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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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the College of Graduate and
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Critical Thinking in Law Enforcement Training Academies:
A Phenomenological Study of Officer Experiences

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by
Billy J. Spruill

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Abstract

Recently, law enforcement officer use of force incidents resulting in death has seemingly become more prevalent. Generally, the educational requirement for a law enforcement officer is a high school diploma or general education development degree. One must question if this requirement is sufficient for a law enforcement officer to be successful in a modern world as the law enforcement training academy may be the law enforcement officer's only postsecondary education. Critical thinking is a needed skill identified by high-stress professions such as the military, nursing, and disaster management, yet there is limited study regarding critical thinking in law enforcement. The purpose of this research study was to assess the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to prepare cadets to pass a state licensing examination successfully and prepare cadets to think critically upon entering their careers as law enforcement officers. This qualitative research study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach interviewing law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience assigned to the patrol division of their agency. Participants were recruited from law enforcement agencies in the western region of Texas. Once consent was obtained, participants were scheduled for interviews. Interviews were completed using predeveloped interview questions designed to address the two research questions for this study. Interviews were transcribed, and the resulting data were analyzed utilizing the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis. This research study learned law enforcement training academies attended by participants focused on cadets' passage of the state licensing examination and imparted limited critical thinking skills to cadets. These academies delivered information through a lecture-based teaching methodology with little hands-on application, which may explain the deficit in critical thinking skills.

Keywords: law enforcement, critical thinking, use of force, legitimacy, TCOLE, academy

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, George Floyd died after a law enforcement officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes. This incident sparked another round of peaceful protests, civil unrest, and violence across the United States and once again began the debate regarding law enforcement training in the United States. These cases seem to have become commonplace. In 2014, Eric Garner died after an encounter with New York City law enforcement officers who allegedly used an illegal chokehold leading to “I can’t breathe” protests across the country (Marcus, 2016). In 2014, Michael Brown was shot to death during an encounter with a Ferguson, Missouri law enforcement officer leading to weeks of protests, with some of these protests turning violent (Wilson & Wilson, 2015). In 2015, Walter Scott was shot in the back five times and killed by North Charleston, South Carolina law enforcement while running away from a traffic stop (Laughland, 2015). These incidents, along with others, are credited with the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement and resulted in many protests across America (Laughland, 2017).

In my home state of Texas, three Texas law enforcement officers have recently received murder convictions for use of force deaths. A former Balch Springs, Texas law enforcement officer was convicted and sent to prison for the on-duty murder of a 15-year-old (Fernandez & Garnham, 2019). A former Farmers Branch, Texas law enforcement officer was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison after chasing down and killing a 15-year-old who had broken into his vehicle (Fernandez & Garnham, 2019). And, most infamously, Amber Guyger was convicted for the murder of Botham Jean in his apartment while Guyger claimed she thought Jean had broken into her residence (Fernandez & Garnham, 2019). The Guyger shooting has led to a great deal of mistrust by citizens for law enforcement in the Dallas area (Bleiberg, 2019), and many of

these incidents have led citizens to question the law enforcement officers charged with their protection. What can be done to address these issues? Are law enforcement officers receiving the education and training they need to effectively and safely perform their duties?

Many researchers have studied law enforcement education, but there is still much not understood (Christopher, 2015; Hudson, 2014). In 1829, Sir Robert Peel was charged with creating the London Metropolitan Police Department, and his efforts are credited with ushering in an era of modern law enforcement (Worrall & Schmalleger, 2016). Peel believed law enforcement officers must be trained and educated to achieve a professional law enforcement agency to serve their communities (Lentz & Chaires, 2007). Peel introduced his ideas for law enforcement in London during a time of widespread scandal and disorder with private citizens and local gangs performing law enforcement duties (Gaines & Kappeler, 2015). Peel believed law enforcement should be disciplined and organized along military lines, under government control, and Peel believed no trait was more important to a law enforcement officer than perfect command of temper coupled with a quiet, determined manner instead of reliance on violent physical action (Gaines & Kappeler, 2015). Many of Peel's principles still drive modern law enforcement operations in the United States and around the world (Gaines & Kappeler, 2015).

In 1909, August Vollmer was appointed police chief of the Berkeley, California Police Department. When Chief Vollmer came into office, law enforcement officers under his command employed brutal tactics when dealing with those accused of criminal activity, and his officers were known more for their brutality instead of their ability to maintain order and control crime (Lyman, 2018). Chief Vollmer believed law enforcement officers should be educated, trained properly, compensated, and treated as professionals (Kappeler & Gaines, 2015). In 1916, Chief Vollmer began working with the University of California to develop a bachelor's degree

program for Berkeley law enforcement officers (Oliver, 2016). Chief Vollmer is credited for being the first in his field to require higher education for law enforcement officers (Lyman, 2018). In 1929, Chief Vollmer was appointed by President Hoover to head the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement and was credited with launching the American law enforcement reform movement (Kappeler & Gaines, 2015).

Despite the efforts of Peel and Vollmer, the opportunity to transform law enforcement officers into educated professionals was never realized, and many in the law enforcement community have shifted away from the educational ideas presented by Peel and Vollmer (Cordner, 2016). There is still much the law enforcement community can learn regarding education (Christopher, 2015; Makin, 2016). Many believe educational requirements should be increased for entry-level law enforcement officers (Christopher, 2015). This action can increase the trustworthy expertise of law enforcement officers leading to an increase in law enforcement legitimacy (Thompson & Payne, 2019). Still, others believe postsecondary educational institutions should be training law enforcement officers instead of law enforcement agency training academies not affiliated with postsecondary institutions (Sereni-Massinger & Wood, 2016). Still others believe postsecondary institutions should train law enforcement officers using curriculum developed in partnerships between academia and law enforcement agencies and officials (Thompson & Payne, 2019). All of these proposed changes, and the concepts proposed by Sir Robert Peel and August Vollmer, are intended to increase law enforcement legitimacy.

Background of the Study

A large body of literature exists, which states a citizen's opinion of law enforcement is related primarily to their personal experience and the experience of friends and family with law enforcement (Gau, 2010). Without the support of the community, law enforcement will have

difficulty effectively carrying out their mission. Tyler (2006) completed a study in which he attempted to understand why people obey the law. During a longitudinal study of 1,575 Chicago residents, Tyler (2006) discovered people obey the law when they believe the group of individuals enforcing the law is doing so in a fair and just manner. During the study, Tyler (2006) developed a definition of procedural justice as the fair, just, and unbiased application of the law regardless of the various characteristics of individuals encountered by law enforcement. Many researchers have applied Tyler's definition of procedural justice to various peer-reviewed and empirical studies (Donner et al., 2015).

Application of Tyler's (2006) definition of procedural justice to various communities can allow one to posit a community with a positive view of its law enforcement will generally not question the outcomes of law enforcement actions in their community because of the inherent belief law enforcement acts in a fair and just manner. In these communities, law enforcement benefits from a compliant and cooperative citizenry. Further, law enforcement agencies benefit from procedural justice both internally and externally (Donner et al., 2015). In other words, the law enforcement agency that is supported by the community is viewed by the community as a legitimate organization.

Legitimacy is the ongoing dialog between groups who hold power and groups who are the audience (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). Those in power, such as a law enforcement agency, make a claim to power, and the audience, the community, in this case, responds to the claim (Nix & Wolfe, 2017). Because those in power need to convince themselves that their power is rightfully held, those in power will evaluate the response of the audience and adjust their claim to power (Nix & Wolfe, 2017).

The events described in this chapter and other events such as the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles, California in 1991 and law enforcement arrests and maltreatment of individuals during the civil rights movement of the 1960s America, have all had a negative impact on law enforcement legitimacy. When a perceived negative incident occurs involving a law enforcement officer, law enforcement legitimacy may be negatively impacted in the area, in the state, or even nationwide, depending on the size and scope of the incident (Bradford, 2014). Law enforcement legitimacy may also be affected when a law enforcement agency is perceived to be an oppressive gang (Armaline et al., 2014), such as was the case in Ferguson, Missouri.

The primary objective of any law enforcement organization is to protect the public (Worrall & Schmallegger, 2016). As the title suggests, law enforcement is also charged with enforcing laws and maintaining order within their jurisdiction (Donner et al., 2016). While carrying out these duties, law enforcement officers may encounter situations where they experience fear and stress. These encounters have the potential to impact the officer and the community alike in negative ways, leading officers to employ inappropriate levels of force, as was the case in the incidents previously described. These are but a few incidents that have played out in communities around the United States involving law enforcement officers' use of force deaths. These incidents may cause one to ask if Sir Robert Peel and August Vollmer were correct in their assertions that law enforcement officers need to be trained and educated if law enforcement should be perceived as a profession and not simply a job opportunity. These incidents may cause some to question if law enforcement officers in the United States have the education and training required to develop increased critical thinking skills and abilities to defuse the high-stress situations encountered each day.

When examining critical thinking from a law enforcement perspective, critical thinking can be defined as the use of a person's skills, values, and worldview in an attempt to discover the truth, coupled with a use of judgment about how to react or what to believe about what is observed or experienced (Lyman, 2018). Law enforcement officers in Texas are referred to as peace officers by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE), the state law enforcement licensing body, and peace officers are appointed by law enforcement agencies recognized by TCOLE (Texas Constitution and Statutes, 2019). In Texas, the educational requirement for a law enforcement officer is a high school diploma or general equivalency degree (GED) and completion of a law enforcement training academy (Texas Administrative Code, 2018).

As with most areas of Texas, the Permian Basin Region of West Texas has numerous local law enforcement agencies. These agencies vary from county sheriff's offices, police departments, school district police departments, hospital district police departments, and constable's offices. Most of these agencies require only the State of Texas law enforcement officer's educational requirement of a high school diploma or GED coupled with the state peace officer license. The Midland Police Department was the rare West Texas agency requiring 12 hours of college, but this requirement was eliminated in 2020 (Midland Police Department, 2021).

The law enforcement officer selection process is time-consuming, expensive, complex, and consists of many tests, including physical, psychological, reading, writing, and personality (Annell & Sverke, 2015). Though the law enforcement hiring process is complex, the applicant's ability to think critically is not assessed. Thus, it is important to understand if the law enforcement training academy, possibly the law enforcement officer's only postsecondary

educational experience, adequately prepares the law enforcement officer for the complex situations he or she will face upon exiting the law enforcement training academy and entering the communities they will serve.

Statement of the Problem

It is the duty of law enforcement to enforce laws, maintain order (Donner et al., 2016), and protect the public (Worrall & Schmallegger, 2016). Over the years, incidents of law enforcement officers' use of excessive force, sometimes resulting in fatalities, have become more prevalent (Hickman & Poore, 2016; Legewie, 2016; Marcus, 2016; Mears et al., 2017). Because the primary role of law enforcement is to protect the public, the actions of law enforcement have the potential to impact the lives of others. Therefore, researchers contend modern-day law enforcement requires a variety of skills and traits taught based on valid research and understanding (Christopher, 2015; Cordner, 2016; Oliver, 2016; Thompson & Payne, 2019). Law enforcement is a dangerous and stressful occupation (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), and law enforcement officers are exposed to potentially life-threatening situations each day (Bergman et al., 2016), yet law enforcement officers are not receiving the education and training that could lead to improved critical thinking skills. The United States military has identified critical thinking as important for commanders facing dangerous situations (Gleiman & Zacharakis, 2016; Stone, 2017), and critical thinking has been identified as an essential skill for disaster management professionals (Albanese & Paturas, 2018; Safi & Burell, 2007). Many researchers have studied law enforcement education in the United States (Christopher, 2015; Cordner, 2016; Oliver, 2016) and have found many in the law enforcement community believe educating law enforcement officers to be unnecessary (Dominey & Hill, 2010).

Some argue that law enforcement officers do not have the education and training required to handle the complex issues encountered each day in a modern, globalized world (Sereni-Massinger et al., 2015), and research has shown law enforcement officers with more education are less likely to rely on physical force (Brandl & Stroshine, 2012; Mears et al., 2017; Paoline et al., 2012). Yet, law enforcement leadership in Texas only requires a high school diploma or GED to become a licensed law enforcement officer (Texas Administrative Code, 2018). Given the fact there are no additional educational requirements beyond a high school diploma for law enforcement officers in the state of Texas, and given the fact the law enforcement training academy may very well be a law enforcement officer's only postsecondary educational experience, it is important to understand how a law enforcement officer views his or her academy experience with regard to increasing a law enforcement officer's ability to think critically while exposed to life and death situations. Further, though administrators at agencies across the United States may increase the basic educational requirements for law enforcement officers serving within their agencies, all but two of the 50 states in the United States have a basic educational requirement of a high school diploma or GED. Only Michigan requires a bachelor's degree for law enforcement officers (Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards, n.d.). Wisconsin requires a high school diploma or GED for recruits, but a new law enforcement officer must complete a 60-hour associate's degree before beginning their fifth year of service (Wisconsin State Legislature, n.d.)

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to investigate the experiences of law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas during their law enforcement training academies and to assess the

efficacy of law enforcement training academies to teach critical thinking skills based on those officers' experiences. Depending on the results of this study, data collected may be used to propose changes to the training requirements of law enforcement officers in Texas and other states.

When law enforcement officers are accused of using excessive force or receive excessive citizen complaints, law enforcement legitimacy can decrease (Terrill & Paoline, 2015). When law enforcement legitimacy decreases, law enforcement may lose the support of and cooperation from the community, and these issues may result in decreased funding for law enforcement agencies (Cook, 2015). Therefore, the importance of understanding how critical thinking may affect the performance of a law enforcement officer cannot be overstated. Further, there is limited study regarding the ability of law enforcement officers to think critically, though there has been more study regarding critical thinking in other high-stress occupations such as the military (Gleiman & Zacharakis, 2016; Stone, 2017) and disaster management (Albanese & Paturas, 2018; Safi & Burell, 2007).

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were designed to target the perceptions held by law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas regarding their overall law enforcement training academy experience with regard to the academy's efficacy to teach the materials needed to pass the state licensing exam and their experience with regard to critical thinking skills gained during the law enforcement training academy experience.

RQ1. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience during the law enforcement

training academy with regard to the efficacy of the training academy to teach the law enforcement officer the materials required to pass the state licensing exam?

RQ2. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience with regard to critical thinking skills gained while attending the law enforcement training academy?

Definition of Key Terms

Critical thinking (from a law enforcement perspective). The use of a person's worldviews, values, and personal skills attempting to come as close as possible to the truth, coupled with the use of judgment about what to believe or how to react in response to what is observed or what is experienced (Lyman, 2018).

Ferguson effect. After the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014, and the refusal of both state and federal prosecutors to indict the officer responsible, numerous riots broke out across the United States, and there has been a perception by law enforcement of increased scrutiny, leading some in law enforcement less willing to enforce the law for fear of being digitally recorded and scrutinized by citizens and the media. This phenomenon has been called the Ferguson effect (Wolfe & Nix, 2016).

Law enforcement legitimacy. Legitimacy is the ongoing dialog between those who hold power and their audience (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012), those in power make a claim to legitimacy while the audience responds to that claim, and depending on the response, those in power may make an adjustment to their claim of power (Nix & Wolfe, 2017).

