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Panel #19 EVALUATION OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMS

Paper: POLICE EFFECTIVENESS IN HANDLING DISTURBANCE CALLS:  
AN EVALUATION OF CRISIS INTERVENTION TRAINING

Presenter:

John R. Snortum, Ph.D.  
Professor of Psychology  
Claremont Men's College  
Telephone (714) 626-8511  
Ext. 2927

Co-author (not presenting)

Jack B. Pearce  
Planning and Research  
El Monte Police Department  
El Monte, California

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El Monte is a middle- to lower-income suburb of 70,000 people, lying to the east of Los Angeles. A 56-hour course of training was provided for all 64 patrol officers in the El Monte Police Department by a trainer from an outside consulting agency. The training was distributed over seven eight-hour days, with classes held only twice each week in order to foster the transfer of training into daily practice. Officers were trained in four "waves" of 16 students per class, spanning a four-month period. Before the start of classes, the trainer made extensive field observations on the patrol practices of each officer.

Course content covered safety factors in approach; methods for defusing violent situations; information-gathering, mediation and referral of disputants; and handling of victims, substance abusers, and the mentally ill. The trainer employed group discussion, lectures, role-playing, and videotape feedback. To make the role playing optimally involving, the trainer hired professional actors, placed the action in various homes and buildings throughout the city, and required officers to proceed to these "calls" in patrol cars, wearing uniforms, and armed with "blank" bullets. Nonparticipating observers of these classes reported that, while the eight-hour sessions sometimes became fatiguing, the trainer maintained a high level of rapport with the officers because of his personable style and street savvy.

#### METHODOLOGY

Data were derived from four principal sources:

1. Dispatcher call-slips provided a record of the location of the disturbance, the nature of the complaint, the officers assigned, the times dispatched and cleared, and the disposition of the call. Call-slips were

tallied over a seven-month period which included a 53-day period prior to the introduction of training, a 47-day period when only one-quarter of the department had completed training, a 51-day period during which the remainder of the department received training (three-quarters of the department had completed training at the median point of this time period), and a 55-day post-training period.

2. Arrest records revealed the frequency of charges for "resisting arrest" or for "assaulting an officer" during the same time periods as the call-slip data.

3. Officer ratings of disturbance calls detailed the characteristics of the dispute, the disputants, the officers' approach, and the outcome. Although officers were usually dispatched to disturbance calls in pairs, only one rating was obtained per case. The ratings were obtained during a 30-day period which was strategically selected to follow the completion of training by the first and second wave of students, to overlap the period of training for the third wave of students, and to precede the training of the fourth wave of students.

4. Telephone interviews were conducted, after a three-day "cooling off period," with a sampling of disputants who had been rated by officers during the 30-day period of officer ratings.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### The Social Psychology of Disturbance Calls

Disturbance calls followed temporal patterns similar to those which have been reported for rape and homicide, with highest frequencies during evenings and weekends. While neighbor and landlord-tenant disputes tended to peak in the early evening hours, family disputes peaked just before midnight and

declined relatively slowly throughout the night. One out of every three residential sources of disturbance calls required more than one police intervention during the seven-month period of study. The probability of a return call was greatest within the first few hours after the initial call. Considering only those cases in which return calls occurred within four weeks of an earlier call, it was found that there were as many return calls within the first 2 days as occurred within the next 26 days.

Disturbance calls typically involved a conflict between persons of the same ethnic group, usually a man versus a woman, with the male more often cast as the primary disputant or central figure in the problem. Approximately one-half of all primary disputants were described by officers as showing some degree of aggressive or unmanageable behavior and one-quarter of the secondary disputants were seen as being fearful or hysterical. Some evidence of intoxication was noted in one out of three primary disputants and one out of five secondary disputants. Signs of intoxication in either disputant increased the aggressive intensity of the dispute and decreased the likelihood that the dispute would be successfully resolved. However, it should be noted that participants who were relatively less intoxicated were more capable of bringing their belligerence under control by the time of the officers' departure.

#### Effects of Crisis Intervention Training

The trainer had recommended these steps for defusing the initial antagonism between disputants: (1) Approach the less aggressive and more malleable disputant first and (2) draw him off to one side while the second officer remains to talk with the other disputant. (3) Position the disputants in such a way

as to interrupt their eye contact (back-to-back) and yet allow each officer to maintain a peripheral view of any problems that may develop for his police partner.

