The 'Language of the Street' Fallacy

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In our *Surviving Verbal Conflict®* and *Winning Back Your Community* courses we caution law enforcement officers to avoid using what is called the 'language of the street.' The language of the street refers to profanity and other abrasive language often used by the criminal element in some neighborhoods. **While most officers agree that using this language when communicating with the public is inappropriate, some officers (and even some supervisory personnel) have challenged us on this issue. These individuals argue that people in impoverished, high-crime areas tend not to understand any other type of language, and that using profanity and other coarse language is a way to establish authority when dealing with people in particular areas.**

We argue that this view is incorrect, calling it the language of the street fallacy. **Using such language when engaging in an official interaction with a citizen unnecessarily harms the officer's credibility and damages the legitimacy of the law enforcement profession**.

The Golden Rule

Most people have heard of the golden rule: *do unto others what you would have them do unto you*. Another way of saying this is that you have to show respect in order to receive respect. Holding this principle in mind, **how would <u>you</u> like to be spoken to by a police officer?** When an attendee of one of our courses challenges this language of the street fallacy, the discussion can sometimes become quite heated. The objecting officer (or sergeant, or captain, or chief) argues that there are certain times or certain neighborhoods where an officer has to use abrasive street language in order to assert their authority and handle situations. What if, during this discussion, the *Surviving Verbal Conflict®* course instructor was to say, "Look, asshole, you are wrong." How would that course attendee feel? What are the odds that individual would become more angry? What are the odds the attendee would immediately leave the course and demand a refund because of this insult? **Why would we expect members of the public to feel any differently?**

Imagine a person who fits the stereotype of someone we are often told only understands the language of the street. Imagine a 25-year-old police officer standing in the living room of a 40-year-old man because of a "loud arguing" disturbance call. The 40-year-old man, who has been drinking, has been having a heated argument with his wife and his teenage daughter. The 40-year-old man has only a 7th grade level of formal education, has a past criminal record, and even served 10 years in prison for armed robbery. His employment record is inconsistent, but he is currently employed in a minimum wage job. How fragile is this man's ego and how important is respect to this man? How do you think he would feel if the 25-year police officer standing in his living room were to say to him, in front of his wife and daughter, "Look, asshole, shut up while I'm talking. I'm in charge here, *Cuz*." How enraged could this man get at those remarks? Might he be motivated to act violently toward the officer?

Was the officer unnecessarily creating jeopardy by needlessly insulting the man in his own home and in front of his family? The courts today are becoming less likely to support an officer's use of force when it is later determined that the officer's actions needlessly created jeopardy, contributing to the circumstances that required the use of force. Could the officer have been more effective by saying something like, "Whoa, time out folks! Please let me talk here so we can fix this and I can get out of your business!" This type of a response is what we teach in *Surviving Verbal Conflict*®. It's called an emotional appeal, or a statement that subconsciously appeals to the citizen's self-interest – the "What's in it for me?" concept. The faster the man lets the officer talk, the faster the officer can leave. There also is no personal insult in this statement that the man feels compelled to address, or risk being labeled as a chump by his family members or others within earshot.

Research Evidence

Five studies have examined citizen satisfaction following traffic stop encounters with a law enforcement officer. These studies have occurred in Colorado, Florida, Illinois, and Indiana. Across all five studies, **the strongest factors producing a negative perception of the officer and the interaction were the officer's use of profanity and/or the officer making a personal insult. Another strong predictor of dissatisfaction with the encounter was if the officer called the citizen by a nickname or street term, such as "bro," "cuz," or "dude." These factors – swearing, insulting, and referring to the person by a street term – were actually far more important than whether or not the individual received a citation, in terms of determining their satisfaction with the encounter**.[1]

Language matters in use of force incidents as well. Findings from a very important study, conducted by a research team from West Virginia University, have just been released in the *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*. **This study examined the influence of profanity on public perceptions of police use of force. In this study, in-car cameras were used to video record a use of force scenario**. The participants in these scenarios were defensive tactics instructors with the Pennsylvania State Police. In the scenario, one instructor portrayed a criminal suspect who refused to exit a car on a traffic stop. Another instructor, dressed in uniform, played the role of the officer. In the scenario, the officer makes repeated commands for the suspect to exit the vehicle while the suspect refuses to exit the car. The officer then lawfully employs an arm-bar technique to remove the suspect from the car and take him into custody.[2]