Procedural justice. The fair, just, and unbiased application of the law regardless of the various characteristics of individuals encountered by law enforcement (Tyler, 2006).

Use of force. Force employed by a law enforcement officer to gain compliance during an encounter with a citizen with the amount of force ranging from simple coercion to hands on, to less than lethal weapons, to deadly force (Gaines & Kappeler, 2015).

Research Methodology

Through this study, I employed a qualitative phenomenological research methodology attempting to understand the perceptual and emotional behaviors of the phenomenon experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers using quantitative methods attempt to predict and validate from known variables and established guidelines, but researchers using these methods do not interview or observe participants, which makes the use of a quantitative design for this study unsuitable (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). A transcendental phenomenological study requires the researcher to set aside any preconceived ideas to see the phenomenon through human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Live interviews allowed me to analyze responses as the participants spoke, allowing me to employ follow-up and clarifying questions (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Through live interviews with law enforcement officers, I gaged the perceived critical thinking skills gained by the officers interviewed during their law enforcement training academy experience.

Data Collection

The phenomenological approach involves collecting data using the sample population's experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental phenomenological approach requires the researcher to set aside preconceived ideas to truly understand the participant's experience (Moustakas, 1994). Data was collected using live interviews through the Zoom virtual meeting platform. Live interviews allowed me to analyze participant responses as the participant spoke, and using live interviews allowed me to ask follow-up and clarifying questions (Saldaña &

Omasta, 2018). Participants were asked to plan to spend 20–30 minutes for an interview and were advised that a follow-up interview may be required.

The data collected came directly from the participants as they described their feelings and experiences. Everyday judgments, understandings, and knowledge are set aside, visiting the phenomena naively and perceiving the data freshly (Moustakas, 1994). Data collection employed face-to-face Zoom virtual meeting interviews and utilizing semistructured, open-ended questions related to the law enforcement officers' remembered experiences during their law enforcement training academy. Interviews were recorded using the recording feature of the Zoom virtual meeting platform.

Participants were selected from law enforcement agencies within a Permian Basin region of West Texas. Participants were required to have a minimum of five years' active law enforcement experience. The chief executives of various law enforcement agencies within a Permian Basin region of West Texas were contacted and informed of the study, the purpose of the study, and questions to be asked. The chief executives who agreed to allow participation by their officers provided department email addresses for appropriate officers, and those officers were contacted as potential participants. Though initially, the number of participants could not be predicted because enough participants were needed to be interviewed to reach a point of saturation or a point where there is no new information gained (Guest et al., 2006), the resulting number of participants to reach saturation was 15 participants. Participants were selected from the qualified volunteers with hopes of selecting volunteers from many different agencies located within a Permian Basin region of West Texas.

To ensure trustworthiness, I completed several steps. I completed a literature review, which supported the carefully designed and implemented research method (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The use of live interviews comported to the research questions.

Data Analysis Method

Data was analyzed using the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis. This method required me to analyze the participant interviews by testing for an experience necessary to understand an experience and determine whether the experience could be labeled to show it was repetitive or overlapping in descriptive terms (Moustakas, 1994).

The first step in this method required me to transcribe the interviews to allow for coding of the text and grouping the answers of each participant relevant to their experiences during their law enforcement training academies into horizons (Moustakas, 1994). The second step involved the reduction and elimination of the invariant constituents using the criteria of “(a) Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?, and (b) Is it possible to abstract and label it?” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). The third step required me to cluster the invariant constituents of the experience that were related into one thematic label, and the clustered and labeled constituents were determined to be the core themes of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The fourth step required me to check the invariant constituents and their accompanying theme against the complete record of the participant transcript (Moustakas, 1994). The fifth step required me to construct an individual textural description of the experience for each participant, including verbatim examples from the transcribed interview (Moustakas, 1994). The sixth step required me to construct an individual structural description of the experience based on the individual textural description and the use of imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). The final step required me to construct a textural-

structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience incorporating the invariant constituents and themes for each participant (Moustakas, 1994).

Chapter Summary

There have been many events throughout recent years calling into question the actions of law enforcement officers in the United States. These events have had an effect on law enforcement legitimacy. Due to the fact that the state of Texas only requires a high school diploma or GED to be a licensed law enforcement officer, can it be expected that law enforcement officers are prepared for the stressful and complex situations they will encounter each day? Through this study using a qualitative phenomenological approach, I hoped to understand law enforcement officers' lived experiences better with regard to their law enforcement training academy experience regarding the efficacy of the academy to prepare the officer for the state licensing exam and their law enforcement training academy experience with regard to critical thinking skills gained. The following literature review addressed the topics of procedural justice, law enforcement legitimacy, the Ferguson effect, decision-making, use of force, law enforcement education, and critical thinking.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Law enforcement officers in Texas are required to possess a high school diploma or GED to become a Texas licensed law enforcement officer, but one must question if the law enforcement training academy adequately prepares the law enforcement officer to respond to the problems he or she will encounter in a modern, globalized world. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to document the lived experiences of law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas during their law enforcement training academies and to assess the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to teach critical thinking skills based on those officers' experiences.

As discussed in Chapter 1, there have been many incidents of law enforcement use of force and use of deadly force, which has resulted in the deaths of citizens. These incidents have had far-reaching effects across the United States, resulting in protests. Some of these protests have turned violent, resulting in the loss of property and injuries to participants and bystanders. With the current hiring requirements employed by the state of Texas and with the lecture and test model employed by most law enforcement training academies across Texas, this research study assessed if law enforcement officer cadets were receiving the critical thinking skills required to serve the citizens in their jurisdictions. To better understand the lived experiences of law enforcement officers in a post-Ferguson United States, the following research questions were developed to guide the research for this study:

RQ1. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience during the law enforcement training academy with regard to the efficacy of the training academy to teach the law enforcement officer the materials required to pass the state licensing exam?

RQ2. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience with regard to critical thinking skills gained while attending the law enforcement training academy?

In order to fully understand the problem, one must better understand the issues surrounding the problem. The following chapter was designed to familiarize the reader with literature available in the fields of procedural justice, law enforcement legitimacy, the Ferguson effect, use of force, law enforcement education, and critical thinking. Through this study, possible changes could be recommended to enhance the efficacy of law enforcement training and educational requirements to policy makers in Texas.

This chapter begins with procedural justice, which is the fair and unbiased application of the law regardless of the characteristics of those encountered by law enforcement (Tyler, 2006) and addresses why people obey the law. An overview of law enforcement legitimacy is covered. Law enforcement legitimacy is affected by the actions of law enforcement officers. The Ferguson effect is discussed. An understanding of the Ferguson effect is important because some argue the events in Ferguson, Missouri, and other similar events have had a negative impact on law enforcement legitimacy, how people view law enforcement officers currently, and how law enforcement officers react to potential high-stress situations. Use of force is discussed. An overview of the current state of law enforcement education is provided. Critical thinking is defined and addressed. The literature review culminates with a logical justification for this research study.

The best gift a researcher can give to him or herself is a literature review (Roberts, 2010). A literature review is a necessary component to prepare for a research study (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). A literature review is written documentation of a logically argued case that is built upon a

comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge about a particular subject of study (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). The literature review is not used to prove or persuade but simply identifies and presents what is already known about a particular problem (Terrell, 2016). Without a literature review, a researcher will not develop the knowledge required to understand the topic researched, what is already known about the topic researched, and the key issues surrounding the topic (Hart, 1998). Researchers are expected to show an understanding of previous research and the main theories surrounding the subject matter studied, and this is demonstrated through a thorough review of the current literature surrounding the topic (Hart, 1998).

Search Strategy

Due to the incredible amount of information available to researchers through the Internet and various databases, strategic use of combined keywords and phrases is the first step in locating relevant literature (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Searches for this review of the literature were located using Abilene Christian University's OneSearch Discovery provided by EBSCO through the Abilene Christian University's (ACU) Online Library. The commonly used search terms were *law enforcement, police, critical thinking, procedural justice, law enforcement legitimacy, the Ferguson effect, decision-making, use of force, law enforcement education, community policing, operationalized, and operationalizing*.

I began preliminary research for this study in 2016. The anticipated completion of this study is 2021. Initial searches were limited to works published during 2011 or later. Older material was included when the search parameters used did not yield sufficient material on the subject matter studied. The various journal homepages and publishing requirements were reviewed to ensure the peer-reviewed status of each article.

Procedural Justice and Law Enforcement Legitimacy

The United States is a country founded on the rule of law. Citizens of the United States are expected to follow laws on the federal, state, county, and city levels of government. These laws regulate how corporations function fairly, how citizens pay taxes, how citizens interact with each other, and how everyone operates a motor vehicle. Laws essentially regulate how each person lives their lives each day and serve to protect us as citizens. Law enforcement officers in the United States enforce these codes of laws. Everyone will eventually break the law sometime, others more often, but in general, most people obey the law. This is referred to as compliance. But why do most citizens comply with most laws?

In the 1990s, Tyler (2006) began his landmark study to discover why people obey the law. During the study, Tyler (2006) discovered that people tend to obey the law when they perceive the group or individual enforcing the law was doing so in a legitimate and fair manner. Tyler (2006) conducted a longitudinal study of 1,575 Chicago, Illinois citizens gathering data on the citizens' views on law-abiding behavior, personal experiences with law enforcement, and how those experiences shaped the citizens' views of the legitimacy and fairness of the law enforcement officers and law enforcement organizations. Based on the study, Tyler (2006) developed a definition of procedural justice as the fair, just, and unbiased application of the law regardless of the various characteristics of individuals encountered by law enforcement. If the law enforcement officer is perceived by citizens as fair, courteous, and applies the law to each citizen encountered in an unbiased manner, then the law enforcement officer is said to be acting in a procedurally just manner.

Many peer-reviewed and empirical studies have used Tyler's definition of procedural justice (Barkworth & Murphy, 2015; Donner et al., 2015; Gau, 2011). When applying Tyler's

(2006) definition of procedural justice to American society, one can assert that a community that has a positive view of their law enforcement officers will not generally question the outcomes of arrests or court cases because they believe their community is treated fairly by law enforcement. One may also conclude that law enforcement officers and organizations benefit from operating in a procedurally just manner as each will encounter more compliant and cooperative citizens. Research has found procedural justice produces many benefits to law enforcement agencies internally, with law enforcement officers, and externally with citizens (Donner et al., 2015).

But what happens when a community does not trust law enforcement? Legitimacy is the ongoing dialog between two groups, those who hold power and audiences (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). Those in power make a claim to legitimacy, and the audience responds to that claim (Nix & Wolfe, 2017). Because those in power need to convince themselves their power is rightfully held, those in power will evaluate the audience's response and may adjust their claim to power (Nix & Wolfe, 2017).

Perceived procedural injustice can lead to feelings of social disconnectedness in communities, with perceived unfairness leading to less cooperation from citizens and lower law enforcement legitimacy in the community (Bradford, 2014). A law enforcement organization may also lose legitimacy when a community of color perceives the organization as an oppressive gang (Armeline et al., 2014).

A citizen complaint against a law enforcement officer is a formal expression of procedural injustice, and that expression alone might affect law enforcement legitimacy with the way a law enforcement officer treats citizens during an encounter being as important as the overall outcome of the encounter (Terrill & Paoline, 2015). The concept of procedural justice states that law enforcement officers who treat citizens fairly, even with a negative outcome

(arrest, traffic ticket, summons), the negative outcome will be viewed more acceptable than an encounter where the treatment of the citizen by the law enforcement officer is viewed as unjust or unfair (Tyler, 2006). The consequences of these negative encounters can be vast and far-reaching (Terrill & Paoline, 2015).

Many scholars have long argued the importance of legitimacy for effective law enforcement (Kochel et al., 2013; Mastrofski et al., 1996; Murphy et al., 2009; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Researchers have further demonstrated that citizens who view law enforcement as legitimate authorities are more likely to comply with the law (Jackson et al., 2012; Murphy et al., 2009; Tyler, 2006), cooperate with law enforcement (Jackson et al., 2012), comply with law enforcement orders during face-to-face encounters (Henry & Franklin, 2019), and share information with law enforcement (Henry & Franklin, 2019; Hinds & Murphy, 2007). Tyler (2006) contributed to the legitimacy literature through his Chicago study providing empirical support for the effect of legitimacy on citizen compliance. Tyler (2006) developed two approaches to compliance as instrumental and normative.

The instrumental model is based on the idea of deterrence; people will generally change their behavior when confronted with immediate rewards or penalties associated with following the law (Tyler, 2006). Based on this model, people will view their behavior in the light of personal gains or losses that may result from their behavior as it relates to following the law. Policy makers generally adopt this model when addressing how to gain compliance by increasing the penalties associated with violating the law (Tyler, 2006).

The normative model is associated with the influence people believe to be just and moral instead of what is in a person's self-interest (Tyler, 2006). If people view compliance with the law because of their personal beliefs as to how a person should behave in society, people will

voluntarily assume their obligation as a citizen to follow the law and have a personal commitment to obey the law (Tyler, 2006). This is the morality side of the normative model. There is also a legitimacy side of the normative model. People want justice from their law enforcement officers and evaluate law enforcement on whether or not they believe justice is done by those officers (Tyler, 2006). Based on the legitimacy side of the normative model, law enforcement can maintain their authority if they act in a fair and just manner. If law enforcement is required to use force to maintain order and force to gain compliance to the law, legitimacy suffers, and many resources are diverted to these actions (Tyler, 2006). Based on this model, voluntary compliance by citizens requires fewer resources leading to discretionary authority that can be used by law enforcement.

Based on this information, one can surmise that in order for law enforcement to be effective in their communities, legitimacy is required. Legitimacy influences whether citizens will comply with the law. Legitimacy can also influence the amount of cooperation law enforcement receives from citizens while investigating crimes in their communities. If legitimacy is lacking in a community, law enforcement may face difficulties in solving crimes due to a lack of cooperation from citizens. Further, law enforcement depends on citizens to report when crimes occur. When citizens view their law enforcement officers as legitimate, citizens are more likely to report to law enforcement when they have been victimized (Kochel et al., 2013).

Other research has broadened Tyler's (2006) definition of legitimacy. During research conducted in Los Angeles and Oakland, California, an entitlement component was added to Tyler's (2006) definition of legitimacy. The definition of legitimacy was broadened to include legal authorities, such as law enforcement, and states' legal authorities are entitled to be obeyed by citizens because of their position, and citizens should defer to the authority granted to legal

authorities (Tyler & Huo, 2002). In this work, Tyler and Huo (2002) identified four different subscales to measure legitimacy: an obligation to obey the law, cynicism about the law, trust in legal institutions, and feelings about legal authorities such as law enforcement. Other studies also addressed feelings of obligation as important components of legitimacy (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Subjectively, a sense of obligation by citizens to obey legal authorities, such as law enforcement, is essential to legitimacy (Jackson & Gau, 2016). Gau (2011) continued her study of legitimacy by noting legitimacy could not always be defined by both trust and an obligation to obey, as documented by Tyler (2006). Law enforcement legitimacy can be operationalized as trust in law enforcement, but a citizen's duty to obey could be a separate measurement for study (Gau, 2011).