From the officers' ratings of their approach to disputes (Table 1), it appears that the recommended manner of approach was already widely used within the department. It is interesting to note that the trained officers were willing to acknowledge that they acted contrary to their training in approximately one-third of their cases. Indeed, there are probably many situations where it is virtually impossible to avoid dealing with the more aggressive disputant first and other situations where the disputants are sufficiently rational that it is simply more efficient to allow them to continue a face-to-face discussion of their grievances. Although the officers who were "in training" claimed a slightly higher proportion of interventions which had an immediate calming effect on the disputants, these differences were not statistically significant.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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The trained group did declare a larger proportion of their cases to be resolved or referred, and fewer cases unresolved or ending in an arrest. (Among the total sample of 134 disputes, only 7% of the cases involved referrals and 7% resulted in arrests.) In addition, the trained officers claimed a more intensive level of understanding of the causes of the disputes they handled. However, it was not possible to verify the depth of their insight from the brief comments that were appended to the rating form.

The follow-up data from telephone interviews proved much more difficult to procure than expected. Telephone numbers were recorded on only 40% of the

officer rating forms because many of the disputants did not own a telephone and sometimes the officers simply forgot to obtain the number while at the site. The interviewer was able to reach at least one of the disputants in 63% of those cases with telephones listed. While the interviewer was "blind" concerning the training level of the officers handling each dispute, subsequent tracing of officer serial numbers revealed that 16 disputes had been served by trained officers, 9 by officers in training, and 9 by untrained officers.

In a brief, structured interview using open-ended questions, disputants were asked to describe the attitude, behavior, and effectiveness of each of the officers on the call. This method has the merit of allowing the subject to respond in his own words; however, it was often difficult to keep the interviewee's attention focused upon the officers rather than to rehash and justify the subject's own behavior during the dispute. A content analysis was conducted of all descriptive terms of phrases elicited by the questions, employing the four categories shown in Table 2.

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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Considering the department as a total group, 88% of all descriptive terms or phrases were positive and 12% were negative. The largest cluster of positive adjectives, comprising 38% of all responses, was dominated by qualities of social approachability and tact. A second positive cluster of 23% of the adjectives emphasized the officer's calmness in the face of crisis--as if to persuade through nonverbal suggestion that "OK, everybody can relax. There's no big problem here." The third group, encompassing 26% of the total, centered upon the officer's ability to bring the situation under control through

mediation, arbitration, and measured amounts of firmness and authority. Interestingly, most of the negative adjectives also dealt with aspects of control but, in these cases, the officer crossed that thin line to where he was perceived to be heavy-handed, hostile and aggressive. As the old song goes, "It's not what you do, but how you do it!"

Table 2 reveals significant differences in intervention styles as a function of training. The untrained officers received more criticism for "pushiness" than did the other two groups. When untrained officers received compliments, it was usually for vague and commonplace qualities of social etiquette ("nice," "pleasant," and "polite"); i.e., characteristics which can be acquired through general enculturation, with or without crisis intervention training. By contrast, the officers who were trained or in training received more praise for their reassuring manner and professional competence in managing the crisis.

It is one thing to be able to bring a disturbance under control. It is quite something else to be able to resolve the conflict in such a way that the problem will never occur again. Table 3 examines the frequency of repeated calls as a function of the proportion of the patrol force which has received crisis intervention training. When a return call occurred within two weeks of an earlier call, the return call was charged against that time period in which the initial call occurred. (Tests were also conducted for rate of return calls within 7-day and 1-day periods in order to check for more temporary effects in suppressing repeated calls.)

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Insert Table 3 about here  
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Table 3 shows that, except for minor irregularities in pattern, there was a slight decline in the rate of repeated calls as more officers completed their training. However, chi square tests indicated that these differences between phases were not statistically significant. A more sensitive assessment of these trends can be made by statistical procedures which tap the directional nature of the hypothesis, i.e., a one-tailed test of the predicted decline. With this approach, significant reductions were found in the rate of return calls between the pre-test and post-test periods applying the 1-day test; and between the "one-quarter" period and post-test period applying the 7-day test. Though these short-term effects upon rate of repeated calls may be statistically significant, they are probably too subtle to be of practical significance. They are, nevertheless, <sup>u</sup>sufficiently clear trends to suggest that the training program is on the right track and that minor modifications in tactics might yield important additional gains.