In one version of the scenario, the officer uses one word of profanity only once during the interaction. In another version, the officer does not use any profanity. One set of scenarios was recorded with a male officer, and another set of videos was recorded with a female officer. A nationwide sample of 522 individuals, each recruited to view one version of the video, were asked to indicate if they thought the officer's use of force was appropriate. Each participant also completed a survey that gathered their demographic data (age, sex, race, etc.) and measured the person's level of trust in the police.[3]

The findings revealed the **participants were more likely to believe that the officer's use of force was excessive in the scenario where the officer used profanity. Both individuals who reported high trust of the police *and* individuals who were skeptical of the police were more likely to believe the use of force was excessive if the officer swore during the interaction**. The same was true, regardless of whether the participants saw the version with the male or the female officer. The ***participants' race, sex, or age also had no influence on their responses***. In all situations, the participants were more likely to perceive the version involving profanity as excessive, and less likely to perceive the "clean" version as not excessive.[4]

It is important to note that the use of force portrayed in all versions of the scenario was lawful and legitimate under the circumstances. It is also important to note that the version using profanity only involved uttering the word "f***" once and did not involve any derogatory insults or threats toward the citizen. Nevertheless, this simple utterance of frustration was enough to sway the opinions of members of the public who viewed the interaction, causing them to be more likely to perceive that the officer's actions were illegitimate, and even illegal.

It Is Not Necessary

In our *Surviving Verbal Conflict®* course, attendees are told a story about Deputy Chief Dan Savage of the Grand Rapids Police Department in Michigan. Deputy Chief Savage is a 35-year veteran of law enforcement, a second-generation police officer, and has served almost 30 years on tactical teams as a SWAT team member and leader. During his entire tactical career, Deputy Chief Savage has enforced a 'G-rated language' requirement during raids and other tactical operations. His perspective is that tactical officers need to give loud, clear commands when assaulting a location. Tactical officers' language needs to be forceful, but not profane, such as "Police, get down! Police, hands out! Policia, manos arriba!"

After the tactical operation is complete, he then has his officers explain to the people in custody, and the neighbors, what just happened and why. They explain that they were serving a felony warrant for drugs and that it was believed that there were weapons in the house. They explain that it is safest for everyone involved that they do a dynamic entry and shout clear loud commands so that there is no confusion and no one's safety is placed at risk. This is what is called "dusting 'em off" in the *Surviving Verbal Conflict®* course, where you explain your actions and try to restore a little dignity to the person in custody.

The reasons for demanding G-rated language are based in concern about the perceived legitimacy of officers. Savage worried that citizens witnessing his SWAT operations would perceive his tactical officers as *thugs* if they used insults and profanity. He was concerned about clear

communication during tactical operations, and profanity and insults interfere with clear communication. He was concerned about the effect the raid may have on the memories of any children in the home. Savage was also concerned about having to repeat any inappropriate language on the witness stand later, and the effect this language may have on the opinions of jurors. In his 30 years of tactical experience in a city of almost 200,000 people, this G-rated requirement has not interfered with efficient tactical operations, and he has never lost a SWAT officer.

Conclusion

This is all vital information for any law enforcement officer who interacts with the public. It reinforces what we teach in our *Surviving Verbal Conflict®* and *Winning Back Your Community* courses about the fallacy of the language of the street. Officer use of profanity and other coarse language, even when not directed at a citizen, causes the officer's actions to appear illegitimate in the eyes of the public. **Furthermore, there are countless examples of controversial and even career-ending encounters caught on tape that turn not solely on an officer's actions but on an officer's words—leading up to, during, and following an encounter**.

While we recognize that this job—and the words and actions of those you encounter on-duty—can be very frustrating at times, using the 'language of the street' within earshot of the public, however, will only continue to hurt our profession. Reasonable members of the community accept the fact that officers must utilize force and engage in other enforcement actions that are not necessarily pleasant. What they have a more difficult time accepting is the notion that law enforcement officers fail to exhibit a professional demeanor consistent with their position.

References

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.