Further study found that legitimacy must consider the type of recognition citizens give authority (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). Legitimacy should be viewed and defined based on how those in power view legitimacy and how those who are expected to obey those in power view legitimacy (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). Tankebe (2013) continued the study through 5,210 face-to-face surveys to assess the participants' perceptions of procedural fairness, distributive fairness, lawfulness of law enforcement effectiveness, obligations to obey law enforcement, and cooperation with law enforcement. The study revealed that people tend to obey law enforcement for reasons beyond simply that they should obey law enforcement (Tankebe, 2013).

Based on this information, it is fair to surmise that law enforcement can secure public obedience by creating legitimacy in their communities. Given this fact, one must understand how a citizen determines the legitimacy of law enforcement in their communities (Tyler & Huo, 2002). Law enforcement legitimacy can be assessed based on three types of citizen assessment: law enforcement's ability to reduce crimes, the success law enforcement has in apprehending

criminals, and the fairness with which outcomes are distributed (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). In addition, the procedural justice perspective suggests fairness in the procedures employed by law enforcement in achieving the aforementioned citizen assessments has an influence on legitimacy (Tyler, 2004). If law enforcement officers reduce crimes, apprehend offenders, but do not do so in a fair and just manner, legitimacy may still be affected negatively.

Historically, the relationship between law enforcement and the communities law enforcement officers serve has focused on racial issues (Kappeler & Gaines, 2015). Though research has shown that minority groups in the United States generally view law enforcement favorably, the percentages are less favorable than those of white Americans (Kappeler & Gaines, 2015). When there is racial tension in a community because of an incident involving law enforcement and a person of color, law enforcement legitimacy is tested in those communities.

As described in Chapter 1, there were several incidents that occurred beginning in 2014 involving law enforcement officers and African American men who died during or after encounters with law enforcement. In July 2014, Eric Garner was suffocated during an encounter with law enforcement that employed a choke hold to subdue Garner. Garner later died. In August 2014, Michael Brown was shot and killed by Ferguson, Missouri law enforcement. Soon after these events, angry protests erupted across the United States. When officials in Missouri mobilized law enforcement and military forces to Ferguson to respond to the demonstrations and public unrest, public anger increased (Moule et al., 2019), and violence and riots against law enforcement were observed in several major U.S. cities, resulting in what some referred to as a national law enforcement crisis (Culhane et al., 2016). The crisis continued into 2015 when Walter Scott was shot and killed while running away from law enforcement and Freddie Gray's death after sustaining neck injuries during an encounter with law enforcement. Gray's death

resulted in looting, arson, and violence against law enforcement in Baltimore, Maryland (Culhane et al., 2016). Later in 2016, Alton Sterling was shot and killed by Baton Rouge, Louisiana law enforcement officers at close range. Days after, Micah Xavier Johnson shot twelve officers in Dallas, Texas killing five (Arkin et al., 2016). Witnesses told law enforcement Johnson wanted to kill law enforcement and white people following the death of Alton Sterling (Arkin et al., 2016).

The recent crisis has had an effect on law enforcement in the United States. Because of these events, law enforcement legitimacy has suffered, resulting in the most serious law enforcement community relations crisis observed in the last 30 years (Culhane et al., 2016). The result has been the questioning of law enforcement tactics (Moule et al., 2019) and the effect on how law enforcement officers interact with the public (Wolfe & Nix, 2016).

The result of these events was a loss of legitimacy by law enforcement in the communities they serve. But the loss of legitimacy was observed throughout the United States, resulting in looting, arson, and riots. Many communities endured the destruction of property. Because of these events, law enforcement has become focused on rebuilding the legitimacy lost during the aforementioned crisis, with the focus of procedural justice being the key element to rebuild legitimacy (Terrill & Paoline, 2015; Wolfe et al., 2015). The crisis has caused further effects, which are becoming topics for research. Since the crisis, some assert that law enforcement officers are not as aggressive in enforcing laws and are less likely to confront a lawbreaker in public for fear of scrutiny by communities and the media. This alleged Ferguson effect will be discussed in the following section.

The Ferguson Effect

Law enforcement officers in the United States have many duties. Each day, law enforcement officers respond to various calls for service. They complete reports on various criminal offenses such as thefts, burglaries, assaults, and robberies. Law enforcement officers also enforce traffic laws, respond to vehicular crashes, and serve as a deterrence to crime by their mere presence in the community.

Law enforcement in the United States is the formal attempt by the various levels of government to gain compliance to laws enacted by those various levels of government. If laws were not enforced, society as a whole would devolve into chaos. The United States Constitution was written and adopted to protect the individual liberties of its citizens, and law enforcement officers take an oath to preserve and protect the constitution. Hence, law enforcement officers are required to balance the rights of citizens while enforcing the laws they are sworn to uphold. But, in our representative form of government, there are differing opinions as to how laws should be enforced, with the consequences of the negative encounters described between 2014–2016 being vast and far-reaching (Terrill & Paoline, 2015).

The community of Ferguson, Missouri, had a history of racial tension and was composed primarily of African American citizens, but the police force was composed primarily of white males (Wilson & Wilson, 2015). Because of previous dealings with the police department, the community found the police department to be racist and anticomunity, lacking legitimacy (Wilson & Wilson, 2015). Because of these facts, at the time of the shooting, Ferguson was already on the brink of collapse.

Race is one of the most common demographics associated with how citizens perceive crime and how citizens perceive the actions of law enforcement officers (Cobbina et al., 2016),

and crime is one of the most important influences on the quality of life in the United States (Pyrooz et al., 2016). Since the events in Ferguson, there has been a noticeable increase in crime rates (Wolfe & Nix, 2016), particularly robbery rates (Pyrooz et al., 2016). This has led some to wonder if this increase is the result of law enforcement officers becoming less willing to do their jobs in the face of negative perceptions of law enforcement in general, the idea that the actions taken by law enforcement officers may be digitally recorded and scrutinized by citizens and the media, and the fear that actions taken by law enforcement officers may lead to complaints of excessive force or racial profiling (Wolfe & Nix, 2016). This phenomenon has been dubbed the Ferguson effect (Wolfe & Nix, 2016). Though crime rates in the United States had been on the decline for over 25 years, major cities in the United States post-Ferguson have witnessed an increase in crime rates (Pyrooz et al., 2016).

The hypothesis that law enforcement officers are affected by negative criticism in the media and in their communities as a result of use of force and use of deadly force incidents resulting in a law enforcement officer's fear to do their job has not been studied at length (Wolfe & Nix, 2016). Wolfe and Nix (2016) completed a study of 567 deputy sheriffs gathering data related to organizational justice, self-legitimacy, the Ferguson effect, and their desire to work with community partners. The study yielded mixed results regarding the Ferguson effect though deputies reported their willingness to perform their assigned duties had decreased due to the national criticism law enforcement was receiving. Wolfe and Nix (2016) concluded that though there were mixed results as to the existence of the Ferguson effect, there has been a negative impact on the growth of positive working relationships between law enforcement and communities. Further limitations were noted as the study involved only one agency.

Pyrooz et al. (2016) conducted a study examining the Ferguson effect on crime rates in 81 United States cities with a population of over 200,000 focusing on Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) crimes of homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, theft, and motor vehicle theft. Researchers examined data from 12 months before the Ferguson shooting to 12 months after the Ferguson shooting. Researchers did not find any evidence that the hypothesized Ferguson effect impacted crime rates in the cities studied (Pyrooz et al., 2016). Pyrooz et al. (2016) did find some cities with larger African American populations and larger law enforcement agencies did see an increase in crime rates overall.

For purposes of this study, it was important to understand the alleged Ferguson effect regarding how use of force and use of deadly force incidents can affect law enforcement and the communities they serve. Though there is limited evidence as to the existence of a Ferguson effect, more time may need to pass for crime rates to reveal an effect, and further study needs to take place regarding these phenomena. What can be asserted is the incidents previously described have had an effect on law enforcement legitimacy across the country and may cause how law enforcement officers make decisions on how and when to employ force while carrying out their duties.

Use of Force

Many in the law enforcement and criminal justice circles have called for a better understanding of how and why law enforcement officers use force during citizen encounters (Kahn et al., 2017; Mears et al., 2017). Law enforcement use of force has long been thought to be required and acceptable in certain situations, but concerns about law enforcement use of force have continued to grow (Mears et al., 2017), especially regarding the many use of force incidents involving excessive or apparent excessive force resulting in the death of unarmed citizens (Kahn

& McMahon, 2015; Nix et al., 2017). When law enforcement officers make shooting mistakes, there can be dire consequences, such as unarmed persons are harmed and delicate situations becoming more explosive (Cox et al., 2014). Lethal incidents have had a larger effect on the national discussion and resulted in more debates about the need for law enforcement use of force and why law enforcement officer use of force is resulting in excessive force complaints and citizen deaths (Mears et al., 2017).

Generally, law enforcement use of force is acceptable when the use of force is necessary to maintain the safety of victims, bystanders, and fellow law enforcement officers, but there is no single accepted definition for use of force (Mears et al., 2017). The International Association of Chiefs of Police (2001) defined the use of force as “that amount of effort required by police to compel compliance from an unwilling subject” (p. 1) and included physical force to include law enforcement officer hands, chemical agents such as pepper spray, impact force such as batons, electronic force such as a TASER, and potentially deadly force such as firearms. Others contend a law enforcement officer’s verbal commands should be considered force as these commands are coercive in nature and a citizen may feel forced to do something they may not want to do (Kahn et al., 2017). Even with these possible definitions, law enforcement officers have been granted discretion as to when to use force in particular situations. These situations are generally governed by individual law enforcement agency policy.

Law enforcement officer discretion regarding use of force emerges from the United States Supreme Court Case *Graham v. Conner* (1989). In the case, the court granted law enforcement officers use of force discretion due to the fact the law enforcement officers’ job duties were inherently dangerous, and any encounter with a citizen could not be fully anticipated. Because of this fact, law enforcement officers are required to determine based on the situation,

and keeping in mind that each situation is different, the level of force required to reduce the level of threat presented by a citizen-suspect and protect victims, bystanders, and other law enforcement officers during an encounter with a citizen-suspect (Mears et al., 2017). With that said, the court also allowed for a “reasonableness” standard, meaning, would a reasonable law enforcement officer placed in the same situation act in the same way because law enforcement officers are required to make split-second decisions in tense, uncertain, and quickly evolving circumstances (Mears et al., 2017).

Because of the court’s decision, many agencies have developed a use of force continuum. Law enforcement officers know based on the continuum which level of force is acceptable for a particular circumstance. If a suspect is unarmed and not a physical threat, officers know to use verbal commands or use empty hands to gain compliance (Terrill & Paoline, 2013; Worrall & Schmallegger, 2016). If a suspect is agitated and on the verge of violence, officers may use chemical agents, such as pepper spray, to gain compliance (Terrill & Paoline, 2013; Worrall & Schmallegger, 2016). However, if a suspect is armed with a weapon such as a gun or a knife and presents an immediate threat to victims, bystanders, or other officers, the officer may be required to use deadly force (Terrill & Paoline, 2013; Worrall & Schmallegger, 2016), but the law enforcement officer’s actions will be judged based on the reasonableness clause of *Graham v. Conner* (1989). Researchers and citizens, for the most part, agree that the decision to use force by a law enforcement officer is appropriate when the officer is faced with situations that include citizens who refuse to comply with officers’ legal commands, encounters with potentially violent suspects, and other potentially violent situations when a suspect must be controlled to maintain the order and safety of the community (Gerber & Jackson, 2017; Nix et al., 2017).

With the present media coverage regarding law enforcement officers' use of force, one would think these events are common. However, research has shown with the relative number of law enforcement and citizen encounters each day, use of force incidents are not at all frequent (Mears et al., 2017; Nix et al., 2017), with most law enforcement-citizen encounters being traffic related stops (Mears & Lindsey, 2016). Law enforcement use of force is desirable when the force is employed to control a situation and protect citizens. Use of force is not desirable when the force is excessive or when other avenues are available to control a situation.

When unreasonable or excessive force is utilized, there are several resulting consequences. The first is physical or psychological harm to a citizen or suspect (Mears et al., 2017). This is a logical consequence as the citizen-suspect has been exposed to force as a result of the encounter. The second consequence is physical or psychological harm to the law enforcement officers (Mears et al., 2017). Again, this is logical as the officer has applied force to a situation, and the result could result in physical or psychological harm to the officer. Harm may also come as a result of retaliation against law enforcement officers on a broader scale because of an unreasonable or excessive use of force incident. In 2016 after several officer-involved shootings, 14 Dallas, Texas law enforcement officers were shot, resulting in the deaths of five officers (Arkin et al., 2016). Other incidents of officers being retaliated against because of use of force incidents have been seen in the media as well. The third consequence may be what is referred to as de-policing or a reduced emphasis in enforcing the law for fear of encountering a situation that may not reflect well on the officer after a high-profile use of force incident (Paoline et al., 2012). This has also been referred to as the Ferguson effect and may take place on a national or even local level depending on the scope of the event in question (Nix & Wolfe, 2017; Pyrooz et al., 2016). The fourth consequence is the depletion of resources from law enforcement

agencies. With an unreasonable or excessive use of force incident, the potential for injury is high, and these injuries may lead to lawsuits, workman's compensation claims, additional departmental training, and loss of personnel (Marcus, 2016). Finally, unreasonable or excessive use of force incidents may lead to a loss of law enforcement legitimacy (Gerber & Jackson, 2017; Moule et al., 2019).

Researchers have identified a range of factors that may influence a law enforcement officer's decision to use force and have divided these factors into four categories (Mears et al., 2017). The first category is individual. Research has found that a small number of law enforcement officers account for a large portion of use of force incidents, with those who have used force in the past being more likely to rely on force again (Mears et al., 2017). These studies have also found that some individual characteristics of law enforcement officers may affect their use of force decisions. These characteristics include officers with higher levels of education and more years of experience being less likely to rely on physical or even verbal force (Brandl & Stroshine, 2012; Lim & Lee, 2015; Paoline et al., 2012). The second category is situational factors. Researchers have found that officers who work in higher crime areas are more likely to use force (Mears et al., 2017), and officers who work overnight shifts tend to be more likely to employ force during the course of completing their assigned duties (Brandl & Stroshine, 2012).

The third category is organizational. This category suggests that a law enforcement officer's organizational size, rates or arrest, formal departmental policies, practices of supervisors, and numbers of minority officers within the department may all affect officer use of force (Mears et al., 2017). For example, agencies with higher educational standards as well as formalized policies restricting officer discretion have fewer lethal force incidents, while agencies without these requirements have higher complaint rates (Nowacki, 2015; Shjarback & White,

2016). The final category is ecological, which requires the examination of environments where use of force takes place. This body of research has found that law enforcement officers who work in disadvantaged or high violence neighborhoods are more likely to use increased levels of force, and the frequency of law enforcement use of force misconduct is greater in these areas, which usually have higher crime rates overall (Eitle et al., 2014; Klinger et al., 2016; Lee, 2016).

