providing a clear definition of de-escalation, limits an officers' understanding because that focus is limited on verbal communication. Specific verbal communication techniques such as active listening skills, a softer, engaging voice, and making a connection with the person are the focus of de-escalation in the media and the public, reinforcing the misconception that de-escalation is just controlling behavior and resolving conflicts with words alone [10], [12].

De-escalation is more than just effective communication and even the courts are now using terms such as "tools on an officer's belt" when discussing time, distance, and cover as part of de-escalation, not just focusing on verbal interactions [7]. The challenge with expanding the recognized techniques of de-escalation is the perception that stepping back in a confrontation is a weakness for law enforcement officers [6]. Instead, officers need to realize that building distance and preserving options is a critical skill for police officers, it is not a sign of weakness [6]. The definition needs to expand to

include time, distance, cover, isolation, and containment, along with effective communication tools.

A start for a definition of de-escalation can be found within crisis intervention scholarship as part of the Crisis Intervention Continuum [10]. Law enforcement officers can apply the crisis intervention process of helping individuals, entities, and systems that are in a state of crisis return to a state of equilibrium as a starting point for understanding de-escalation [10]. In training for crisis intervention, officers are taught not only verbal de-escalation, but also diffusing techniques, and taking all of those tools, techniques, and skills together, officers interact with individuals or groups to bring the situation to a point where behavior can be influenced [13]. This greater understanding of de-escalation allows officers to choose from a variety of different options during all points of an incident while realizing that choices made at an earlier point can influence choices made at later stages of the event [2].

B. The Need for De-Escalation

The need for greater understanding of de-escalation comes from many different groups, starting with the court systems. The increased litigation around law enforcement incidents involving persons who have potential mental health issues have led the courts to acknowledge that there are additional factors for officers to consider during encounters [7]. The courts have been informed through expert witnesses, law enforcement training, and mental health professionals that when an officer correctly identifies a person's emotional state the officer has a greater ability to overcome a strong emotional response and manage conflict more effectively [12]. The first few seconds of the encounter is when the tone for the interaction is set, if the officer uses de-escalation, then the encounter is more likely to be resolved without resorting to force, but if there is a rush to forced compliance, there is a greater change that the encounter will escalate to violence [5]. The courts have expanded rulings on prior case law to account for the actions of the officer during an encounter and created the expectation that de-escalation is used when possible.

The media, the public, the community, and law enforcement agencies are also demanding that officers use de-escalation techniques to gain cooperation instead of quickly using coercive force. The realization is that by getting others to cooperate voluntarily, officers improve safety and effectiveness in virtually every aspect of law enforcement, along with reducing complaints [12]. De-escalation methods can also improve overall interactions with people in crisis by reducing the unpredictability of the crisis and the risk of injury for the consumer and the officer, which can lead to the community feeling safer during interactions with law enforcement [14]. The ability to handle encounters with words rather than force is more important now than ever, it can unbalance the subject, is safer for all involved, and can lead to success for the officers [15]. The profession and their academic partners need to adapt to these expectations and provide officers the tools to handle encounters in this manner.

C. CIT Training

The additional training associated with Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) can have direct benefit to all law enforcement officers. Many agencies cannot accommodate all their personnel completing the full CIT course, but there are specific parts of the training that can be built into an agency's culture. During CIT training, officers develop a deeper understanding of their own ability to impact the behavior of a person by using de-escalation and away from use of force [16]. These same techniques, such as discussing the importance of patience when dealing with crisis situations with consumers, some of the little catch phrases, some of the things you learn in CIT to say and how to engage in conversations, the type of demeanor to employ, and the type of physical tactics, can be taught to all officers pre-service and during in-service [14]. Officers that have learned these skills, and continue to have them reinforced during in-service training, expressed significant self-efficacy to apply learned skills, specifically de-escalation techniques, to crisis situations [14].

