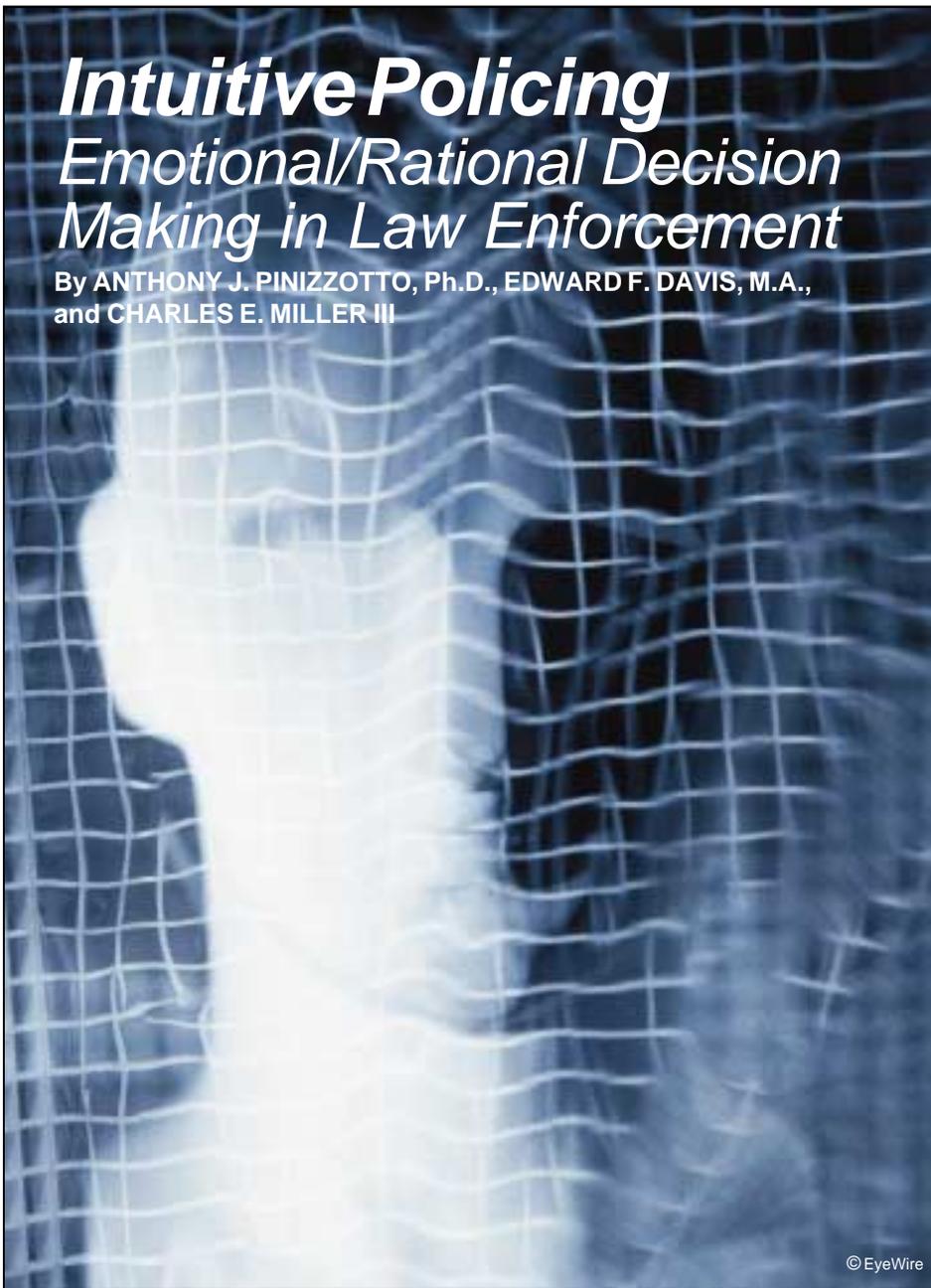


Intuitive Policing Emotional/Rational Decision Making in Law Enforcement

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narcotic substances from several street dealers. The undercover officers then walked away from the intersection and broadcast the physical descriptions of the sellers to arrest teams, consisting of three unmarked vehicles containing three officers each, who began canvassing the vicinity to locate the suspects.