Though there has been much research completed regarding law enforcement officer use of force, there is still much to be done. There are some concerns about how use of force data is collected and analyzed (Hickman & Poore, 2016). The United States Department of Justice (DOJ) Bureau of Justice Statistics (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], n.d.) collects most use of force data (Hickman & Poore, 2016). Some research has found that the BJS data suffers from serious measurement flaws, lacks a valid and reliable basis for comparing and reporting data for research purposes, and lacks validity when used for litigation purposes (Hickman & Poore, 2016). There has also been research that points to a concern regarding the law enforcement culture and a code of silence when it comes to law enforcement officers reporting questionable and illegal conduct by other law enforcement officers (Donner et al., 2018). Still, additional research has found that law enforcement agencies that employ law enforcement officer body-worn camera systems have seen a reduction in use of force complaints and more positive citizen-law enforcement officer interactions (Braga et al., 2018).

For purposes of this research study, there was literature that indicated higher education coupled with more officer experience results in those officers being less likely to rely on verbal or physical force (Brandl & Stroshine, 2012; Lim & Lee, 2015; Paoline et al., 2012). Further, agencies that require higher levels of education for law enforcement officers and have policies that limit officer discretion tend to have fewer use of force complaints (Nowacki, 2015;

Shjarback & White, 2016). With this empirical evidence, law enforcement education should be a priority.

Law Enforcement Education

Thirty to 40 years ago, law enforcement education was a hotly debated topic, with controversial academic literature filled with critical questions by prominent scholars arguing about which direction law enforcement education should take (Bartkowiak-Théron, 2019). Through the years, these debates have seemingly gone quiet, with only recent interest in the topic of law enforcement education being addressed by some law enforcement jurisdictions across the world (Bartkowiak-Théron, 2019). Still, some question whether law enforcement today is receiving the training and education needed to adequately enforce laws, maintain order, and interact with their communities in a globalized, modern world (Sereni-Massinger et al., 2015). Educating law enforcement beyond a high school diploma in the United States has been a point of conversation in law enforcement circles since the professional police reform movement of the early 1900s (Paoline & Terrill, 2007). Many argue higher education requirements for law enforcement officers, especially in the social sciences, would lead to better cultural awareness for officers, the ability to apply appropriate professional discretion in operational situations, and increase the officer's ability to respond to the needs of the diverse communities served (Christopher, 2015). Though additional education would lead to a better mentally equipped professional law enforcement officer, law enforcement culture has slowed additional education requirements (Christopher, 2015). Some believe innovation in law enforcement has become stagnant as well (Darroch & Mazerolle, 2012).

To understand law enforcement education better, one must first understand how law enforcement officers acquire a law enforcement officer license. As previously mentioned, the

education requirements for law enforcement officers generally are a high school diploma or GED (Texas Constitution and Statutes, 2019). As a result of federalism, government functions, including law enforcement, are distributed across local, state, and federal authorities (Bartkowiak-Théron, 2019). Due to this fact, many local agencies are responsible for the training of law enforcement officers based on state requirements. In Texas, for example, if there are no additional educational requirements, law enforcement officers will not be required to seek additional education beyond the law enforcement training academy, and law enforcement officers in Texas are required to attend an additional 40 hours of continuing education during each two-year training cycle (Texas Constitution and Statutes, 2019), possibly making the law enforcement training academy the only postsecondary educational experience for the law enforcement officer. In the United States, law enforcement training and law enforcement education are almost entirely separated, with law enforcement occupational training taking place in law enforcement training academies and law enforcement higher education taking place in mainstream colleges and universities (Bartkowiak-Théron, 2019).

Recruiting, selecting, and training of law enforcement officers is expensive and time-consuming, with the goal being to screen out undesirable candidates (Annell & Sverke, 2015). The perceived quality of the law enforcement officer candidate pool has decreased over the last several years (Inwald & Thompson, 2020). With the decreased qualified applicant pool to recruit from, many of these recruits who become law enforcement officers leave the job within the first year of being on the street, citing increased danger and a lack of citizen respect for law enforcement as reasons for leaving their jobs (Inwald & Thompson, 2020). With the difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified law enforcement officers and the expense accompanying

these endeavors, the importance of effectively training potential law enforcement officers cannot be overstated.

Further, in the last century, law enforcement has moved from simply reacting to reported crimes to a more proactive crime prevention model and problem-solving while partnering with the communities they serve to achieve these new goals (Thompson & Payne, 2019). However, research from across the United States suggests law enforcement officers are becoming less motivated to serve as law enforcement officers believe their lives are in jeopardy each time they begin a shift and are less willing to work with their communities to solve problems (Nix & Wolfe, 2017; Nix et al., 2018; Pyrooz et al., 2016; Wolfe & Nix, 2016). This begs the question, is the law enforcement training academy addressing these issues?

Law enforcement training academies and agencies across the United States strive to provide law enforcement cadets with the foundational skills required to be successful as law enforcement officers (Lynch, 2018). Lynch (2018) argued that many of these instructional blocks are dedicated to survival curriculum, which focuses on hyperaggressive strategies that prepare the future law enforcement officer to go into battle with the communities they will soon be sworn to serve. Though law enforcement, in general, is seeing a rise in calls for service involving those with mental health issues and those with other disabilities, the focus of law enforcement training academies is not on teaching future officers to deal with these potential issues, but instead, focus on the use of firearms, less than lethal weapons, chemical weapons, blunt force weapons, defensive tactics, and arrest procedures (Reaves, 2016). Further, only a limited amount of instructional time is spent on the subjects of cultural understanding, fair and impartial law enforcement, procedural law, and de-escalation strategies (Martinot, 2014). These facts suggest

that law enforcement training academies have the potential to normalize violence as a means to resolving conflict with the citizens they serve (Lynch, 2018).

Law enforcement training prior to entering a particular law enforcement agency has changed over the years. During the political era of law enforcement, the 1840s through the early 1900s, future law enforcement officers learned their profession by watching other law enforcement officers instead of through formalized training (Chappell, 2008). It was not until 1907 when August Vollmer established a law enforcement school in Berkeley, California, and recommended law enforcement undergo formalized training in an academic setting prior to serving citizens in their communities. Vollmer wrote,

A school for police officers is a requirement for the times. Those authorized and empowered to enforce the laws, rules, and regulations which are intended for the better protection of the public should have some knowledge of the fundamental principles underlying human action, more especially those actions which are commonly designated as criminal or contrary. (Vollmer & Schneider, 1917, p. 878)

Over the next several decades, many other law enforcement organizations followed suit regarding law enforcement training (Lynch, 2018). But along the way, the idea of focusing on the use of force and officer safety became the prime focus of law enforcement training, meaning that many recruits exit the law enforcement training academy without developing the needed skills such as critical thinking, decision-making, and interpersonal communication (Bradford & Pynes, 1999; Conti, 2011; Doreian & Conti, 2017; Lynch, 2018).

Law enforcement is traditionally paramilitary in nature. Doreian and Conti (2017) found that many law enforcement training academies, especially those in large urban areas where the stress of the paramilitary structure of the academy can be greatest, found it necessary to add

military veterans into the academy classes to help the socialization process within the academies. Many law enforcement training academies seek out military veterans for academy classes by offering bonus points on entrance exams and other advantages for military service. These military veterans act as a seed within an academy cohort, becoming leaders and helping to advance the socialization process (Doreian & Conti, 2017). This socialization process allows for the cadets to shed their civilian identities and become what some refer to as ideal law enforcement officers while discouraging those who do not have what it takes from serving (Lynch, 2018). Lynch (2018) further argued that this culture within law enforcement training academies could lead to a false reality for cadets being that once they begin working the streets, they will likely be targeted for harm by those they are assigned to protect and serve.

Because of their academy training, many law enforcement officers see themselves as the thin blue line protecting society from chaos. Much of this thought can be attributed to the socialization process, which has been divided into four phases (Fekjaer & Petersson, 2019). Phase one of the socialization process takes place when the recruit is still in the application phase, and their perceptions of law enforcement are influenced by recruiting materials, friends or family who work in law enforcement, and representations of law enforcement in the media or in pop culture, and during this phase, conforming to those norms may influence whether an applicant is accepted into the academy (Fekjaer & Petersson, 2019). Phase two of the socialization period occurs when the recruit is working through the law enforcement training academy and the field training program after the academy and the norms and attitudes are demonstrated by academy instructors and field training officers (Fekjaer & Petersson, 2019). Phase three of the socialization process covers the recruits initial working years when the rookie is very susceptible to the norms displayed by fellow law enforcement officers (Fekjaer &

Petersson, 2019). The final phase of the socialization process covers the recruits' time working as an officer and beginning to develop their own sets of norms through their experiences (Fekjaer & Petersson, 2019). The concern that seems apparent is those agencies and law enforcement training academies with questionable norms. How can those agencies and academies influence the next generation of officers they are supposed to be preparing to serve their communities?

In Texas, law enforcement officers must complete a basic peace officer academy and pass the state licensing exam (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, n.d.). The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE) sets the curriculum for the basic peace officer certification course, which consists of the following blocks of instruction within the overall course.

- professionalism and ethics;
- professional policing;
- fitness, wellness, and stress management;
- Texas Commission on Law Enforcement rules;
- multiculturalism and human relations;
- racial profiling;
- United States and Texas constitutions;
- Texas penal code;
- Texas code of criminal procedure;
- arrest, search and seizure;
- asset forfeiture;
- identity crimes;
- consular notification;
- civil process;

- Texas health and safety code;
- Texas alcoholic beverage code;
- family violence offenses;
- missing and exploited children;
- child alert checklists;
- victims of crimes;
- human trafficking;
- Texas traffic code and crash investigations;
- intoxicated drivers;
- written communications;
- verbal communications;
- Spanish;
- de-escalation;
- force options;
- crisis intervention training;
- traumatic brain injury training;
- arrest control procedures;
- criminal investigations;
- juvenile offenders;
- professional police driving;
- patrol skills;
- radio communications;
- civilian interactions;

- interacting with deaf and hard of hearing;
- canine encounters;
- emergency medical assistance;
- firearms; and
- hazardous materials awareness.

De-escalation training, traumatic brain injury training, and crisis intervention training are relatively new to the TCOLE curriculum (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, n.d.). Even with the additions of these sections to the overall training curriculum, there is still debate as to the effectiveness of the law enforcement training academy to prepare the future law enforcement officer to deal with the many divergent situations they will encounter in the field (Dobrin et al., 2019). Inadequately trained law enforcement officers are a risk to themselves, other law enforcement officers, and the communities they serve (Dobrin et al., 2019), which can be seen in the many events mentioned witnessed in communities across our nation.

Even with the addition of new curriculum items such as de-escalation training, there is debate as to the effectiveness of the training provided and if de-escalation training is actually beneficial to the law enforcement officer working the street. President Obama's President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) called for new strategies to train law enforcement officers in de-escalation strategies. The report suggested that with the additional de-escalation training, law enforcement officers will be better prepared during citizen encounters and will be less likely to use force, including deadly force (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). There have been issues identified with these assertions, including the knowledge that there are very few studies that address de-escalation as a means to decrease use of force incidents, and there is limited research surrounding the effectiveness of law enforcement training academies

actually to train future law enforcement officers in general (Wolfe et al., 2020). Further, the idea of de-escalation training would need to be provided to all law enforcement officers currently serving across the country, and there is even less research regarding the effectiveness of law enforcement officer in-service training (Wolfe et al., 2020).

When the law enforcement officer cadet enters the law enforcement training academy, the training the cadet receives will be pivotal in developing the cadet's views on serving the public and the cadet's perceptions and trust in various diverse groups of people (Basham, 2014). Law enforcement academies across the country have only recently begun to add this training to curriculums (Miles-Johnson & Pickering, 2018). Unfortunately, this newly added training regarding diverse groups has been found to be inadequate (Miles-Johnson & Pickering, 2018). Many argue there needs to be additional preentry educational and training requirements as well as a more standardized preentry screening process to address the diversity issues observed with regard to law enforcement (Miles-Johnson & Pickering, 2018).

After a law enforcement cadet successfully completes the training academy and passes the state licensing exam, the cadet then enters the law enforcement field training program. These programs are not required or standardized in Texas and vary from agency to agency regarding length and organization. Many Texas agencies employ field training to familiarize the new officer with department policies and procedures. Larger agencies use the field training program as a final opportunity to assess the efficacy of the new law enforcement officer, and at times, some officers are terminated for not successfully completing the program (Getty et al., 2016).

Field training can be traced back to the 1960s in the United States when it was found that many officers did not have formal training or field training prior to beginning work as law enforcement officers (Getty et al., 2016). The field training officer, who undergoes additional

training to become a field training officer, is expected to impart a particular set of values on the new officer and to help the new officer begin to apply the information gained during the law enforcement training academy experience (Getty et al., 2016). Getty et al. (2016) found that badly trained field training officers and field training officers with high numbers of complaints tend to impart these same traits on the officers they train. All of this information seems to suggest that officers who are not trained properly can evolve into law enforcement officers who participate in undesirable activities.

One of the greatest hurdles facing law enforcement in the 21st century is maintaining order in society without sacrificing public confidence and trust (Rosenbaum & Lawrence, 2017). If positive changes are to occur in law enforcement, some argue this needs to be addressed during law enforcement training (Antrobus et al., 2019). It is fair to assert that stressful situations can lead to undesirable consequences. It is further fair to assert that law enforcement is a stressful profession. Most research completed regarding decision-making under stress has been completed in a laboratory setting, which cannot recreate the dynamic and stressful situations faced by law enforcement officers each day (Harris et al., 2017). Training in complex domains such as law enforcement should consist of multiple training methods that expose trainees to multiple variants allowing the trainee to experience stress in a safe environment allowing the trainee to transfer that experience to the street later during a real-life situation (Harris et al., 2017). However, law enforcement training in Texas still employs a lecture and test method of instruction with hands-on activities only experienced during firearms, defensive tactics, and motor vehicle pursuit training (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, n.d.), making one question if the trainee is receiving adequate training before entering the various field training programs.

There have been many who have asserted the need for additional education for law enforcement officers, but these calls have gone unanswered (Edwards, 2019). Only about one-third of law enforcement agencies across the United States require some college for entry-level law enforcement positions, 1% of law enforcement agencies across the United States require a four-year college degree for entry-level law enforcement positions, and from 2003 to 2013, these numbers actually decreased (Reaves, 2015). Many in law enforcement argue increased educational requirements will decrease the qualified applicant pool, and many current law enforcement officers and administrators do not believe education to be important (Edwards, 2019).

Over the years, the world has grown smaller through technology and globalization. Criminals have used this technology, and law enforcement has seen threats morph from individuals to large, complex international organizations operating on a global scale (Huber, 2019). With society changing, technology advancing, crimes and criminal laws becoming more complex, and increased community expectations, law enforcement has changed drastically over the last several decades (Ryan & Ollis, 2019). Yet, educational requirements for law enforcement officers in Texas have remained the same during the same time (Texas Constitution and Statutes, 2019).

Currently, many law enforcement managers argue there is not enough evidence to conclude that education improves law enforcement officer performance, which does not motivate law enforcement administrators to change educational requirements (Gardiner, 2015). But early research completed during the 1960s and 1970s indicated officers with more education were more flexible, less authoritarian, more open-minded, more accepting of ethnic minorities, had a more professional attitude, but were less satisfied with their jobs and more cynical as they were

more likely to be passed over for promotion (Gardiner, 2015). Gardiner (2015) did find law enforcement officers with some college education were better report writers, were better able to use technology, were less resistant to change, were more open to new policing methods, and were better problem solvers.