D. Education

Criminal justice education shares the goal of social competency that reflects the development of skills and knowledge that is thought to be essential for an educated person in the modern world such as critical thinking, ethics, and communication skills with other social and human behavioral sciences [17]. This social competency helps future officers develop empathy and appreciation for people who are different from oneself [18]. Another goal of criminal justice education is to produce a future officer who can provide a clear decision and action when faced with the uncertainty of a law enforcement encounter [19]. Since it has been found that life experience, rather than police experience, may teach police officers to adopt more cooperative solutions, conflict resolution training should prepare students to practice nonviolent resolutions to conflict in addition to skills training [20].

This training in critical thinking focused on de-escalation, discretion, and decision-making needs to be initiated in pre-service education and training, before continuing annually during a law enforcement officer's career [21]. This training should also include understanding mental illness, statutory authorities governing law enforcement responses, the law enforcement response to calls for service, community policing/problem solving, and use of force [22]. Although there may still be a culture where use of force instructors fire that "an unacceptable risk to be wasting time talking to these people because they'll never understand you anyway" [23] during an encounter in crisis, specific skills training including a combination of verbal de-escalation techniques and suicide prevention methods needs to take place during formal education [22]. The training on the use of distance to preserve options as a tactical strength, along with cover, time, isolation, and containment, needs to be reinforced as acceptable tactics, instead of being viewed as retreating [6].

The responsibility for educators is to not only provide

information, but also ensure that students have the ability to practice the use of these skills in a safe environment. Although on-line education can improve performance competence of de-escalation skills in current officers, the prevailing sentiment is learning by doing is still the most effective way for a student to understand complex ideas in professional fields [24], [25]. In social sciences and professional fields, experiential learning is a useful pedagogical tool and allows students to "work out" with words and rhetorical strategies just as they would with defensive tactics, handcuffing techniques, and firearms [15], [25].

III. METHODOLOGY

This study focused on the change in understanding of de-escalation in university students in a professional peace officer education program. The data were collected with the use of a pre-questionnaire and a post-questionnaire that consisted of two open-ended questions given in a specific class at the junior level. The pre-questionnaire was given to students in the first week of the course and the post-questionnaire was given to the students after they had been in the course for 14 weeks. The same two questions were asked on each questionnaire: What does de-escalation mean and what are the techniques used to de-escalate situations in law enforcement? The students were given no limitations or parameters on the length of the answers to the open-ended questions. Students were asked to create a unique identifier, not associated with any university or government issued identifier that was used on the pre-questionnaire and the post-questionnaire to allow the researcher to match responses for content analysis.

The academic intervention that took place between the pre-questionnaire and the post questionnaire included content on active listening skills, communication, conflict management, crisis intervention, critical incidents, de-escalation, mental illness, suicide intervention, and use of force. The material was presented in readings, presentations, recorded lectures, electronic activities, submitted topic papers, and multiple role-playing sessions. All students completed role-playing scenarios in a minimum of six out of the eight sessions where they were required to interact as a responding officer to a crisis situation. The parameters of the scenario focused specifically on communication during the first three minutes of the interaction, no physical contact or force was used, and officers were given limited initial call information. The specific techniques of effective communication, active listening skills, time, distance, and cover were emphasized in the course material and role-playing. The techniques of isolate and contain were discussed in readings and lectures. The final role-playing session was completed a week before the post-questionnaire was given to students.

The access to the participants was made possible because the sample was a convenience, or availability, sample, the participants were chosen because of their registration and participation in the specific course of the university program [26]. This convenience sample was important, since the purpose of the study was to measure a change in the student's understanding of de-escalation after specific coursework was completed.

The data collection process yielded 52 submissions, with 47 unique samples that included a completed pre-questionnaire and a completed post-questionnaire that could be matched based on the unique identifier used by the student. There were five additional samples where only one of the questionnaires was completed; therefore, no comparison analysis could be completed. The collection of the data, entry, and analysis of the data were completed all in one process by the researcher where responses were sorted into three main categories for the pre-questionnaire [26]. The responses to the post-questionnaire were then matched to the pre-questionnaire, and the content was compared for changes in understanding on the same spreadsheet program.