When the unmarked cars approached the street corner, the crowd immediately began dispersing. At this time, one officer observed a subject matching the description of one of the sellers provided by the undercover team and instructed the driver to stop. The doors of the unmarked police car swung open, and the crowd began to clear the area in a more-hurried fashion. As the officer who spotted the alleged dealer began yelling to the other officers to identify which of the suspects he intended to stop, another officer simultaneously

On a warm summer evening in a large American city, narcotics officers, working the 4 p.m. to midnight shift, began a “buy-bust” operation at an intersection known as an open-air drug market where approximately 50 to 60 persons, many presumably involved in narcotics trafficking, had congregated on the sidewalk. Five minutes earlier, two undercover officers had walked into the area and purchased illicit

exited the vehicle and pointed to a different individual approximately 30 feet farther down the sidewalk.¹ The second officer began calling out to the others, as well as broadcasting on the radio, to “get the one in the red



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shirt; he's got a gun." The man in the red shirt started to run down the sidewalk after he observed plainclothes officers approaching from both sides with their weapons drawn. The male surrendered, and the officers removed a .357-caliber revolver from his waistband and placed him under arrest. The remaining members of the arrest team continued to canvass the area until they located, identified, and arrested the suspects who had made the illegal narcotics sales.

While the officers were in the station house processing the prisoners and completing the necessary paperwork, the officer who originally identified the seller turned to the officer who spotted the gunman and asked, "How did you know he had a gun?" The officer who noticed the gunman hesitated for a moment and stated, "I'm not sure why; I just knew." He then

finished processing his prisoner and sat down to prepare his statement of facts for presentation to the prosecutor's office. As he began to recall the details and circumstances of the incident, he had to make a conscious effort to remember the observations that led him to conclude that the suspect possessed a handgun. First, the officer recalled that when pulling up to the scene, he saw the suspect sitting on the curb. As the officers approached and the crowd began to scatter, the man stood up and adjusted his waistband. Next, the officer remembered that although the weather was extremely warm, the suspect had on a long-sleeved dress shirt with the shirt-tails hanging out. Finally, he recalled that immediately after the male stood up, he turned the right side of his body away from the officer and began to walk in another direction, grabbing the

right side of his waistband as if securing some type of object. The combination of these factors led the officer to correctly believe that the individual in the red shirt was armed.

The officer made these observations so rapidly that he experienced an "instantaneous recognition" of danger. However, he could not articulate these reasons to his fellow officers until after the incident was resolved.

How often do law enforcement officers observe suspects and immediately "know" that they possess a weapon or illicit narcotic substances? On such occasions, why are these officers unable to articulate their accurate reactions that may represent building blocks to reasonable suspicion or probable cause indicators? Equally important, why can they not explain their reasons for reacting in such appropriate ways that actually saved

their lives or prevented an offender from assaulting them? The authors have been exploring the concept of intuitive policing and have begun to draw some conclusions. While their research remains ongoing, they feel that the importance of the subject matter necessitates sharing their preliminary findings with the law enforcement community.

Danger Signals

Not limited to law enforcement experience or law enforcement officers, examples of individuals “perceiving” the need to act without first becoming consciously aware of why they were acting have surfaced repeatedly in current work in the neural sciences. In his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman related the case of a young man walking along a canal who comes upon a woman staring into the water. He recognizes the look of fear on her face. But, before being consciously aware as to why, he finds himself diving into the canal. Only when he enters the water does he realize that the woman had been staring at a child who had fallen into the canal and was in immediate danger of drowning. Thanks to his “acting upon impulse,” he saved the toddler’s life. Goleman wondered what made him jump so quickly into the water without knowing why. The answer, he said, was in the work of neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux.²

Three major, interrelated portions comprise the human brain: the brain stem, the cerebellum, and the cerebrum. Dr. LeDoux’s research³ in the anatomy of the brain and its emotions seems to point to what law enforcement officers have experienced since the first peace officer—they become aware of danger signals and can act on them without first being consciously aware of these warnings.