Another issue for higher education in law enforcement is relevance. Many law enforcement officers do not see the relevance of a criminal justice degree to law enforcement, as very few criminal justice courses focus on law enforcement and policing (Cordner, 2019). In 1916, Berkeley, California Police Chief August Vollmer began working with the University of California to develop a bachelor's degree program for Berkeley law enforcement officers (Oliver, 2016). This program consisted of subjects such as criminal law, rules of evidence, investigations, and other law enforcement-related topics (Oliver, 2016). Over the years, as law enforcement training academies have taken over the training of law enforcement officers, and as higher education has become less a priority, these law enforcement related subjects in higher education classes morphed into what we see today in criminal justice degrees moving away from police and law enforcement subjects into a more generalized criminal justice degree (Cordner, 2019). There is an argument to be made that if a law enforcement degree could be developed, law enforcement officers could be enticed to go back to school and continue their education (Cordner, 2019).

Though there is great debate as to the cause of the many incidents of use of force deaths, which have occurred in recent years, educating law enforcement officers is not discussed. Many blame racism in general, a law enforcement culture that is inherently racist, and the growing cultural differences in the United States. Higher education has been found to increase the critical thinking ability of students and has become a focus of higher education in the United States

(Huber & Kuncel, 2016). One must begin to question if additional educational requirements for law enforcement officers would lead to a better understanding of the cultural differences that now exist in the United States and would allow law enforcement officers the ability to make better decisions by employing the critical thinking skills acquired through additional education.

Critical Thinking

The law enforcement officer selection process is time-consuming, expensive, complex, and consists of many tests, including physical, psychological, reading, writing, and personality (Annell & Sverke, 2015). Though the hiring process is complex, the applicant's ability to think critically is not assessed. Though critical thinking has been identified as a needed skill for those who work in other high-stress environments such as healthcare and the military, there has been very little study completed regarding critical thinking in law enforcement, leaving a significant gap in the literature. Through this study, I hope to begin to address this gap in the literature with regard to critical thinking in law enforcement training.

For law enforcement purposes, Lyman (2018) defined critical thinking as,

The use of rational skills, worldviews, and values to get as close as possible to the truth.

It is judgment about what to believe or what to do in response to observations or

experiences. Critical thinking can also involve determining the meaning and significance of what is observed to determine whether there is adequate justification to accept whether a conclusion is true. (p. 14)

Apply this definition to the situations mentioned in Chapter 1. If law enforcement officers were better equipped to analyze situations through the use of critical thinking to use better judgment in response to their observations and experiences in particular high-stress situations and were better equipped to think critically to determine whether there was adequate justification

to accept whether a conclusion was true, would there be as many critical incidents? Todak and James (2018) further found that more experienced law enforcement officers were less likely to use force in citizen encounters. Through this study, I began to fill the gap in the literature whether the law enforcement officer is developing critical thinking skills through their experience on the street.

Though critical thinking is not a priority in law enforcement research, critical thinking has been studied in other high-stress professions. Since the events of September 11, 2001, critical thinking has become a vital skill for those charged with defending the United States (Dike et al., 2006). After 9/11, there was a push by senior United States military leaders to transform military education to incorporate curriculum in military education, which was geared to increase critical and innovative thinking, which would help the United States military maintain relevance in the changing world (Dike et al., 2006). In 2015, leaders within the United States Air Force further asserted the need for airmen who display the ability to think critically in complex situations and are educated, trained, appropriately empowered, and trusted to execute orders given (Stone, 2017). Stone (2017) found that the top 20% of United States Air Force field officers were below average critical thinkers, and recommendations were made to change the training methods of those officers. Miller and Tucker (2015) found that military leaders with high critical thinking abilities also demonstrated higher cross-cultural competencies when stationed in foreign countries.

Nursing is another high-stress field that has focused on critical thinking. Global changes in healthcare require nurses with critical thinking skills that can be accountable in complex clinical situations (Adib-Hajbaghery & Sharifi, 2017). Guidelines of nursing education in the United States have a strong emphasis on critical thinking, with critical thinking being an

essential outcome for the American Association of Colleges of Nursing since 2008 (as cited in Adib-Hajbaghery & Sharifi, 2017). The various instructional methods used in nursing schools have been researched as to the efficacy to improve the critical thinking skills of nursing students (Adib-Hajbaghery & Sharifi, 2017; Carter et al., 2016). Makhene (2019) found that the use of Socratic inquiry is a teaching and learning strategy that can be used to increase the critical thinking abilities of nursing students. Fertelli (2019) found that by using a peer assessment system where students were required to review and study material more in-depth to assess their peers, the critical thinking skills of students in the program increased overall. Other healthcare professionals, such as occupational therapists, are trained to make decisions based on clinical evidence acquired from the patient, and this process requires the therapist to think critically (Baarends & Van der Klink, 2017).

Disaster response and management professionals encounter situations that are fluid and can result in loss of life, requiring the disaster response and management professional to have effective critical thinking skills (Albanese & Paturas, 2018). The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) considers critical thinking incredibly important for disaster management professionals that FEMA offers several online courses in critical thinking (Albanese & Paturas, 2018). Peerbolte and Collins (2013) studied a group of local emergency managers in Virginia for a correlation between education levels, years in their occupation, and critical thinking skills. Their study revealed that those local emergency managers with higher education levels and more years' experience showed higher levels of critical thinking ability (Peerbolte & Collins, 2013).

Like law enforcement, these professions require making decisions in stressful situations, and the decisions made have the potential for life and death consequences. Yet, critical thinking

has received very limited study concerning law enforcement. Through this research study, I began to fill the gap in the literature regarding critical thinking in law enforcement training.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of the available literature regarding procedural justice, law enforcement legitimacy, the Ferguson effect, use of force, law enforcement education, and critical thinking. Tyler (2006) provided a framework by which procedural justice and law enforcement legitimacy has been viewed. Legitimacy is the foundation upon which law enforcement organizations and law enforcement officers are given their authority to enforce laws and use force to enforce those laws when necessary (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). When legitimacy suffers, a law enforcement officer's ability to use that authority is called into question. Researchers are continuing to add to the procedural justice and legitimacy literature because of the importance legitimacy plays in law enforcement.

The events in Ferguson, Missouri, coupled with other events identified in this chapter and Chapter 1, have led some to believe law enforcement may not be as aggressive in enforcing laws for fear of scrutiny from the public and the media. These events further damaged law enforcement legitimacy across the United States. Though more research regarding the Ferguson effect is required, an understanding of the Ferguson effect is important to law enforcement researchers moving forward due to the crisis created by the events in Ferguson, Missouri.

Law enforcement officers are at times required to use force to complete their duties and keep citizens and other law enforcement officers safe. Many in criminal justice circles have completed research regarding law enforcement use of force (Mears et al., 2017). What stands out in the literature concerning this study is the fact that law enforcement officers with additional education and additional experience are less likely to rely on verbal or physical force in the

course of completing their assigned duties (Brandl & Stroshine, 2012; Lim & Lee, 2015; Paoline et al., 2012). Further, agencies that require more education for entry-level officers and restrict officer discretion tend to have fewer lethal force incidents, while agencies lacking those policies tend to have higher complaint rates (Nowacki, 2015; Shjarback & White, 2016). With that said, there is still much to understand regarding use of force data and how that data is collected and analyzed (Hickman & Poore, 2016).

Though research has been completed concerning educational standards and use of force, the same cannot be said about law enforcement education in general. Many believe law enforcement officers today are not receiving the education they need to be successful in the current modern world encountered each day (Sereni-Massinger et al., 2015). In 1916, August Vollmer, then chief of police in Berkeley, California, developed a bachelor's degree program for his officers (Oliver, 2016). Though education and professionalism were thought of as important for law enforcement early on, today, only about 1% of law enforcement agencies in the United States require a four-year degree to be a law enforcement officer (Reaves, 2015). Further, law enforcement officers across the country do not place importance on higher education in general (Edwards, 2019), though many other professions view education as important. Critical thinking is a main goal of higher education to prepare students to be successful not only in their careers but also in life (Haghparast et al., 2014).

Though there are many steps in the law enforcement officer selection process, critical thinking ability is not included in those assessments (Annell & Sverke, 2015). Law enforcement is a dangerous and stressful profession (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.). Many other high-stress professions, such as healthcare, the military, and disaster management, believe critical thinking to be an important skill to handle those high-stress situations better (Albanese & Paturas, 2018;

Baarends & Van der Klink, 2017; Dike et al., 2006; Stone, 2017; Von Colln-Appling & Giuliano, 2016). The gap in the literature regarding critical thinking in law enforcement is immense. Through this study, I added to the research about critical thinking in law enforcement. Chapter 3 will outline the research methodology to be employed for this research study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This chapter's purpose was to discuss the methodology used in this qualitative research study and outline the reasoning behind the chosen methodology. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to document the experiences of law enforcement officers within a Permian Basin region of West Texas during their law enforcement training academies and to assess the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to develop critical thinking skills based on those officers' experiences. The results of this study provided essential information to propose substantive changes in how law enforcement officers are trained to develop better the critical thinking skills required to serve their jurisdictions. This chapter also provided information regarding how participants for this research study were chosen, how data was collected, the procedures that were followed in collecting data, how collected data for this study was analyzed, and a discussion of possible ethical concerns that were encountered during data collection.

Law enforcement is a stressful and dangerous profession (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.), requiring law enforcement officers to make decisions in high-stress situations. These decisions may result in a use of force incident, which may, in turn, result in death to the officer or a civilian. Critical thinking has been discussed as a necessary skill for military leaders who encounter high-stress situations while leading forces in combat (Dike et al., 2006; Stone, 2017). Disaster response professionals encounter situations that are fluid and can result in the loss of life, requiring disaster response professionals to think critically when those situations arise (Albanese & Paturas, 2018). Critical thinking has been identified as a necessary skill for occupational therapists who are trained to make decisions based on clinical evidence acquired from patients (Baarends & Van der Klink, 2017). The concept of critical thinking and nursing

education has been researched for many years (Von Colln-Appling & Giuliano, 2016), and critical thinking has been identified as a key skill needed for nursing practitioners (Carter et al., 2016).

Though much empirical research regarding critical thinking skills has been completed in the aforementioned high-stress, high-stakes occupations, there is limited empirical study regarding critical thinking and law enforcement. In the wake of the many high-profile law enforcement use of force deaths in recent years, it is important to understand a law enforcement officer's perception of how their law enforcement training academy experience prepared the officer to think critically in these high-stress situations. It is the perceptions of law enforcement officers that will provide insight into how law enforcement training academies equip those officers.

A qualitative methodology and phenomenological research design allowed me to log perceptions of law enforcement officers who experience what it is like to be a law enforcement officer making decisions in high-stress situations. I also captured how the officer relates their experience in the law enforcement training academy and the efficacy the law enforcement training academy exhibited in training the officer to think critically. Researchers who use a quantitative research methodology do not observe or interview participants, while a qualitative phenomenological research design allowed for fuller descriptions of the participants' experiences (Barrett & Twycross, 2018; Willis et al., 2016) and how the officer felt to be working in the world of law enforcement in the framework applying critical thinking to their daily duties.

Research Design and Methodology

Qualitative research methods are chosen by researchers who want to understand better how individuals experience the world around them (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Researchers using quantitative methods attempt to prove or disprove a developed hypothesis by measuring outcomes using numbers and variables (Terrell, 2016). Quantitative research is used when a researcher wants to explain or predict theories regarding a specific problem (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Qualitative research is employed when researchers want to gain information and knowledge about an experience (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). This research study's goal was to understand better law enforcement officer's experiences regarding their experiences in the law enforcement training academy and how their experiences in the academy affected their critical thinking skills. A qualitative research design was selected to achieve this goal.

A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for different individuals regarding a common lived experience of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There are many different approaches to phenomenology in qualitative research (Vagle, 2018). Phenomenology is mostly rooted in the work of German mathematician Edmund Husserl (Moustakas, 1994), with the primary purpose of phenomenology as a research methodology being to study what it is like as one finds oneself in relation to another (Vagle, 2018). Therefore, empirical researchers who employ this methodology gather information in the form of descriptions from participants regarding their common experiences and use this information to move scientific knowledge forward. There are several different approaches concerning qualitative phenomenological research, including transcendental phenomenology, ethnography, grounded research theory, hermeneutics, and heuristics (Moustakas, 1994).

Edmond Husserl is credited by many in qualitative research circles to be the father of the phenomenological research methodology, with many others adding their own interpretations and ideas to Husserl's initial designs (Vagle, 2018). Phenomenological researchers are typically more interested in how participants make decisions instead of focusing on the actual decisions made and further believe humans do not construct a phenomenological experience but find themselves in the experience (Vagle, 2018). With the focus of this research study being to understand the experiences of law enforcement officers regarding their law enforcement training experience, phenomenology was an appropriate and effective qualitative research methodology to employ for this research study.

Transcendental phenomenology is the specific form of phenomenological research methodology to be employed during this study. Transcendental phenomenology focuses on the truth of the participant's experiences based on the perceptions of the participant (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, this research study sought to understand better how law enforcement officers perceive critical thinking skills gained during their law enforcement training academy experience. Transcendental phenomenology was an appropriate research methodology as this research study explored the meaning law enforcement officers have attached to critical thinking within the day-to-day performance of their assigned duties within their communities. Further, with the controversy currently surrounding law enforcement in this country concerning the incidents described in Chapters 1 and 2, utilization of transcendental phenomenology allowed for new points of view of a highly debated phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Ethnography was not chosen as a methodology for this research study because the research questions developed for this study were concerned with the experiences reported by law enforcement officers as they perceive their experience. Ethnography is concerned with

observations of how individuals within a group and various social settings interact with each other (Moustakas, 1994). This methodology did not allow for the rich textual explanations of law enforcement officers' perceptions answering the questions posed in this research study.

Grounded research theory is an area of phenomenological research intended to develop a theory based on information and perceptions provided by participants in interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers who employ grounded research theory are not as interested in conveying the essence of the experience of individuals with a phenomenon but are more interested in developing a theory based on the information gained from the research (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2018). Since the purpose of this research study did not involve the development of a new theory but was focused on understanding the perceptions and experiences of law enforcement officers regarding critical thinking skills gained in the law enforcement training academy, the use of grounded research theory was not chosen as a methodology for this study.

The hermeneutic research methodology was not chosen for this research study as hermeneutics focuses on how historic events contribute to the meaning of a participant's current experiences (Moustakas, 1994). There is potential for research concerning how historic events such as the Rodney King incident coupled with more recent events have affected perceptions of law enforcement legitimacy, the potential critical thinking may have played in those events, and a law enforcement officers' lived experiences in the light of those events, but this was not the focus of this research study. Historic events were not pertinent within the framework of this research study, making this research methodology inappropriate.

Heuristic research explores the theoretical implications of a question of personal importance to a participant (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) referred to the heuristic process as being autobiographical in nature. The focus of this research study was to understand

better the experiences of law enforcement officers regarding a specific phenomenon and was not autobiographical in nature; therefore, the heuristic approach was not an appropriate methodology for this research study.

