



Public Perceptions of Police Profanity

Richard R. Johnson, Ph.D.

April 2018

The use of profanity when dealing with members of the public has been debated in law enforcement circles for years. **Most law enforcement leaders argue the use of profanity with members of the public is unprofessional and should be avoided whenever possible. Other leaders disagree with this. They instead argue that officers often need to use the “language of the street” in order to be understood and viewed as authoritative by some segments of the population.**¹

Prior research has revealed that the use of profanity generally has negative repercussions in various social settings. Studies of doctors and therapists have revealed that patients view them as less competent if they use profanity.² In other studies, job applicants for college faculty positions were less likely to be hired if they used profanity, and faculty members were perceived as less professional if they used profanity in speeches and presentations.³ Unfortunately, **no research has examined police use of profanity until now.**

How Speech Affects Sense of Authority

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 made repeated commands for the suspect to exit the vehicle while the suspect refuses to exit the car. The officer then lawfully employs an armbar technique to remove the suspect from the car and take him into custody.⁴

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 were recorded with a male officer, and another set of videos were recorded with a female in the officer

role. A nationwide sample of 522 people were each recruited to view one version of the video and indicate if they thought the officer's use of force was appropriate. Each participant also completed a survey that gathered demographic data (age, sex, race, etc.) and measured the person's level of trust in the police.⁵

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, no matter if 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.⁶

It is important to note that the use of force portrayed in all versions of the scenario was lawful and legitimate under the circumstances. In all versions, the word "fuck" was said 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.

This is important information for any law enforcement officer who interacts with the public. It also reinforces what we teach in our [Surviving Verbal Conflict®](#) and [Winning Back Your Community](#) courses about the fallacy of the "language of the street." This study provides important evidence that officer use of profanity, 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 an officer's words—leading up to, during, and following an encounter.**

Conclusion

While we recognize that this job—and the words and actions of those you encounter on-duty—can be very frustrating at times. Expressing profanity within earshot of the public, however, will only continue to hurt our profession. This new study supports the idea that 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

-
- ¹ Baker, M. (1985). *Cops: Their Lives in Their Own Words*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster; Fletcher, C. (1992). *What Cops Know*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- ² Heubusch, N. & Horan, J. J. (1977). Some effects of counselor profanity in counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 24, 456-458; Kottke, J. L. & MacLeod, C. D. (1989). Use of profanity in the counseling interview. *Psychological Reports*, 65, 627-634; Phillips, M. &

Kassinove, H. (1987). Effects of profanity, touch, and sex of the counselor on perceptions of the counselor and behavior compliance. *Journal of Rational Emotive Therapy*, 5, 3-12.

³ Morgan, B. L. & Korschgen, J. A. (2001). The ethics of faculty behavior: Students' and professor's views. *College Studies Journal*, 35, 418-432; Powell, L., Callahan, K., Comas, C.,

McDonald, L. & Mansell, J. (1984). Offensive language and impressions during an interview. *Psychological Reports*, 55, 617-618.

⁴ Patton, C. L., Asken, M., Fremouw, W.J., & Bemis, R. (Forthcoming 2017). The influence of police profanity on public perception of excessive force. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.