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In one of the most telling discoveries about emotions of the last decade, LeDoux’s work revealed how the architecture of the brain gives the amygdala a privileged position as an emotional sentinel, able to hijack the brain. His research has shown that sensory signals from eye to ear travel first in the brain to the thalamus, and then—across a single synapse—to the amygdala; a second

signal from the thalamus is routed to the neocortex—the thinking brain. This branching allows the amygdala to begin to respond before the neocortex, which mulls information through several levels of brain circuits before it fully perceives and finally initiates its more finely tailored response.⁴

Essentially, Goleman and LeDoux feel that people often perceive danger signals and can begin to initiate responses to them before becoming consciously aware of them. This pre-conscious recognition of danger and how humans can react appropriately to it have been explained by several authors, including Gavin DeBecker who has worked for many years advising corporate executives, media figures, and government officials on how to recognize feelings of impending danger and react fittingly to them.

I’ve learned some lessons about safety through years of asking people who’ve suffered violence, “Could you have seen this coming?” Most often they say, “No, it just came out of nowhere,” but if I am quiet, if I wait a moment, here comes the information: “I felt uneasy when I first met that guy,” or “Now that I think of it, I was suspicious when he approached me,” or “I realize now I had seen that car earlier in the day.” ...if

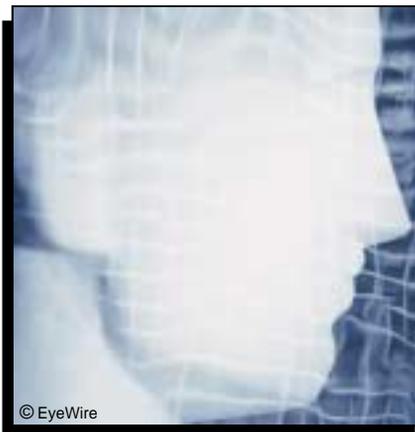
they realize it now, they knew it then.⁵

Whether explained as an uneasy feeling, a gut reaction, “a cop’s sixth-sense,” or overlapping neural networks, the result is the same: law enforcement officers perceive danger signals that trigger alarms in their brains that set their bodies in motion. Often unable to articulate *why* they reacted or *what* prompted them at the time of the event, they sometimes retrospectively can plot their actions based upon what had been clear and present danger signals.

Goleman explained this convergence of thought (cognitive explanation) and feeling (gut reaction) as the coordinated efforts of the emotional and rational brains: the convergence of the brain stem, the cerebellum, and the cerebrum. The rational brain—aware, conscious, and reflective—ponders the consequences of the person’s actions. The emotional brain—more impulsive and reflexive—acts upon stimulation from the environment in powerful ways designed to protect the person from danger and harm.

Law enforcement officers work in a profession where their lives depend both on recognizing danger signals and on responding appropriately. Life-threatening, high-arousal, high-stress situations within the law enforcement officer’s experience trigger the brain to stimulate the adrenal glands to secrete the

hormones epinephrine and norepinephrine. The body now engages in a fight or flight action. As part of this reaction, the memories of these circumstances become fixed in a part of the brain called the amygdala. When similar situations occur in the future, the amygdala is stimulated and triggers the officer to react even before being aware of the totality of the



circumstances. Applying the work of LeDoux, Goleman, and DeBecker to the law enforcement arena provides insight into some of the “intuitive” or “implicit” nature of officer reactions and has several implications for law enforcement training and procedures.

Realistic Training

Realistic academy training can present pragmatic and practical situations that approach the kinds of events officers will experience on the street. If the scenarios are realistic and simultaneously arouse the autonomic

nervous system, officers begin to develop a bond between situations and circumstances that represent potential threat and subcortical awareness of the limbic system, their fight/flight mechanism of defense. Upon graduation, these new officers are assigned to veteran training officers on the street. Experienced, qualified training officers can reinforce these biopsychological responses learned at the academy by having the young officers verbalize what they saw and felt following high-arousal incidents, such as high-speed chases and calls involving armed suspects or suspicious persons. New recruits, as well as seasoned officers, must make constant checks on their environment. They must continually and persistently conduct “reality checks” on themselves and recurrently and consciously say to themselves, “Look around; take note.” They must constantly ask themselves, “What do I see? What do I hear? What do I smell? What do I feel?”