#### CONCLUSIONS

While trained officers seemed better prepared to manage crisis situations in ways that build good police-community relations, it does not appear that training dramatically improved the officers' ability to reduce the rate of "call-backs" to the same address. Training may have facilitated a temporary suppression of return calls within the first few days after the crisis; however, the rate of return calls occurring two weeks after the initial contact was not significantly lower than the rate reported for the department prior to training. Perhaps we are expecting too much from a 30- to 40-minute contact with the disputants. Even professional therapists have difficulty in demonstrating the effectiveness of intensive psychotherapy with such symptoms

as alcoholism and mental illness which often lie behind these repeated calls. Nevertheless, further improvements in the development and implementation of crisis intervention programs would probably yield additional increments in effectiveness. Based upon systematic observations and left-field hunches, we would recommend the following:

(1) Experiment with a briefer course of training by condensing the lecture materials. Intensify the opportunities for skill training by working with subgroups of eight officers in less elaborately staged role-playing situations which allow for a greater number of repetitions by each officer. (2) Develop a cumulative file on disturbance calls in order to identify problem families. (3) Make more extensive use of referrals to social and mental health agencies for families which have been seen more than once within a six-month period. To avoid the high rate of "no-shows" for referrals, arrange that the first agency contact may be a "house call." (4) Allow duty-time for officers to follow-up on referrals. (5) Continue to monitor the quality of police handling of disturbance calls through telephone follow-ups at random intervals. Provide feedback and opportunities for further training for those officers who consistently aggravate the situation. Allow ample leeway for that proportion of "cranks" who can never be satisfied, regardless of the quality of police service. (6) Develop a two-hour training course for the managers of large apartment complexes and housing projects to teach the fundamentals of conflict management.

Table 1

Officers' Ratings of Approach Techniques and Outcomes  
as a Function of Level of Training

	Trained	In Training	Untrained	Chi Square	p
Number of Cases	53	33	48		
Approached First					
More aggressive disputant	32.1%	18.2%	22.9%	2.31	--
Other disputant	67.9	81.8	77.1		
Positioning of disputants					
Together	18.9%	12.1%	20.8%	3.65	--
Apart	81.1	87.9	79.2		
Disputants' line of sight					
Direct	34.0%	36.3%	37.5%	1.57	--
Interrupted	66.0	63.6	62.5		
Immediate Effect After You Began to Talk with Disputants					
Calmed down	35.8%	51.5%	39.6%	2.90	--
Became more inflamed	13.2	6.1	14.6		
Remained about the same	50.9	42.4	45.8		
Disposition					
Resolved/Referred	62.3%	27.3%	39.6%	13.76	.008
Unresolved/Arrested	34.0	51.5	41.7		
Other	3.8	21.2	18.8		
Do you Understand the Cause of the Dispute?					
Yes, thoroughly	41.5%	18.2%	31.3%	19.46	.001
Yes, somewhat	43.4	21.2	37.5		
No	15.1	60.6	31.3		

Table 2

Descriptive Adjectives Applied to Handling Officers  
by Disputants in 34 Cases

	Trained	In Training	Untrained
Number of Adjectives	(65)	(35)	(32)
Adjectives Per Case	(2.4)	(2.2)	(1.9)
Scale			
Approachability:	29.3%	45.7%	53.1%
Nice, Polite, Courteous, Listened, Kind, Good, Understanding, Pleasant			
Pacification:	26.2	28.6	9.4
Calm(ed), Reassuring, Peaceful, Cool, Quiet, Easy-going, Patient			
Problem-Solving:	36.9	20.0	9.4
Helpful, Authoritative, Efficient, Mediated, Forceful, Solved the Problem			
Aggravacion	7.7	5.7	28.1
Pushy, Aggressive, Hostile Hard-nose, Assholes, Too Forceful, Ignorant, Grumpy			

( $\chi^2 = 22.89, 6 \text{ df}, p < .001$ )

Table 3

Frequency of Repeat Calls and Time Spent Per Call  
As a Function of the Proportion of Department Trained

	None (Pre-test)	One- Quarter	Three- Quarters	All (Post-test)	Chi Square	p
Test Period	53 days	47 days	51 days	55 days		
Number of Calls	573	354	315	342		
Porportion of Repeat Calls						
1-day Test						
Repeat calls	6.2%	5.9%	6.3%	4.4%		
Other calls	93.8	94.1	93.7	95.6	1.53	--a
7-day Test						
Repeat calls	9.2%	9.9%	8.6%	7.3%		
Other calls	90.8	90.1	91.4	92.7	1.54	--b
14-day Test						
Repeat calls	11.0%	11.9%	9.8%	9.6%		
Other calls	89.0	88.1	90.2	90.4	1.117	--
Minutes Spent Per Call						
0 -15 minutes	31.4%	25.7%	20.0%	23.1%		
10-20 minutes	19.3	22.0	21.9	20.2		
21-25 minutes	20.1	18.1	22.9	16.1		
26-35 minutes	17.4	20.3	21.0	23.4		
26 + minutes	11.8	13.8	14.3	17.3	21.77	.04

<sup>a</sup>Significant difference between proportions for pre-test vs. post-test data  
( $z = 1.73$ ,  $p < .05$ , one-tailed).

<sup>b</sup>Significant differences between proportions for "One-Quarter" vs. post-test data  
( $z = 1.73$ ,  $p < .05$ , one-tailed).



**END**