



The Role of Death Concerns in the Use of Force among Police Officers

Hope Bentley, Lexie Bryant, Anita Pai, Robert B. Arrowood and Cathy R. Cox
Texas Christian University



Abstract

From the perspective of terror management theory, reminders of death are problematic because they lead individuals to defend their cultural beliefs. Given that police officers are trained to see persons and situations as potentially dangerous (i.e., naturally occurring mortality salience), this may result in greater acceptance of the use of force. The current study examined police officers' reactions to arrest vignettes and fear of death. Results suggest that increased death awareness predicted greater use of unnecessary force. These effects held while controlling for several individual differences that have previously been shown to influence use of force. These findings suggests that death concerns play an important role in how police officers respond to crime.

Introduction

Officers are reminded of their mortality on a daily basis. For instance, they are required to wear handguns and protective gear; they must undergo mandatory in-service law enforcement training (e.g., firearm, domestic violence); and/or they may be a victim of an officer-involved assault, shooting, or murder. Not surprisingly, approximately 93% of the police express heightened concerns about their personal safety (Parker, Morin, & Rohal, 2017).

Coping with the threat of mortality, from a social psychological perspective, is one of the central tenets behind terror management theory and suggests that a great deal of human behavior functions to defuse this potential threat. Primarily, people defend against the awareness of death by adhering to their cultural beliefs and/or by maintaining a sense of self-worth. This can result in greater hostility and aggression toward those who hold different beliefs, or worldviews (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011).

The increased death concerns may result in an "us versus them" mentality as officers try to defend their worldviews leading to increased use of force. Despite the fact that law enforcement shootings are quite rare, with many officers going their entire career without the use of deadly force, the consequences are still ever present and unnecessary force remains a persistent issue within the United States (Silver & Pickett, 2015). Thus, the present work examined use of force and death awareness among active duty police officers.

Hypothesis

Police officers who experience greater death concerns will endorse greater use of unnecessary force.

Method

Funding:

The present research was funded by a grant from the United States Department of Justice.

Participants:

315 active duty police officers (237= male; $M_{AGE} = 45.87$; $SD_{AGE} = 10.21$) completed:

Materials

Use of Force Questionnaire. Five items measuring willingness to use force. Three subscales were created assessing General Force, Excessive Force, and Reasonable Force (Barkan & Cohn, 1998). Each item was scored using a yes/no scale.

Use of Force Vignettes. Two vignettes in which participants indicated number of warnings, amount of initial force, and maximum force. One vignette described a situation where force is reasonable (i.e., domestic disturbance where the officer is attacked) while the other described a situation where minor force or warnings are needed (i.e., running from the police with no probable cause). Both vignettes were counterbalanced (CITE). The two force items were scored on a seven point scale (1 = Warnings; 7 = Discharge Firearm). In each case, the race and age of each perpetrator was not mentioned

Collett-Lester (1990) Fear of Death Scale. Eight items assessing fear of death (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Demographics for covariates. Sex, Age, Relationship Status, Race, Education, and Income (See Silver & Pickett, 2015).

Results

Several hierarchical logistic and linear regression analyses were conducted to analyze each measure. In Step 1 of each model, Fear of Death was entered to predict each outcome variable. Covariates were entered at Step 2. Results can be found in Tables 1-3.

Table 1. Results of the hierarchical logistic regression analyses on each force subscale.

Variables	Model 1: General Force			Model 2: Reasonable Force			Model 3: Excessive Force		
	b	SE	Odds-ratio	b	SE	Odds-ratio	b	SE	Odds-ratio
Step 1									
Death	-.40	.21	.67*	-.30	.10	.74**	.31	.16	1.37*
Step 2									
Death	-.46	.22	.63*	-.28	.11	.75**	-.28	.11	.75*
Sex	.85	.74	2.33	.21	.39	1.23	.21	.39	1.23
Age	.01	.03	1.01	-.05	.02	.95**	-.05	.02	.95**
Relationship	.12	.74	1.13	-.21	.36	.81	-.21	.36	.81
Race	-18.85	4593.01	<.001	.87	.37	2.39*	.87	.37	2.39*
Education	.45	.26	1.58^	.07	.14	1.07	.07	.14	1.07
Income	-.26	.20	.77	2.44	1.20	11.43*	.33	.11	1.39**

Note: ^ $p \leq .10$
* $p \leq .05$
** $p \leq .01$

The results of the hierarchical logistic regression analyses suggest that greater death concerns predict increased odds of endorsing excessive force. Conversely, increased death concerns predict decreased odds of endorsing reasonable or general force.

Results cont.

Table 2. Results of the hierarchical regression for reasonable force

Variables	Model 1: Warnings			Model 2: Force			Model 3: Max Force		
	b	SE	R ²	b	SE	R ²	b	SE	R ²
Step 1									
Death	.003	.45	<.001	-.03	.06	.001	-.003	.06	<.001
Step 2									
Death	.002	.04	<.001	-.03	.06	.001	.02	.06	<.001
Sex	-.22	.16	.01	.47*	.23	.01	.45^	.23	.01
Age	.01	.01	.01	-.01	.01	.001	-.01	.01	.001
Relationship	.15	.14	.004	-.03	.20	<.001	.11	.21	.001
Race	-.09	.15	.001	.11	.22	.001	.41^	.23	.01
Education	.05	.06	.001	-.11	.08	.01	.07	.08	.002
Income	-.05	.04	.01	-.07	.06	.01	-.04	.06	.002

Table 3. Results of the hierarchical regression for excessive force

Variables	Model 1: Warnings			Model 2: Force			Model 3: Max Force		
	b	SE	R ²	b	SE	R ²	b	SE	R ²
Step 1									
Death	-.02	.05	.001	.12*	.06	.01	.11	.07	.01
Step 2									
Death	-.01	.05	<.001	.12*	.06	.02	.12^	.07	.01
Sex	.03	.17	<.001	.07	.22	<.001	-.22	.28	.002
Age	.02*	.01	.02	-.01	.01	.001	-.01	.01	.003
Relationship	.10	.15	.002	-.07	.19	.001	.23	.24	.003
Race	.01	.17	<.001	.35	.21	.01	.30	.27	.004
Education	.07	.07	.004	-.05	.08	.001	.01	.10	<.001
Income	-.03	.04	.002	-.05	.06	.003	-.004	.07	<.001

Note: ^ $p \leq .10$
* $p \leq .05$
** $p \leq .01$

These findings suggest that death concerns predict greater immediate and maximum force when force is not necessary. Death concerns were unrelated to reasonable force.

Discussion

Overall, the results suggest that death concerns play a role in police use of excessive force. Given work showing a lack of confidence in police ability to use appropriate force (Pew Research Center, 2014), programs and counseling opportunities with police settings focusing on mitigating death concerns may lower the risk of excessive force and ultimately increase public trust in officers. By identifying the role that death concerns play in the attitudes and behavior of law enforcement, this might help to increase reconciliation efforts between police and members of the community in which they serve. Finally, given that death concerns are associated with lower well-being (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011) these findings may also support police officers by increasing their overall health and lead to lower risk of burnout.