RESEARCH ON INTERPERSONAL CUES PREDICTING PHYSICAL ASSAULTS IN RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CALLS

By Richard R. Johnson, PhD, PATC LLRMI

While working as a law enforcement officer, I was exposed to a number of officer safety training materials that described nonverbal cues indicative of an impending assault. As a young officer I tried to memorize these cues and observe for them when dealing with people on the street. I found, however, that every time I read another book on officer safety there was a new, and different, list of nonverbal cues to watch for. I was also discovering that watching for these cues and reacting to them with harsher verbal commands and a defensive body posture, was making people more hostile towards me and generating citizen complaints. Therefore, when I became a researcher I placed nonverbal cues related to violence on my list of topics to study.

My first step was to find all of the existing scientific research on interpersonal social cues related to aggression. After all, most of the officer safety training materials I had previously read stated that these nonverbal cues were based on scientific research findings. I was surprised to learn that no such research existed. I was able to find only three studies that examined interpersonal social cues related to hostility and verbal aggression, and all of these three studies dealt with early elementary school children. There was no published research

on this topic. I then examined more than 200 books, lesson plans, and websites related to officer safety or self-defense that discussed interpersonal cues that indicated a person was about to make a physical attack. These materials revealed more than 30 different interpersonal cues, some of which were contradictory. For example, some stated that pacing or fidgeting was a sign of impending attack, while others warned that when the person became still he was about to attack. Some suggested avoiding eye contact was a danger sign, while some of the same materials also said staring one in the eyes indicated an impending attack (Johnson & Aaron, 2013).

An experiment was conducted to explore the accuracy of these various interpersonal cues at predicting an assault. A sample of 178 university students was given a survey. In the survey the students were told to imagine that they were in a heated verbal argument with another person and both of you are becoming very angry. They were then given a list of 23 behaviors they might witness in the other person and were asked to indicate how concerned they would be that the person was about to become
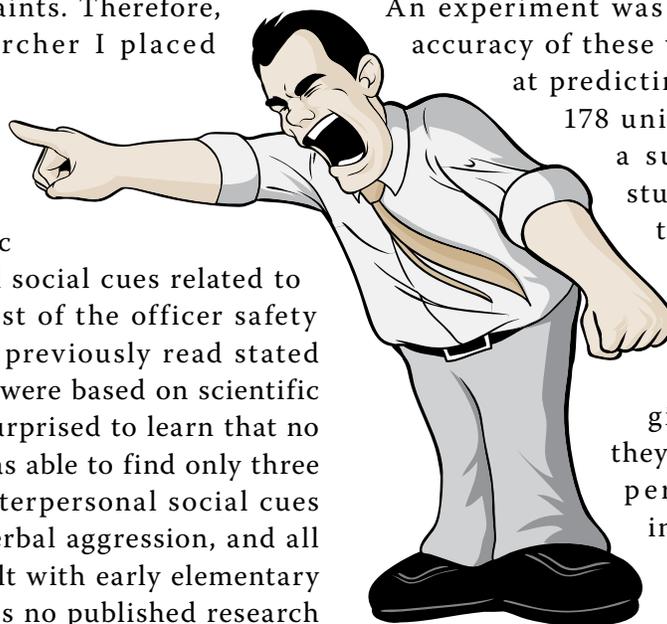
physically violent. For each behavior they were asked to respond on a scale from one (no concern at all) to seven (extremely concerned). The 23 behaviors were selected from the behaviors cited most often in the officer safety materials I reviewed for the study. These behaviors were: frowning, yelling, crying, sweating, increasing respiration, making verbal threats, clenching hands, violating personal space, tensed posture, removing excess clothing, blinking eyes, tense jaw muscles, flushed face, hands on hips, exaggerated hand gestures, stretching arms or shoulders, stretching neck, glancing around, hands in pockets, pacing, staring in the eyes, avoiding eye contact, and taking a boxer's or fighter's stance (Johnson & Aaron, 2013).

The responses of the college students revealed that only six of the 23 behaviors caused the majority of the students to be concerned that the person was about to become violent. These behaviors were:

- Assumes a fighter's stance
- Invades personal space
- Clenches/balls hands into fists
- Makes verbal threats
- Looks around the area (for potential witnesses, backup, or escape routes)
- Tenses jaw muscles

None of the other 17 behaviors made a majority of the university students concerned for their safety. No significant differences were found among the students with regard to race or sex; they all generally held similar views about these cues of impending violence. University students, however, may not have much experience with real violence and may not have accurate views of nonverbal associated with violent attacks. Therefore, the study was repeated with a sample of 129 law enforcement officers, all of whom had previously been assaulted at least once on the job. The officers were given the same questionnaire but were asked to imagine that they were dealing with a verbally hostile suspect during a street encounter (Johnson, 2015).

The law enforcement officers, all of whom had previously been a victim of a real attack, scored almost all of the nonverbal behaviors higher than did the students. In order from most concerning to least concerning, these 11 behaviors are the

behaviors the majority of the officers identified as predictive of an attack:

- Assuming a fighter's stance
- Invading personal space
- Placing one's hands in one's pockets
- Clenching/balling hands into fists
- Making verbal threats
- Looking around the area
- Head rolls/neck stretches
- Tense jaw muscles
- Pacing back and forth
- Sweating profusely
- Stretches arms/shoulders

The majority of these officers also scored the following behaviors as of little or no concern when predicting an attack:

- Blinking eyes rapidly
- Avoiding eye contact
- Placing hands on hips
- Making exaggerated hand or arm gestures
- Crying

The officers were inconsistent about the remaining seven behaviors: breathes rapidly, yells, removes excess clothing, angry expression, stared into eyes, face becomes flushed red, and tenses up whole body. Some thought these were somewhat predictive of an attack, while others did not think they predicted an attack at all (Johnson, 2015).