In terms of ethical considerations, the participants were made aware that the data that would be derived from their completed surveys will be managed for research purposes, and that the data, including quotes from the surveys, would be illustrated in the study, during presentations, and in potential publication.

This study does contain a number of limitations. First, it includes only the students who completed a specific class in the state university professional peace officer education program during a single academic year. Second, the study does not represent the whole population of university students in professional peace officer education programs, and it was not the aim of the study to accomplish this because of the specific academic coursework offered that is being used to measure the understanding of de-escalation. Last, the specific academic coursework is based on learning objectives established by one Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) board for professional peace officer education programs in a specific state and can be interpreted differently at other academic institutions.

IV. RESULTS

During a comparison of the questionnaires collected from the university students at the beginning of the class and the questionnaires completed by the university students at the end of the class, there was an expansion of understanding of de-escalation. Also, from the pre-questionnaire responses, it was clear students based their definition and techniques on a very limited understanding of de-escalation. Based on the literature and the pre-questionnaire responses, students entered the class with the perception that de-escalation involved to bring a situation back to normal using verbal communication in a quick, efficient manner, which is a media driven perception. From the post-questionnaire responses, students not only expanded their understanding of de-escalation techniques beyond effective communication, they also removed the term normal from describing de-escalation and focused on behavior change.

A. Initial Understanding of De-Escalation

The pre-questionnaires were initially divided into three categories for content analysis: On the right track, in the middle, and needs a lot of work. The responses for those that

were on the right track included definitions that mentioned calm, communication, reasonable, bring down, using multiple tools and was eight out of the 47 students. One student defined de-escalation as, "turning a situation or conversation from very high energy or tense, to a calmer and less tense one" (Student F18_1). Another student defined it as, "the ability to resolve conflict through words rather than the use of force" (Student F18_5). Both of these students are focused on verbal communication to de-escalate and remove the conflict from a situation.

Other students in this group focused on a variety of techniques to manage the situation, such as the student who defined de-escalation as:

'Stopping the situation from escalating further, and then trying to calm the person or people in the situation. It's basically taking a bad situation and converting it into a manageable one through conversation' (Student F18_8).

Another student described de-escalation as, "the process of bringing the level of agitation down through the use of many tools, but primary ones voice and mind" (Student F18_18). Another student took it a step further by including time by defining de-escalation as:

'Using body language and words to both calm a subject and slow the situation down. By using good de-escalation techniques, you can solve a majority of your problems without having to use force' (Student S19_1).

Finally, another student stated:

'De-escalation means using special techniques to take a high stress critical incident to a low-risk situation without the use of force. Using words to help someone other than to physically touch or hurt them' (Student S19_7).

These students have started to recognize that de-escalation is more than just effective communication, but need further information and practice to understand those techniques.

Finally, some of the students could not clearly define de-escalation, but they could describe it using a metaphor. One student stated, "De-escalation is like a relaxation in any type of situation. For example, it would be like bringing water to a boil then turning the heat off and cooling the water down" (Student 19_13). Another student used this example:

'An example would be someone about to jump off a bridge. The person is shaking, crying, and yelling that they will jump. An officer would be dispatched to de-escalate the situation. The police officer would try to calm the suicidal person down and reason with them' (Student S19-23).

This final grouping of students is on the right track, but they need the language, words, and practice to be able to define and describe de-escalation without needing an example.