Population

Study participants for this research study were gathered from law enforcement agencies within a section of the Permian Basin region of West Texas. All law enforcement officers in this region were required to complete a law enforcement training academy and maintain training levels to keep their state license. Therefore, currently commissioned law enforcement officers serving at these agencies would have completed a law enforcement training academy within the Permian Basin region of West Texas. Participants must have had no prior relationship with me, served for a minimum of five years as an active law enforcement officer, and were currently assigned to the patrol division of their respective agency to meet the minimum requirements for participation in this study. I have served in various capacities in law enforcement within the region identified, and he did not wish to have influence over the law enforcement officer during interviews. Law enforcement officers who have served less than five years may not have the experience required to fully assess their law enforcement training academy experience nor have the experience required to reflect on their career and assess their ability to think critically. Law enforcement officers who served in the patrol division of their agency will have the most day-to-day interaction with the citizens they serve and will encounter situations more frequently, which will require the officer to make decisions quickly based on information at hand.

The chief executives of the various law enforcement agencies within the western section of the Permian Basin region of West Texas were contacted and informed of the study's purpose and research questions to be employed. Once chief executives of the law enforcement agencies

within the identified region granted permission for members of the agency to participate in the study, law enforcement officers who met the study requirements at the various agencies where permission has been granted were contacted by email requesting participation in the study.

Sample

Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative researchers select participants in a purposeful manner, not randomly, seeking participants who will help the researcher better understand a phenomenon because the participants have lived through the phenomenon or a very specific set of experiences (Creswell, 2014). Research samples for qualitative studies are usually smaller compared with other research methodologies (Leavy, 2017; Mason, 2010). The sample size for this research study was 15 participants as data saturation was achieved. The number of participants in a qualitative research study usually ranges from five to 25 participants, so the decision to cease interviews at 15 participants in this research study was a generally accepted practice (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013).

Though data saturation has not been well defined in empirical research, data saturation is said to have been achieved when a point of diminishing returns is reached (Mason, 2010), meaning no new information is discovered as the study progresses. Saturation can also be achieved when no new data is gathered from research participants, no new coding can be completed in the data analysis process, and there is enough data gathered, which would allow another researcher to replicate the qualitative study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Researchers should be aware of data saturation throughout the data gathering process and be aware that data saturation has more than likely been achieved when no new themes and no new pieces of information are observed during the data collection and data analysis process (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The data-gathering plan for this research study was 10–15 participants. Data collection ceased once data

saturation was achieved upon reaching the fifteenth participant and no new information was gained.

Researchers conducting qualitative research face two challenges. First, determining when data saturation has been reached, and second, documenting data saturation in a way that ensures the research study has collected valid and trustworthy information (Mason, 2010). Data saturation in qualitative studies is achieved as soon as one theme is expressed by a study participant, not necessarily on the number of times a theme is expressed (Mason, 2010). However, when a theme or concept is expressed over and over by different participants, this typically indicates to a researcher that a concept or theme should be considered important enough to be coded as a recurring research theme (Mason, 2010). This threshold was achieved at the fifteenth participant.

Participants for this research study were selected using a nonrandom convenience sample, which is most often used in qualitative studies (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Chain sampling is defined as a sampling strategy that allows for sequential- and emergence-driven sampling where one participant may suggest additional participants who may provide additional data (Leavy, 2017). Though chain sampling has been criticized as lacking structure, chain sampling allows for researchers to identify participants in populations that may be reluctant to participate (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Leavy, 2017). Law enforcement officers, in general, can be classified as a difficult-to-reach participant pool because of the nature of their work, which can develop into an “us versus them” mentality (Hudson, 2014). Though chain sampling was initially suggested as a potential method for soliciting participants, participants were solicited using email addresses obtained from agency chief executives.

Permission to interview law enforcement officers who qualify for the study was accomplished by using the various department email systems. A secondary plan to solicit participants was to visit the various agencies during a shift change when officers were still at the station about to leave for their assigned patrol duties. This secondary plan was abandoned due to the pandemic. Once participants were identified, each participant was reviewed to ensure each met the qualifications for this study, as previously explained. Research participants of all ethnicities were accepted. In an ideal situation, participants with varying experience levels were identified, but this was not a cause for disqualification. An attempt was made to represent men and women law enforcement officers equally, but women are still underrepresented in law enforcement (Kringen, 2014), so this goal was difficult to achieve. Confidentiality in the recruitment process was achieved by providing information for the potential participant to contact me without disclosing to any department personnel the participant's intention to participate in the research study. Participants were encouraged to contact me while off shift. An email was sent to request interested potential participants to contact me by email or cellular telephone.

Materials and Instruments

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to document the experiences of law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within the western section of a Permian Basin region of West Texas during their law enforcement training academies and to assess the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to teach critical thinking skills based on those officers' experiences. The research questions used to explore this phenomenon were as follows:

RQ1. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience during the law enforcement training academy with regard to the efficacy of the training academy to teach the law enforcement officer the materials required to pass the state licensing exam?

RQ2. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience with regard to critical thinking skills gained while attending the law enforcement training academy?

Interview questions for this research study included (see Appendix A):

1. In what ways did your law enforcement training academy prepare you to pass the TCOLE licensing examination? What are some things your law enforcement training academy could have done better to prepare you to pass the TCOLE licensing exam?

2. What primary teaching and learning strategies did your academy instructors use during your academy experience?

3. What strategies would you like to see used in law enforcement training academies in the future to help cadets learn more effectively?

4. What does law enforcement legitimacy mean to you? How would you describe law enforcement legitimacy currently? To what do you credit your answer?

5. Describe what it is like to make a use of force decision in a stressful situation while on a call for service or self-initiated call for service.

6. How do you define critical thinking?

7. From your perspective as a law enforcement officer, what effect does a law enforcement officer's ability or inability to think critically have on their ability to carry out their assigned duties?

8. In what ways did your law enforcement academy experience prepare you to think critically as a law enforcement officer? What improvements would you like to see made to improve the teaching of critical thinking skills in your academy?

9. Overall, how would you describe the critical thinking abilities of the officers you serve with each day?

Field testing of questions to be employed during interviews for a qualitative phenomenological study is an important step to establish the validity of the interview questions to be employed (Creswell, 2014). Research questions and interview questions for this research study were provided to a five-member panel of criminal justice and law enforcement educators serving a community college within a section of a Permian Basin region of West Texas. This panel was informed of the purpose of the research study and was asked for feedback regarding the efficacy of the interview questions to obtain the desired information regarding participant experiences as related to the research questions. Based on this feedback, research and interview questions were accepted and were used as listed.

The decision to use a transcendental phenomenological research design was made because this research methodology allowed these research questions to be explored based on the individual perceptions and how individual knowledge was developed within these experiences by the research participants allowing for rich descriptions of the individual experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews were recorded using the recording feature of the Zoom virtual meeting platform. Field notes were employed during each interview. Cope (2014) noted the importance of critical reflection to ensure the depictions of experiences described by participants are adequately conveyed. Field notes were used, and a reflection portion was included after each interview and kept in my research journal.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data for this research study was collected using semistructured interviews conducted over the Zoom online meeting platform. Semistructured interviews, which use open-ended questions, have been identified as one of the most common ways to collect data for a qualitative phenomenological research study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Semistructured interviews using open-ended questions have been identified as one of the most common ways to gather data regarding a particular experience or phenomenon (Henriques, 2014). Interviews often begin with the interviewer creating a comfortable environment. Interviewers should convey trustworthiness to the research participant to ensure confidentiality, the implementation of ethical data gathering processes, and the comfort of the research participant to gain as much raw data as possible from the interview (Henriques, 2014).

Interviews were conducted using the Zoom online meeting platform. Interviews were scheduled when potential research participants contacted me. Interviews were scheduled at the participant's convenience. To further protect participant confidentiality, numbers were assigned to research participants so that any interview schedule did not contain the name of any participant.

After obtaining consent from the research participant to move forward with the research study, demographic information was obtained using a general information form. Demographic information regarding gender, age, ethnicity, the highest level of education, and major or minor of higher education, if applicable, was gathered from each participant. This information may be used to assess if there is a correlation between the demographic information and the answers given by participants. To produce a comfortable environment, the interviewer set the scene for the participant and initiated the beginning of the interview process (Henriques, 2014).

In an attempt to make the interview process as comfortable as possible, participants were told about the research study goals and objectives and would be guaranteed confidentiality. Participants were told they could terminate their participation in the research study at any time. The interviews began by confirming the demographic information obtained from the participant form. This process allowed the interviewer to get to know the participant, begin to understand the cadence of the participant's speech, and allowed the participant the opportunity to feel at ease with the process (Henriques, 2014). After the initial phase of the interview, the interviewer began to guide the participant into a discussion regarding the participant's experiences concerning the interview questions. After asking the question, the interviewer remained quiet, allowing the participant to provide the most detailed and thoughtful answers possible about the participant's own experiences (Henriques, 2014). The interviewer only spoke during this process when a clarifying or follow-up question was needed. Interviews terminated with the interviewer asking the participant if there is any additional information they would like to add. Participants were informed the research study results would be shared with them once the study has been completed.

The main goal of analyzing data in a qualitative phenomenological research study is to identify recurring themes in the data acquired during participant interviews and to convey the participant's perspectives of the phenomenon in a clear, thick description (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Data was analyzed using the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis as developed by Moustakas (1994). This method required me to analyze the participant interviews by testing for an experience necessary to understand a phenomenon and determine whether the experience could be labeled to show it was repetitive or overlapping in descriptive

terms (Moustakas, 1994). This process should begin immediately after each interview when data was collected (Moustakas, 1994).

Full transcriptions of each interview were completed. Organization of the acquired data began when I first observed and began to study the materials using phenomenological analysis data methods and procedures (Moustakas, 1994). The first step in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis was listing and grouping every expression relevant to the participant's experience, referred to as horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). The horizontalization process was completed by first reading each transcript holistically, then line by line several times (Vagle, 2018). As I completed this process, I noticed patterns of meaning begin to develop consisting of common responses or differing opinions in the data, with each of these patterns of meaning assigned a preliminary title (Vagle, 2018).

The second step in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis consisted of the reduction and elimination of data to determine invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994). During this step, each previously identified pattern of meaning was analyzed based on two questions. I determined if the pattern of meaning contained a moment of the experience necessary and sufficient to understand the experience and if it were possible to label the pattern of meaning. If these two conditions were not met, then the pattern of meaning was eliminated. During this step, overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions were eliminated or presented in more descriptive terms. The remaining patterns of meaning were the invariant constituents of the experience.

The third step in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis required clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994). Related

invariant constituents were clustered into a thematic label. These clustered and labeled constituents became the core themes of the experience.

The fourth step in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis consisted of validation or final identification of invariant constituents and themes by application (Moustakas, 1994). This was accomplished by checking the invariant constituents and the accompanying theme against the complete record of the individual research participant and asking these questions:

- Is the invariant constituent and accompanying theme expressed explicitly in the transcription?
- Is the invariant constituent and accompanying theme compatible if not explicitly expressed?

If the invariant constituent and accompanying theme were not explicit or compatible, then these were deleted as each was not relevant to the experience.

The fifth step in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis consisted of constructing an individual textural description of the experience from the validated invariant constituents and accompanying themes for each participant (Moustakas, 1994). Using verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews, I began to build the textural description of the experience as expressed by the research participants. Step six in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis was like the fifth as I constructed individual structural descriptions of the participants' experiences based on the textural descriptions developed in step five (Moustakas, 1994). The final step of the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis required me to construct a textural-structural description of the meaning and essence of each individual research participant's experience using the invariant constituents and

themes (Moustakas, 1994). The gathered data was then applied to the research questions posed in the research study in an attempt to answer those questions.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness speaks to the quality of the research study, the rigor of the methodology, and whether the reader of the completed research study findings believes the researcher has completed the study in a trustworthy manner (Leavy, 2017). Trustworthiness regarding qualitative research usually refers to the concepts of credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity of the data found within a completed research study (Connelly, 2016). Further research has included authenticity as an extra layer of qualitative research. Authenticity can be demonstrated when a qualitative researcher adequately conveys the participant's experiences within the data analysis portion of a research study (Connelly, 2016).

Credibility has been identified as the ability to verify the data gathered during the research study by the researcher and when researchers use commonly accepted qualitative research methods (Cope, 2014). These methods may include familiarity with the phenomenon studied. This research study demonstrated credibility through the use of a credible researcher who has served in law enforcement in some capacity since 1998. I am further familiar with the various policies and procedures that govern how departments operate and the expectations placed on law enforcement officers as they complete their assigned duties.

Though I have a great deal of knowledge regarding the phenomenon studied in this research study, I employed bracketing to minimize my beliefs about the interviewee and interviewee's responses to research questions. Bracketing is described as the ability to bracket one's past knowledge about a particular phenomenon encountered in order to be fully present as one is encountering the phenomenon studied (Vagle, 2018). Bracketing is best achieved when

the researcher is aware of their own biases, knowledge of a topic, or particular beliefs about a topic. Once these possible issues are better understood and accepted by the researcher, the easier it becomes for the researcher to bracket these during the data gathering process (Vagle, 2018). Vagle (2018) further stressed the need for bracketing because if past interpretations affect the study of a current phenomenon, then the study will lose rigor.

Epoche was also be used in this research study. Epoche is intentionally setting aside any biases or assumptions that may be made about the data gathered during the data collection process because of any experience the researcher may have in the particular field (Moustakas, 1994). To attain epoche, I refrained from reviewing any work related to this research study and refrained from reading or viewing any media coverage of any law enforcement-related event at least one hour before each interview related to this research study. I intentionally set aside any biases or assumptions focused solely on listening to the research participants' responses to each interview question. I made an effort to identify opportunities to employ the same follow-up research questions for each participant's interview so that each interview was conducted in the most unbiased manner achievable (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche was achieved by setting aside 10–15 minutes prior to each interview or data analysis session to consciously remove any potential biases before beginning any activity.

Dependability has been defined as the ability for a particular research study to be duplicated under similar conditions and circumstances (Cope, 2014). This research study demonstrated trustworthiness in this area by discussing the qualitative phenomenological framework research design implemented as the best suited to answer the research questions posed by this study. This research study also contained a written discussion as to how data was

gathered, including transcriptions of all interviews conducted and how the data was collected from the interview transcriptions.

Transferability is demonstrated when the information discovered in a research study can be applied to individuals in a similar group (Cope, 2014). The participants' section of this research study details the qualifications for individual law enforcement officers who participated in this research study. Further, data collection methods were clearly described by discussing how interviews were conducted, recorded, and the confidentiality of the participants maintained. Authenticity has been defined as the ability of a researcher to convey adequately the feelings of a research participant with regard to the phenomenon experienced (Cope, 2014). Qualitative researchers can ensure the data collected is authentic by first selecting research participants who can speak honestly and provide rich textual descriptions about the phenomenon studied in the research study (Connelly, 2016). This research study identified law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience assigned to the patrol division of their particular agency as these participants best described their experiences regarding critical thinking skills gained during their law enforcement training academy experience and how those skills transfer to the situations encountered each day while serving their communities.

Researcher Role

During this qualitative phenomenological research study, I interviewed research participants, transcribed the interviews, analyzed the data, and compiled the data. I worked in law enforcement in a municipal police department in some capacity from 1998–2014. I also served as a criminal justice professor at a community college from 2014 to the present. During my time in these roles, I made numerous relationships and acquaintances with law enforcement in areas served. Because of this fact, I included a requirement for participants to have no prior

relationship with me to participate in this research study to avoid any conflict of interest, and as such, did not interview any participant with whom I had a prior law enforcement relationship.