In-service training also should include scenarios where officers must recall as many details as possible, along with their own feelings and thoughts that occurred to them as the incident took place. These feelings and thoughts can later trigger important details of the incident that they will need for reports and testimony. Moreover, in-service training by specially trained mental health workers

can further assist in helping officers relate their feelings to the circumstances occurring in the immediate environment.

Throughout the realistic and practical preparation at the academy, on-the-job experience, and in-service training, several important processes occur. The high-arousal, realistic training prepares officers to recognize the kinds of physiological reactions they can expect to experience during high-stress activities. This training also engages the neural wiring within the brain, already present in each officer, to react to certain threatening stimuli in the environment. By becoming accustomed to associating these feelings with their triggers and then verbalizing these feelings both at the academy and during on-the-job training, officers become better able to recognize the environmental cues triggering the impulses to act.

Improved Procedures

Because officers cannot testify that the reasonable suspicion they used to stop a suspect was a “gut feeling” or an “intuition,” they often will state that the person displayed a “furtive move” or was “acting suspiciously” without being able to articulate what constituted these moves or actions. But, in reality, what frequently “catches the officer’s attention” is preconscious. Based on the officer’s experience, the

“furtive movement” was the suspect dropping his hand under the seat of the car as he pulled to the side of the road. The “acting suspiciously” was the individual tugging on the right side of his shirt that caused the officer to think “gun.” Becoming aware of the processes that create these “gut feelings” or “intuitions” and

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practicing to recognize and verbalize these realities present officers with accurate and verifiable reasonable suspicion or probable cause indicators that they can articulate.

In addition, supervisors who review reports of subordinate officers must ensure the inclusion of all necessary details in original or follow-up reports. If the report does not contain details necessary to support the stop or arrest, the supervisor must require the officer to reflect on the incident and articulate what behaviors caused the officer to focus attention on the suspect, vehicle, or crowd.

Finally, officers should use postarrest debriefing to process individual and collective experiences cognitively, reliving the experience to remember in accurate and supportable detail the reasons for the stop or arrest. During this time, officers must recall and record the specific actions and verbalizations of suspects and, based on these facts, garner support for their own behaviors. Such a process proves helpful to the individual officer, to the agency, and to the process of justice and the protection of local communities.

Conclusion

Since the first law enforcement officers accepted the responsibility of protecting their communities, accurately recognizing which individuals pose a threat to the safety and security of those jurisdictions has challenged all who belong to the profession. Criminals come in a variety of shapes and sizes and can blend in easily with society’s law-abiding members. How, then, can those charged with safeguarding the innocent ferret out the guilty?

Intuitive policing represents a decision-making process that officers use frequently but find difficult to explain to those unfamiliar with the concept. Experienced officers observe actions and behaviors exhibited by criminals that send danger signals to them that they react to

before becoming consciously aware of these warnings. Such “gut feelings” or “intuitions” have saved many lives, not only those of innocent citizens but officers as well. The authors intend to continue their research into this remarkable concept to better understand how it may help reduce crime in American communities and, most of all, to improve officer survival in

encounters with dangerous criminals. After all, the authors agree with an early 16th century proverb: “Forewarned is forearmed.”⁶ ♦

Endnotes

¹ For illustrative purposes and to maintain clarity, the authors refer to officers and suspects as males throughout the article.

² Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More*

Than IQ (New York, NY: Bantam, 1995).

³ Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996).

⁴ Supra note 2, 17.

⁵ Gavin DeBecker, *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals that Protect Us from Violence* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 6-7.

⁶ Elizabeth Knowles, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 600.42.

The Bulletin Honors

The Houston, Texas, Police Department presents the Houston Police Officers Memorial. This monument, dedicated on November 19, 1992, perpetuates the memory of police officers who gave their lives while serving the citizens of Houston. It consists of a central, tiered pyramid with inverted pyramids underground on each of its four sides; other features include a waterfall and the names of the fallen officers. Funded entirely by donations from citizens and corporate entities, the monument is situated on city-donated land.



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