While these are the opinions of officers who have actually experienced a real violent attack at some point in their career, their responses might also reflect their training as much as their actual experiences. Furthermore, due to tunnel vision or surprise during an attack, officers might not have accurate recollections or perceptions of the predictors of an attack. Therefore, I am currently studying video tapes of real assaults on police officers to try to determine what interpersonal social cues actually correspond with an attack on an officer. Unfortunately this research is still ongoing and it will be several months before I have any solid conclusions to report. In the meantime, however, we can use the perceptions of these veteran

law enforcement officers as a starting point for evidence-based officer safety training.

Note: Court holdings can vary significantly between jurisdictions. As such, it is advisable to seek the advice of a local prosecutor or legal adviser regarding questions on specific cases. This article is not intended to constitute legal advice on a specific case.

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References

Johnson, R. R., & Aaron, J. L. (2013). Adults' beliefs regarding nonverbal cues predictive of violence. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 40(8), 881-894.

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Conducting A Formal Exit Interview

By John McIntyre, LGRMS Loss Control Representative

When an employee leaves our local government, whether resigning, terminated for cause, retiring, or for any other reason, the individual responsible for the HR function of that government entity should always utilize a formal exit process.

Naturally, not all exits are amiable, but one should, in all cases, try to have some formal contact with that (ex) employee. When possible, a formal exit interview should be conducted on site by the HR representative to ensure that the employee receives accurate information on COBRA, retirement withdrawals or options (if eligible), paycheck information (how will employee receive that final check and what is included). The employee can ask for any other information regarding benefits. If that employee is not available to meet with the HR representative — for instance, the employee is sent home or HR is not notified until after the fact — then the HR representative needs to mail the appropriate information to that employee via certified mail, including COBRA, retirement, and pay information. Additionally someone must be responsible for collecting any local government property from that employee, verifying that all property is collected and in proper working order. A standard checklist should be used to do this and must be returned to HR prior to that employee receiving that final paycheck. Most often the department head or director completes this process.

Once the final paycheck has been processed – meaning all is clear with that employee – a Georgia Department of Labor separation notice should be issued.

If available, a formal exit interview form should be used to ensure equality in what is asked of each exiting employee. This form is optional but should be encouraged. It could potentially be useful to assist the local government in determining some departmental or local government issue — positive and/or negative.

Who is Your "Go To" Employee?

By Steve Shields, LGRMS Loss Control Representative

At a recent meeting I had a conservation with the Loss Control Representative of an insurance carrier and we were discussing the current hot button topic of "Changing Our Safety Cultures." During this conservation he brought up an interesting point: Who is your "go-to" employee?

When I inquired what he meant, he said every operation (or department) has that one employee who everyone will go to when they have a problem or question with the job. It's not necessarily the boss – it may the low man on the totem pole – but they have the respect of the other employees.

If we can identify that one go-to employee and get them to embrace the changes we are looking to incorporate, we may have more of an impact than we would ever believe. The first step is now to identify that employee in each department and in the future when we need to make changes we involve these employees and work to get their buy-in and I think we will see a major improvement in departments implementing change.

So who is your go to employee? Identify them, work with them, and see the rewards.

Exit Interview

Division _____ Department _____

Employee's Name _____

Job Title _____ Supervisor _____

Employment Dates _____ to _____

Employee Benefits

Please give your opinion of the following benefits, as provided during your period of employment: (on a scale of 1-10)

_____ Wages   _____ Life Insurance

_____ Health Insurance   _____ Personal Time Off

_____ Retirement Plan   _____ Catastrophic Sick Leave

_____ 457 Deferred Comp Plan   _____ Holiday

If we should make a change to our benefit program, what would you suggest?

_____

_____

Have you received information relating to the extension of your group health coverage (COBRA)?

_____

_____

Supervision & Training

How do you feel about the quality of the job training you received as a new employee?

_____

_____

How do you feel about the quality of supervision you received?

_____

_____

Working Conditions (on a scale of 1-10)

_____ Buildings and grounds   _____ Cooperation of fellow employees

_____ Equipment, tools, machines

How do you feel about the level of safety measures employed by us (On a scale of 1-10)? _____

Your reasons for this reply

_____

_____

General

Do you have suggestions for improvements within your department?

_____
_____

Do you have suggestions that would benefit the organization as a whole and our citizens?

_____
_____

What are your comments relating to the opportunity we provided to you for career development?

_____
_____

What did you like/dislike about working here?

_____
_____

Your reasons for leaving:

_____
_____

If you have found other employment, what are the advantages of your new job over your position here?

_____
_____

If resigning, would you consider re-applying here in the future?

_____
_____

Any other comments you would like to add:

_____
_____
_____

Date _____   __ In person   __ Telephone

_____   _____
Interviewer's Signature   Employee's Signature

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