Ethical Considerations

While planning and designing a qualitative research study, researchers should be aware of and consider ethical issues, which may arise at various stages of the research study and plan how these issues will be addressed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Saldaña and Omasta (2018) identified key issues where researchers should be aware of possible ethical concerns. These were identified as obtaining informed consent from research participants, confidentiality for research participants, and protecting research participants from harm during the research process.

A key legal step in the research process is to obtain informed consent from research participants (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). This study obtained informed consent through the use of an informed consent form to be filled out by participants prior to entering the study. Creswell (2014) identified key components of an informed consent form:

- identification of the researcher;
- identification of the sponsoring institution;
- identification of the purpose of the study;
- identification of the benefits of participating;
- identification of the level and type of participant involvement;
- identifying potential risks to the participant;
- informing the participant, they may withdraw from the study at any time;
- a guarantee of confidentiality; and
- providing the names of persons who may be contacted if questions arise.

I used a form to obtain informed consent from research participants prior to the participant's entry into the study, and Abilene Christian University's Institutional Review Board approved this form.

Confidentiality is another ethical concern for qualitative researchers (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Qualitative researchers should clearly inform research participants how the researcher plans to maintain confidentiality and anonymity for research participants (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Participants who qualified for this study were assigned a number. Names of research participants were not included in any interview schedules or documentation. Recordings of interviews, transcripts of interviews, field notes of interviews, and any other materials generated during the course of this research study were stored on my laptop computer, which is password-protected and accessible only by me. Voice recordings of interviews were transferred to the laptop computer and erased from the Zoom virtual meeting platform. Word documents completed on my personal laptop computer will be stored therein.

Protecting participants from harm is another ethical concern for qualitative researchers during the research process (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The data collected for this research study was collected using semistructured interviews. Law enforcement can be a stressful and hazardous profession (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.), and law enforcement officers, while reflecting on their experiences, may encounter emotional distress during interviews. It is important that research participants be informed of what to expect during the interview process to mitigate these possible issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is also important for researchers not to take on a counselor role during interviews as this may be seen as ethically compromising to the research study (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Research participants were furthered protected during the course of this research study as the participants were provided with a clear outline as

to what to expect during the interview. This allowed the participants to remove themselves from the study if they believed the study could be harmful to them in any way. Research participants were further informed there may be follow-up or clarifying questions employed for purposes of fully understanding responses, and they may end the interview at any time. No issues were encountered during participant interviews.

The American Psychological Association's (APA) ethics code indicates the research participants shall be notified at the conclusion of the research study (American Psychological Association, 2010). Research participants shall be informed as to the conclusion of the study and will be further informed of the study's results once the dissertation committee members have approved the final dissertation draft and the dissertation has been successfully defended. If any participant expresses concerns regarding their experience during the research study, which has resulted in anxiety or other distress, the participant will be referred to an appropriate organization, which may provide appropriate care for the participant if required.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

One assumption made for this research study is that law enforcement officers participating in this study will have the same general descriptions as to their experience regarding critical thinking skills gained during their law enforcement academy experience. The reason for this assumption is law enforcement training academies in Texas are still employing a lecture and test method of teaching. The tests employed, including the state licensing exam, are multiple-choice and do not require officers to think critically about the information tested. A second assumption that can be made is that law enforcement officers participating in this study will be able to describe the need for critical thinking skills in their day-to-day duties, though they may not use the words critical thinking. The final assumption made is that since the researcher

will be present during the interview process, bias must be minimized during the data gathering process. One limitation inherent to qualitative studies is the sample size. The sample size for this study was expected to be 10–15 law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience working in a western section of a Permian Basin region of West Texas. This was intentional as this study sought to understand the experiences of those officers relating to their law enforcement training academy.

The boundaries or delimitations for this study are limited to law enforcement officers in the western section of a Permian Basin region of West Texas. One cannot expect the experiences of law enforcement officers to be the same in other areas of the United States. Though this research study allows for a limited sample size, this sample size is acceptable for the selected research methodology.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological research study was to document the experiences of law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience in the western section of a Permian Basin region of West Texas during their law enforcement training academies and to assess the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to teach critical thinking skills based on those officers' experiences. Through this study and additional studies in the future, I hope to obtain data to publish to propose changes to the training requirements of law enforcement officers in that area. Through this study, I employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological research methodology attempting to understand the perceptual and emotional behaviors of the phenomenon experienced by research participants (Moustakas, 1994), using semistructured participant interviews.

I chose this methodology because researchers who use a quantitative research methodology attempt to predict and validate results from known variables and established guidelines without observing or interviewing research participants making use of quantitative methods for this study unsuitable (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). By using semistructured interviews, I was allowed to observe participants during the interview process and ask clarifying and follow-up questions resulting in richer textual data (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Collecting data using this methodology means the data comes directly from the research participants as they describe their feelings and experiences related to the studied phenomenon.

I believe with the current issues surrounding law enforcement use of force issues seen across the United States, as illustrated in Chapters 1 and 2 of this work, that this is important research to be completed. Texas is still employing a lecture and test method of teaching law enforcement academy recruits in law enforcement training academies across the state. This type of teaching allows students the opportunity to regurgitate information during multiple-choice exams but does not allow for the application of the information, which leads to higher levels of thought. Through this research study, I assessed how law enforcement officers with at least five years' experiences within a Permian Basin region of West Texas assess the efficacy with which their law enforcement training academy demonstrated when teaching critical thinking skills. Research participants further described their experience in law enforcement as related to their ability to think critically.

Chapter 4: Results

Chapter 4 provides a review of the methodology implemented for this research study and a summary of the results of the interviews conducted during this research study. The remainder of Chapter 4 provides a discussion of the examination and analysis of the data collected and the research study results. The review of the methodology will explain how the data collected for this research study was analyzed. The data review will reveal how the data was collected and how I became immersed in the data. The data review will also explain how I determined data saturation had been achieved during the data gathering process. Finally, this review of the methodology will identify how I analyzed data to reach thematic conclusions from participant experiences recorded during the interview process. Further, as described in Chapter 3, I will describe the processes implemented to practice epoche to avoid biases or preexisting thoughts or opinions while gathering and analyzing data for this research study. The results of the data analysis were achieved using the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis as outlined by Moustakas (1994) and in Chapter 3 of this research study. The mode of analysis will also be discussed in Chapter 4.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to investigate the experiences of law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas during their law enforcement training academies and to assess the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to teach critical thinking skills based on those officers' experiences. The research study was completed to answer the following two research questions.

RQ1. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience during the law enforcement

training academy with regard to the efficacy of the training academy to teach the law enforcement officer the materials required to pass the state licensing exam?

RQ2. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience with regard to critical thinking skills gained while attending the law enforcement training academy?

The chosen qualitative method of data collection and analysis for this research study was transcendental phenomenology. This study sought to understand the lived experiences of the law enforcement officers during their academy experience. Because transcendental phenomenology is used to explore the experiences of individuals and understand the meanings individuals assign to those experiences, transcendental phenomenology was the most effective method to collect data for the research questions posed in this research study. The modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis as described by Moustakas (1994) was used to analyze the data gathered during the semistructured interviews with participants, which were conducted over the Zoom virtual meeting platform. This method has seven steps, and these steps will be discussed within the framework of the gathered data. Specific examples gathered from the interviews with research participants were used to provide insight into the research questions for this qualitative study.

Sample

Participants for this research study were solicited from various law enforcement agencies within the Permian Basin region of West Texas. Chief executives of various law enforcement agencies within the Permian Basin region of West Texas were contacted by email requesting permission to seek participants from their agencies for this research study. Once permission was obtained, the various chief executives were asked to provide email addresses for officers

assigned to the patrol division of their agencies with at least five years' experience. The chief executives providing this information were instructed not to have contact with any of the potential participants, as participation in the study was voluntary. I sent a solicitation email (see Appendix B) to those officers as potential research participants informing the officers of the research study and requesting a return email or phone call if interested in participating in the research study. Officers who responded were provided information about the study, and I answered any questions posed by the potential participants. Those who agreed to participate and met the requirements of at least five years' experience and assigned to the patrol division of their agency were sent a consent form through the Hello Sign online digital signature application. Each participant digitally signed the form, and I was available to answer any questions. Participants were provided a copy of the consent form. A total of 15 law enforcement officers participated in this research study.

As part of their participation in the research study, participants provided general demographic information that may provide some insight into the research but did not impact the data analysis process of the recorded interviews. Additional questions as to the years of experience as a law enforcement officer, current assignment within their agency, educational level achieved by each participant, and the major and minor of each of the participants who attended college was obtained. The questions regarding years of experience and current assignment within their agency were used as a final verification to qualify for the research study. The years of law enforcement experience of the participants ranged from five to 47 years. Table 1 displays the demographic information obtained from each of the 15 participants.

Table 1*Participants' Demographic Information*

Characteristics	Variables	Participants	Findings
Gender	Male	12	80.0%
	Female	3	20.0%
Age	25–34	3	20.0%
	35–44	8	53.0%
	45–54	1	6.5%
	55–64	2	14.0%
	65–74	1	6.5%
Ethnicity (Race)	White	8	53.0%
	Hispanic	6	40.0%
	African American	1	7.0%
Education	High School	2	13.0%
	Some College	2	13.0%
	Associate's Degree	5	33.0%
	Bachelor's Degree	4	26.0%
	Master's Degree	2	13.0%

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in accordance with the description provided in Chapter 3. Data collection was completed using semistructured interviews through the Zoom virtual meeting platform. Interview questions were developed prior to beginning the recruiting process of research participants (see Appendix A). All potential research participants were provided a copy of the consent form through the Hello Sign online application for digital signatures. Once the potential research participant digitally signed the consent form through Hello Sign, the form was returned to me for my signature. Once I digitally signed the form, the potential participant was designated a research participant and assigned a participant identification number. I contacted the participant, and a time was agreed upon for the interview. I sent a meeting

invitation using the Zoom virtual meeting platform to the participant, which contained a link to the Zoom meeting.

To practice epoche, I set aside two locations to conduct participant interviews. Each location was private and secure, which allowed for no distractions. I would arrive at the location at least 15 minutes early to set up my laptop computer. After this was completed, I would have a few moments of quiet reflection to clear his mind of any preconceptions or prejudgments about the study in general or the upcoming interview. After this was accomplished, I would log in to the Zoom meeting to await the participant.

At the beginning of the semistructured interview, I would confirm the applicant's law enforcement experience in years and assignment to the patrol division of their agency. I would then collect the information for the participant demographic record form (see Appendix C). This allowed me to build rapport with the participant. After completing the participant demographic record form, I would ask the participant about their time in law enforcement and their experience. I would explain the purpose of the research study and express to the participant my concern and care for the participant's privacy. I would ask the participant if there were any questions. I would inform the participant how the interview would be conducted and that the interview would be recorded using the Zoom virtual meeting platform. The participant was reminded that the interview was confidential and participation in the research study was voluntary, and the participant could end the interview and withdraw from the research study at any time. Each research participant was assigned a number, the first being 10, the last being 150 in increments of 10 to maintain confidentiality.

All interviews were conducted using a semistructured interview format based on the interview questions provided in Appendix A. Some follow-up questions were asked during the

interview process. Interviews were recorded using the recording feature of the Zoom online meeting platform. After the conclusion of each interview, the participant was asked if there were any questions. Any questions were answered, and the participant was released. Digital files of the recorded interviews were transferred to my password-protected personal laptop computer. The interviews were transcribed to a Word document and again saved to my password-protected laptop computer. A backup of the transcriptions was saved to an external hard drive, which was secured in my personal safe in my home.

Data Analysis and Results

This section of Chapter 4 will review the data analysis process as outlined in Chapter 3. Epoche was practiced throughout the data collection and data analysis processes of this research study to reduce the influence of any preexisting beliefs or biases I may have had during these processes. Epoche was practiced by using the two previously described private and secure locations where the interviews were conducted for data analysis. Each time I began to analyze the data, I would take 10 to 15 minutes to clear my mind of any preconceptions or prejudgments about the study in general or the data he was about to analyze. After this period was completed and these thoughts removed, I would move forward.

It was determined data saturation was achieved after the fifteenth participant interview when several research participants expressed similar thoughts, perceptions, ideas, and concepts during the interview process. These will be explored further in the data analysis process. The data immersion and data analysis process began with the transcription of the 15 participant interviews. After the interviews were transcribed, the participant responses to the various interview questions were copied into an Excel spreadsheet. This allowed me to read and reread participant responses to the various interview questions together and begin to make notes within

the spreadsheet. The transcriptions were then copied into HyperRESEARCH®, a qualitative analysis program used to assist in the coding of qualitative data. This software does not use technology to code and extract themes automatically from qualitative data but simply assists the researcher in these functions and was helpful in determining the frequency and terminology of themes, which appeared throughout the data collected.

Horizontalization

The first step in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis is horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). This step requires the researcher to take each participant's transcript and list each expression from the transcript that is relevant to the participant's experience and begin to group these expressions together (Moustakas, 1994). Each expression is referred to as a horizon, and the process is referred to as horizontalization. In qualitative studies, each response given by a participant is important to the research study. To begin this process, I printed out each participant's transcripts and began highlighting words and phrases relevant to the participant's experience. I made notes in the margins of the transcripts and made additional notes at the end of each transcript. I completed this action for each participant's transcript. After completing this step, I made a second pass, adding to his notes for each transcript. During this process, I made additional handwritten memos in his research journal. These transcripts were revisited throughout the data analysis process.

To further enhance this process, I copied the participant's answers into a new Excel spreadsheet excluding interview questions. This resulted in 156 pages of raw data. I began to list the words and phrases relevant to the participants' experiences described in the interviews and began to group these words and phrases together using the Excel spreadsheet. The Excel

spreadsheet, the printed interview transcripts, recordings of the interviews, and my memos were reviewed numerous times to enhance the process of identifying emerging themes.

Data Reduction and Elimination

Data reduction is the process by which a researcher takes a large amount of qualitative data and reduces it to a more manageable size. Data reduction and elimination is the process of identifying common themes in the data, differing themes in the data, and which themes in the data may serve to answer the questions posed in the research study. I continually employed epoche during this process by again using one of two secure, private areas and setting aside 10 to 15 minutes to clear his mind of any preconceptions or prejudgments about the study in general or the data he was about to analyze. During this phase, I continued to refer to the printed copies of the transcripts of interviews, the recordings of the interviews, and the Excel spreadsheet. It is at this point the data began to be reduced.

Each expression or horizon made by a research participant regarding an experience has equal weight in phenomenological research. However, there were horizons repeated by research participants that indicated these horizons had a particular meaning concerning this research study. These horizons are identified as invariant constituents in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). A two-prong test identifies invariant constituents: does the horizon contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent to understanding the experience, and is it possible to abstract and label the horizon? If these are true, the horizon is an invariant constituent. Any horizons not meeting this two-prong test are eliminated. Any overlapping or repetitive expressions are eliminated. Vague horizons are eliminated if these cannot be expressed in more precise terms. The remaining horizons are the invariant constituents.

