

The Cassandra Effect

Translating “blood lessons” to the public

by Brad Fawcett

In Greek mythology Cassandra, the beautiful daughter of King Priam of Troy, was given the gift of prophesy. When she spurned Apollo’s love, she was cursed to have no one believe her.

University of Maryland economist Julian Simon (1932-1998) identified the “reverse-Cassandra effect.” He is perhaps most famous for his wager with Paul Ehrlich in 1980. Ehrlich, author of *The population bomb*, made a number of dire predictions regarding mans impact on the environment. Simon doubted the validity of the data underpinning Ehrlich’s work and famously bet him that his predictions would not come to pass. Needless to say, Simon won the bet. Countering Ehrlich’s position with facts, he was bemused that they and winning the bet failed to counter the influence of Ehrlich’s position on public opinion:

People were inclined to believe the very worst about anything and everything; they were immune to contrary evidence just as if they’d been medically vaccinated against the force of fact. Furthermore, there seemed to be a bizarre reverse-Cassandra effect operating in the universe: whereas the mythical Cassandra spoke the awful truth and wasn’t believed, these days “experts” spoke awful falsehoods and they were believed.

This “reverse-Cassandra effect” seems to operate in a similar fashion in policing. Continued purveyors of police malfeasance appear to have captured the minds of the public regardless of what the science, research, inquiry or jury finds when analyzing a use of force incident. Some authors have opined that the low rate of convictions for police officers alleged to have used unnecessary and/or excessive force is due to some nefarious relationship between the police and those prosecuting them.

If the defence used expert witnesses to explain why an officer failed to hear, see or do something they are castigated as unethical sympathizers of the police. Explaining use of force by police using facts supported by research is akin to saying anything contrary to former Vice President Al Gore’s Academy Award winning film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). If you question the science underpinning the film you may find yourself maligned as a global warming denier.

Many readers will be familiar with the work of Dr. Daniel Simons and his colleagues at the University of Illinois regarding cognition. Their studies of inattentional blindness and change blindness (1999) have helped to explain why police officers (or anyone else) failed to perceive things clearly in their visual field. Reaction time studies have been a favourite subject of experimental psychologists since the mid-nineteenth century and the



implications have been incorporated into police training through the work of Bruce Siddle and PPCT Management Systems. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, Pulitzer Prize nominated author of *On killing: The psychological costs of learning to kill in war and society* (1996), provided police trainers with insights into combat performance and arousal states.

Sport psychology contributed aspects of mental imagery applicable to law enforcement. Dr. Bill Lewinski, a tenured full professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato, has conducted studies directly related to use of force by police. Dr. Joan Vickers of the University of Calgary whose specialty includes cognition, vision and gaze control, motor learning, motor control, decision-making and decision-training, has also conducted research that has applications for training law enforcement and assists in understanding use of force incidents. Dr. Christine Hall, MD has conducted research into the phenomenon of excited delirium, which has direct implications for law enforcement.

Despite the objective, scientifically sound research of these and others the reverse-

Cassandra effective abounds. For example, notwithstanding the documented descriptions of excited delirium in research dating back to the 1800s, some assert that the syndrome is a police fabrication to cover up their abuses.

Another example can be seen in the debate over hazards associated with prone restraint, originally postulated in the late 1980s, which gained significant traction. Police agencies and manufactures scrambled to find techniques and technologies designed to avoid prone restraint while still controlling a violently resisting subject. Later research cast significant doubt on the validity of the original study and many consider the hypothesis “debunked.” The reverse-Cassandra call assails research that contradicts the original study as biased and not applicable to “real-world” incidents involving prone restraint.

Credible police trainers stay current with research in a variety of fields to ensure their officers and the public they serve receive the best training possible: training that is medically, legally and tactically sound.

In many cases police trainers have been well in front of issues. In British Columbia, for example, the Use of Force Working Group chaired by Vancouver Police Department S/ Sgt. Joel Johnston made a number of recommendations on conducted energy weapons. The report predated the events at Vancouver International Airport (YVR) investigated by the Braidwood Inquiry but sadly wasn’t acted upon until the commission adopted a number of the recommendations years later.

Police trainers have informed themselves of evolving case law and threat trends and have incorporated those lessons into the training they provide. Police agencies routinely provide instruction in ground fighting, edged weapons and multiple assailants, having identified the need by analyzing assaults on police officers and the public in general. Police trainers have been actively seeking out new technologies and techniques intended to prevent injuries to everyone, not just police officers.

In order to mitigate some of the barriers to performance identified by the various researches described earlier, many police agencies have incorporated stress inoculation training, using simulated munitions, role players and simulated environments. Many researchers whose work has buttressed police training have not had a horse in the race. Much of the research was conducted without law enforcement in mind and simply sought to understand the limits of human performance regardless of one’s profession.

Those who criticize the police and their training appear to have forgotten, if they ever knew, that law enforcement personnel learn blood lessons. Someone – an officer, suspect,

or member of the public – was injured or killed, causing us to reflect on the appropriateness of the techniques, tactics or technologies involved. Police agencies typically do not stand idle after a tragedy but actively seek out methods to prevent its repetition. This proactive approach has been criticized as being too rash and failing to exercise due diligence in adopting new techniques, tactics or technologies. The same cycle of criticism followed the incorporation of oleoresin capsicum spray, conducted energy weapons and maximum restraint technologies, to name but a few. The spectre of bias is routinely raised regarding the research and field tests conducted prior to implementation.

The reverse-Cassandra cry demands more research (one wonders when there will ever be enough research done to satisfy the critics) and in so doing risks officer and public safety in the interval. Police academies do not churn out automatons seeking an opportunity to visit violence upon someone at the slightest provocation. Rather, they turn out members of the community who love it so much that they are willing to don a uniform and put their own safety on the line to protect residents from those who would prey upon them.

The reverse-Cassandra call criticizes the facts and scientific research upon which modern police training is based primarily on emotion and, perhaps, it is that emotional appeal that makes the call so resilient. George Orwell warned of the intolerance of emotion over the preference of law:

In a society in which there is no law and



in theory no compulsion, the only arbiter of behaviour is public opinion. But public opinion, because of the tremendous urge to conformity in gregarious animals, is less tolerant than any system of law.

The Canadian law enforcement experience has been similar to that of Simon: facts developed through rigorous scientific research fail to counter the influence of those who assume the worst when it comes to police use of force. One can ignore the science, research and blood lessons upon which modern police training is founded but the inconvenient truth is the judge or jury, devoid of emotional second guessing,

when presented with the facts regarding the limitations of human performance under stress, tend to get it right. The officers involved typically acted reasonably when examined through a lens informed with an understanding of the limitations of human performance under stress.

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