The second group, in the middle, was the largest group of students, with 31 out of the 47 submissions falling in this category. In this category, students had common themes of mindset, peaceful, talking, and stress level in their definitions, while all of the techniques just focused on communication. The definitions focused on the perception that the subject's

behavior was obnoxious or out of control, and this is why these responses were placed in this category. For example, one student defined de-escalation as, "trying to calm a situation down from what it originally was, normally when a situation is 'over the top'" (Student F18_3). Another defined it as, "de-escalation is the process of calming down a situation, turning a hectic or potentially hectic situation into a calmer one" (Student S19_8). A problem that can be seen in these definitions is the reliance on individual perception about what is obnoxious, out of control, and hectic.

Other students in the middle group focused on the perceived stress level of the involved parties that require the use of de-escalation techniques. As an example, one student stated, "it can mean a variety of things from calming down a belligerent person to controlling a situation" (Student S19_16). Another student defined de-escalation as:

'Taking control of a stressful situation and reducing the stress, volume, and anxiety so those involved in the situation can resolve it in a rational manner' (Student S19_20).

The issue in these definitions is that there is a negative judgment by the student on the behavior, responses, and mindset of those who are involved in the situation. These definitions in the middle group may make sense, and would move the students into the on the right track category, if the techniques that the students identified aligned with their definition. Although talking and communication was listed as a technique in each of the questionnaires in this category, additional techniques such as "incapacitating someone so they can't escalate the situation any more" (Student S19_22), "acting sympathetic and using force" (Student F18_1), "taking the person away or out of the scene" (Student F18_6), and "talking to people and restraining them" (Student S19_4) place the students into this category. Most of the techniques listed in this category went from communications to some sort of physical intervention, restraint, or force. The main focus on force and physical intervention leads to the final category, needs a lot of work.

The final category of needs a lot of work consisted of eight out of the 47 submissions and the common themes in these definitions and techniques included out of control, violence, danger, tension, fast decisions, and quickly. Many of the definitions were clearly informed by the media, especially television shows and movies, as one student demonstrated by defining de-escalation and techniques as:

'When a situation is getting rough, you would use a technique to make the situation less violent, or less of scene. Techniques used to de-escalate are using calm voices and not to show that things are getting out of hand. And if they go to the point, tear gas, or other less lethal forces would be used' (Student S19_5).

Another student stated,

"to bring the level of threat of force down. You can use negotiations, bribery, lying, lower or higher use of force depending on the situation" (Student F18_19).

Other students in this category submitted a judgmental definition of the emotion and potential mental illness of the

involved individuals that may impact an encounter, such as "I think de-escalation means to bring down the stakes of what is going on and to decrease the amount of perceived crazyness [sic]" (Student S19_19). Other students did not see any way to de-escalate a situation without using force, such as the students who provided this definition, "stopping the person before it gets bigger or he or she gets out of hand. Putting the person in cuffs and getting them out of the situation" (Students S19_26).

B. Changes in Understanding

The post-questionnaires were completed and matched to the pre-questionnaires in their original category for content analysis to determine any changes in understanding. The main theme amongst all the categories was an expanded definition of de-escalation that involved multiple techniques and addressing emotions instead of personal behavior. Each student had a broader understanding of de-escalation in their post-questionnaire and could provide a definition without providing examples, however, those who were in the needs a lot of work category had the greatest changes. As an example, one student who initially defined de-escalation as calming a conversation down to a reasonable level expanded their definition of de-escalation to include slowing down, listening, using active listening skills, allowing the person to vent, and giving the person some space (Students F18_14). The student who initially mentioned using tear gas and other less lethal force options in their first definition now defined de-escalation as, "using tactics to make a situation less sensitive. This could mean talking to them to make them feel safe around you, asking simple questions, and help them not be so angry" (Student S19_5).

Overall, the students who were in the needs work category demonstrated changes by including communication and listening into their definitions and techniques, and removed force as a first option, or even part of de-escalation definition. Even though these students did show a lack of using physical space, disengagement, time, distance, and patience in their final questionnaires in the definition and technique questions, and one still mentioned using force to bring the situation under control (Student S19_19), on average the students added three additional techniques to their post-questionnaire when compared to their pre-questionnaire.

The students who were in the middle also demonstrated changes in their definitions and techniques, especially with the themes of pacing and slowing down. One student described de-escalation as, "calming down a riled up situation and try not to make matters worse. If the person is talking fast or loud, maintain a calm, slow, and even tone" (Students S19_18). All but two of the students in this category included positioning and active listening skills in their definitions and techniques lists, which was additional information from their first definitions. On average, students in this category added four additional techniques on their post-questionnaire that were new when compared to their pre-questionnaire. Finally, empathy was mentioned in 28 out of the 31 questionnaires, and the need to allow the person to talk. While there was an

increased understanding of de-escalation and techniques, there was still a lack of identifying physical space and disengagement as techniques.

The students in the on the right track group also demonstrated an increased understanding of the definition of de-escalation and techniques. As one student described:

'Communication skills are necessary in de-escalating a situation. Several things branch off of communication like body language, tone of voice, patience, time, distance, containing the situation, or even getting behind cover if needed' (Student F18_11).

All eight of the students in this group included the terms crisis, empathy, and building rapport as part of the de-escalation, and included time, distance, cover, and disengagement in the various techniques that could be used by officers to help the situation come to a peaceful resolution. On average, students in this group listed four additional techniques to their post-questionnaire when compared to their pre-questionnaire.

V. DISCUSSION

From the questionnaires completed by the students, their definition of de-escalation and the understanding of the techniques expanded to encompass the theory of law enforcement as guardians in the community, instead of just warriors [6]. This change was demonstrated when the definitions of the students shifted from focusing on the behavior of an individual, or the dangerousness of a potential situation, to viewing encounters as having emotion and needing empathy and rapport with individuals. It was easier for students to retain the expanded communication techniques that they learned, including active listening skills, tone, and pacing, than the other concepts such as time, distance, cover, and disengagement.

A reason that students may have retained the communication techniques better than the physical techniques of time, distance, and cover could be linked to the role-playing interventions in the course. The focus of those role plays was on the communication techniques, and with limited space and time, did not focus on the other techniques associated with de-escalation. Although this is targeted training, the students have demonstrated that if they can practice communications without the pressure of a full response scenario, they can focus on the new techniques of active listening and building rapport. The researcher recognizes the need for realistic, scenario based training to better manage interactions and minimize using force [1], however, those scenarios take place in the last semester of the students' education in this program. This targeted role-playing aligns with the change in classroom interactions that have been taking place in higher education to create an environment more conducive to learning rather than just listening to lectures [28].

An implication from this study is the need to expand the definition of de-escalation in coursework across the entire curriculum to encompass various techniques of communication, time, distance, and cover. As part of this expansion, programs need to be very deliberate in developing

procedures for reducing escalation and addressing the appropriate time, place, and situation for using force [27]. The coursework also needs to address that even though all situations cannot be de-escalated, many more of them could be using a variety of techniques than are depicted in the mass media.

A next step, or future area of research, would be to gain an understanding of how current law enforcement officers define de-escalation and the techniques. This would be important because students can learn de-escalation strategies in their formal education, but if the culture of the agency they join does not embrace, or share the same understanding of de-escalation, then the student will quickly change to the culture of their agency and not use de-escalation that they have learned. As part of that research, or separately, exploring the reinforcement of de-escalation techniques, and available in-service training, in agencies would help academic criminal justice programs align with the needs of current law enforcement practitioners.

Finally, a common message needs to be put forward by criminal justice programs and law enforcement agencies to the community that training alone does not lead to an integrated approach that reduces violence and detentions in all encounters, whether mental illness is involved or not [29]. De-escalation can be used in most law enforcement encounters, but not in all encounters. The decision making and critical thinking skills that the students learn in their criminal justice programs gives them the tools to make informed choices on which tools, techniques, and tactics should be used during encounters.

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