To complete this step, I began to identify some preliminary horizons using the participant responses and the notes on the Excel spreadsheet. Some of the preliminary horizons to begin the data reduction process were passing the TCOLE exam, academy requirements, cadets, hiring standards, scenarios, instructors, police powers, critical thinking, and use of force. Horizons were separated into one of these initial categories. To further reduce the data, I removed insignificant one-word phrases such as uh, yeah, I don't know, and repeated words. This reduced the data to 148 pages. These pages were read and reread several times to allow me to become familiar with the overarching tone of each participant interview.

Practicing epoche, I read through the original participant interview transcripts again, taking notes on potential themes, and a rough list of horizons was drafted. I read through the transcripts again, noting the number of times each participant discussed each horizon. A finalized list of horizons was identified from the rough draft of horizons completed in the Excel spreadsheet and using notes from the subsequent rereads of the transcripts. The final list of horizons was subjected to the two-prong test. Does the horizon contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent to understanding the experience? And is it possible to abstract and label the horizon? The remaining list of horizons was identified as invariant constituents of the participant experiences interviewed as participants in this research study. The list was reviewed a final time before being finalized. This list was then entered into the HyperRESEARCH© program. Using the software program, I was able to complete a frequency chart for the invariant constituents, which are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Invariant Constituents and Frequency of Expression Among Participants

Invariant constituents	Times reported	Participants
Academy Teaching and Learning	114	15
Critical Thinking and Law Enforcement	74	15
Problems with Academy	70	14
Passing TCOLE Exam	69	15
Scenarios	65	14
Cadet Learning	53	14
Decision-Making	46	12
Hand-on Learning	41	12
Feelings About Use of Force	40	12
Critical Thinking and the Academy	35	11
Use of Force Training	33	12
Critical Thinking Under Stress	32	13
Instructors	30	9
Critical Thinking and Experience	26	9
Academy Requirements	25	11
Use of Force and Department Policies	24	8
Cadets Not Prepared	20	5
Law Enforcement Powers	10	3
Hesitancy to Use Force	10	4
Education	9	3
Hiring Standards	7	2

Invariant constituents	Times reported	Participants
Use of Force and Experience	7	2
Freeze Up	6	3
Officer Safety	4	3

Clustering and Thematizing Invariant Constituents

The third step in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis is that of clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994). After reviewing the data, a total of 24 invariant constituents were identified. For this step in the data analysis process, the 24 invariant constituents identified in Table 2 were clustered into themes. A total of six themes were identified from the invariant constituents. These themes are:

- a. Academies focus on cadets passing the TCOLE licensing exam primarily through a lecture-based teaching modality.
- b. Officer attitudes toward use of force are varied but generally focus on department policies, experience, and training.
- c. Critical thinking is an important skill for law enforcement officers.
- d. Participant experiences differ on the critical thinking abilities of fellow officers, but critical thinking is required to be successful in law enforcement.
- e. Academies could do better in teaching critical thinking skills through the use of more hands-on and scenario-based teaching methods.
- f. Cadets are not prepared for the streets once academy is completed.

Table 3 will provide sample horizons for the eight themes identified with the various participant numbers listed.

Table 3*Themes of Law Enforcement Officer Experiences and Sample Horizons From Participants*

Theme	Sample horizons
<p>Theme 1: Academies Focus on Cadets Passing the TCOLE Licensing Exam Primarily Through a Lecture-Based Teaching Modality.</p>	<p>“Uh, that’s basically, they teach you to take the test, and they give you, we had, uh, if it wasn’t daily exams, we had at least weekly exams basically, to gauge our progress of what we have is absorbing through the instructors, uh, that, that the classes and stuff were all geared towards passing the TCOLE. Uh, they were, uh, the, uh information that we were, that we were taught, basically, were surrounded around the information that was provided to us from our instructors for how to pass the TCOLE test.” (#100*)</p> <p>“Pretty much taking notes, in certain parts of the PowerPoint were highlighted as, hey, this is what you need to really focus on, what we’re looking at is probably going to be on TCOLE. They, like I said, they had their program broken down to what, what they had highlighted in their PowerPoint for presentations is what we’re going to see on TCOLE.” (#110)</p> <p>“Yeah. They stood at a podium at the front of the class, lectured us, and had what they were lecturing about on a PowerPoint slide on, on the screen in front class.” (#90*)</p>
<p>Theme 2: Officer Attitudes Toward Use of Force Are Varied but Generally Focus on Department Policies, Experience, and Training.</p>	<p>“Part of my training is survival of edged weapons and study after study after study of the distance between a man wielding a knife to an officer handling, being able to, unholster his weapon and actually fire our first round is 21 ft.” (#100*)</p> <p>“The use of force decisions that I make now I know my policy. My policy, as far as my force continuum states my presence,</p>

Theme	Sample horizons
<p>Theme 3: Critical Thinking Is an Important Skill for Law Enforcement Officers.</p>	<p>that's going to be step one. Then I'm going to have my verbal. And then from there we actually go to our Taser and then hands-on. So that's how I look at it when I'm making a use of force decision because I'm going to look at it as if I'm within policy and if I'm protecting myself and if I'm doing the right thing." (#110*)</p> <p>"Well, if you can't think critically, then you're not going to be able to do your, uh, assigned duties, sometimes, just depends on what you're doing. But, in a stressful situation, you've got to be able to think critically quickly." (#10*)</p> <p>"I would say that's a, the ability of somebody to see a situation, analyze it, and, uh, apply their knowledge, their training, their experiences, uh, pretty quickly to, to, what they're seeing, what they're observing, to what the problem that they've got going on. Obviously, a skill the police to use every day, and we have to do it very quickly within seconds." (#80*)</p> <p>"It is very, I think it, it's important. It's very important because without that, you wouldn't be able to make split-second decisions if you need to." (#40*)</p>
<p>Theme 4: Participant Experiences Differ on the Critical Thinking Abilities of Fellow Officers, but Critical Thinking Is Required to Be Successful in Law Enforcement.</p>	<p>"I would say if, if you don't have solid, critical thinking skills as a police officer, you're probably not going to stay in law enforcement long. Um, either by your own decision or, or through human resources." (#30*)</p> <p>"The vast majority were pretty good. There's a few though that they have problems with it." (#10*)</p> <p>"I would say that they're there for the most part, they're, they're, they're pretty good. I mean, there's, there's, there's a few</p>

Theme	Sample horizons
<p>Theme 5: Academies Could Do Better in Teaching Critical Thinking Skills Through the Use of More Hands-On and Scenario-Based Teaching Methods.</p>	<p>officers that sometimes I wonder how they made it through field training.” (#90*)</p> <p>“Everything was lecture-based on PowerPoint.” (#20*)</p> <p>“I think, what would have really helped, maybe a little bit more of a hands-on application, uh, instead of just reading it day after day after day through the criminal, you know, the CCP [Code of Criminal Procedure], the, you know, the government code and the penal code stuff. Basically, more of, ah, life experience of, this is going to apply if this happens, more of maybe a scenario type teaching where, actually, you know, I was in this situation, and this is what we had to do. But if the roles reversed, or if I changed this or this, would that have changed the outcome of the whole investigation?” (#100*)</p> <p>“To me, I feel like if we do need to make it more scenario-based on critical thinking and actually put guys in more stressful situations.” (#110*)</p>
<p>Theme 6: Cadets Are Not Prepared for the Streets Once Academy Is Completed.</p>	<p>“They don’t know what to say. They don’t know what to do. They stumble a lot in what they’re doing with words with how to talk to people or even being physical. Like when do I, you know. When do I take it there? When do I need it up the ante? Um, and a lot of it’s out of fear.” (#120*)</p> <p>“Ah, a lot of freezing. I saw that whenever I hit the streets, Um, some of the, some of the guys and girls that were the best academically during our academy, whenever situations actually happened, it wasn’t on a piece of paper. Um, you could see they had a pail look on their face. They went blank. They didn’t have the ability, ability to process what was given to them</p>

Theme	Sample horizons
	and then react to it. It was more of a, just frozen. And then someone else had to step in. Um, definitely being officer safety issue, definitely being something that gets you hurt or killed.” (#20*).

* To maintain confidentiality, participant names were not used.

The following section discusses the six themes identified in Table 3. Tables 4 through 9 will identify the number of times each horizon was expressed and by the number of participants who expressed the experience. Themes will be further explained by including more participant horizons relative to their experiences expressed in each of the themes.

Theme 1: Academies Focus on Cadets Passing the TCOLE Licensing Exam Primarily Through a Lecture-Based Teaching Modality. All participants in this research study expressed their experience with their academy and passing the TCOLE licensing examination. Though one participant attended the academy prior to the state of Texas licensing peace officers, this participant still expressed an experience with regard to passing the TCOLE licensing examination. Participant 100 expressed their experience stating, “When I started? Uh, that’s basically they teach you to take the test.” Participant 20 stated, “I would, the academy definitely set us up for success on that TCOLE, TCOLE test.” Participant 110 expressed the academy’s ability to prepare them for the TCOLE licensing examination by stating:

Uh, they did a really good job preparing us. They, you know, they, they had that test, you know, pretty well down to what we needed to know and things like that. I believe I was able to score an 88. I was able to knock out that TCOLE test in probably 45 minutes.

They were, they really had it down to what they knew what was, what was going to be on

that test. What they needed to go over high points. Things like that. Uh, you know, their, their final really wasn't too far off of what I ended up seeing on the TCOLE.

Participant 110 further explained:

Pretty much taking notes high in certain parts of the PowerPoint were highlighted as, hey, this is what you need to really focus on, what we're looking at is probably going to be on TCOLE. They, like I said, they had their program broken down to what, what they had highlighted in their PowerPoint for presentations is what we're going to see on TCOLE.

All of the participants in this research study discussed the teaching modalities used while attending the academy, which focused on lecture and testing. Participant 10 expressed their experience, stating, "I would, the academy definitely set us up for success on that TCOLE, TCOLE test." Participant 150 stated, "90% of it was death by PowerPoint. It was and, you know, and like I said, a lot of stories."

Nine of the 15 participants mentioned their instructors regarding their academy experience and preparing for the TCOLE licensing examination. Participant 100 stated, "We had at least weekly exams basically, to gauge our progress of what we have is absorbing through the instructors, uh, that, that the classes and stuff were all geared toward passing the TCOLE."

Participant 60 expressed their experience, stating:

You know, and most of the instructors just went through the PowerPoint, you know, just that the PowerPoint, that was mainly it, you know, except a few of them, you know, who actually, you know for sure think outside the box and implement different things.

Eleven of the 15 participants addressed academy requirements about their academy experience and passing the TCOLE licensing examination. Participant 130 expressed their experience, stating:

And, uh, a lot of the things that we did were directed toward the exam, like we had to maintain an above 90 average. He knew that if you were below a 90 average that you're going to struggle on the exam, and so he pushed for that excellence of maintaining 90 above average throughout the course of the academy and constantly filling in things.

Participant 20 shared their experience, stating:

Um, we were, we were required to make at least an 85 on every single test that we had.

Um, it was, they were very, very specific on the academic part of our academy. They told us if we could pass their tests, if we could pass everything that they were giving to us, the TCOLE exam, it'll be a breeze.

Table 4 displays the invariant constituents related to Theme 1, the reporting frequency of the invariant constituents, and the number of participants reporting the invariant constituents.

Table 4

Theme 1: Academies Focus on Cadets Passing the TCOLE Licensing Exam

Invariant constituents	Times reported	Participants
Academy Teaching and Learning	114	15
Passing TCOLE Exam	69	15
Instructors	30	9
Academy Requirements	25	11

Theme 2: Officer Attitudes Toward Use of Force Are Varied but Generally Focus on Department Policies, Experience, and Training. All 15 participants in this research study discussed use of force regarding their day-to-day duties. Twelve of the 15 participants discussed their feelings regarding use of force in some manner. In referring to their feelings regarding use of force, participant 120 stated:

Intense. It's extremely intense. It's from 0 to 100 real quick. Um, I have had both on duty and off duty experiences with that as an officer. And among, depending on what department you work for, life or death situations, your safety, their safety, other people's safety.

Other participants referred to the use of force as "terrifying" and "stressful." Other participants shared how they feel they are under constant scrutiny in this modern world because everyone has a cell phone camera and record encounters between law enforcement and citizens, leading some officers hesitant to employ force. Participant 60 stated:

Especially nowadays, it is even harder because we, um, we have a lot of people, the community, you know, people outside with, with, with, with cell phones now.

Everybody's recording everything, so we have some officers really hesitant to actually take action just because they don't want to be on TV, they don't want to be scrutinized for doing their job, you know.

Some participants shared that they felt they could do everything correctly but still lost their job.

Participant 80 shared:

You know, shooting someone. You know, I do not want to do that. That is, that would be a terrible thing to have to, to deal with for my family to have to deal with. And then, of course, the recourse of, of what can happen afterward, you know, losing your job, losing your career. Um, you know, it could be catastrophic. Um, so, yeah, that's one of the most terrible things to be in a situation where you're, you're a gunpoint with somebody and you're squeezing that trigger and thinking what is going to happen to me? What is going to happen to my family? What is going to happen to this person? What's going to happen to their family? Uh, yeah, it, it's not a, not a fun situation, is probably the worst, worst thing we have to deal with in this job.

Of the 15 participants, eight mentioned or referred to the importance of knowing one's department policies when discussing the use of force. Referring to department policies regarding use of force, participant 150 stated:

I think that a lot of it is if you're trained well and you, and you do your training, and you keep up with your force policies and you read them and you know what's going on, mentally you're already there, and it's kind of second nature, and I think that's what it should be.

Of the 15 participants in this research study, only two discussed experience regarding use of force. The two participants discussing experience were two officers who have served their entire

careers at large departments. When discussing experience and use of force, participant 50 related how, through their experience, they had to speak to people to deescalate situations, stating:

You start talking to them. If that doesn't work, then you transition to something else. But you don't just show up and initially, like, start a fight for lack of a better term, with a person. Like, you try to reason with them. Try to understand what's going on with them. But if, if, if talking doesn't work, then you need to be prepared to use physical force.

Eleven of the 15 participants referred to training when discussing use of force. Many referred to academy training but also pointed to the need for continued training to be proficient in use of force. Referring to their training, participant 100 stated:

As far as use of force. Ah, you know what they teach you in school, you take, you take the threat level one higher than the one that is being demonstrated to basically neutralize that threat. Whatever the case may be, whether it be verbal judo, hands-on, and in some cases, actually going to your weapon as the last defense.

Participant 60, who teaches in the academy from time to time, discussed the need to train continually, but even with continued training, use of force decisions are difficult. Participant 60 stated:

But if you train properly and you practice or train, train, train, you know it's much easier to be able to, um, to take action. You know, you will be much easier, but it's not easy though, it's still hard because, you know, it's so much going on that you have to make, you know, life-changing decision and scale of a sec [sic].

All of the research study participants discussed use of force concerning their daily duties. Most of the participants focused their discussions regarding use of force on their feelings, department policies, experience, and training. Table 5 displays the six invariant constituents,

which relate to Theme 2, the reporting frequency of each invariant constituent, and the number of participants reporting each invariant constituent.

Table 5

Theme 2: Use of Force

Invariant constituents	Times reported	Participants
Feelings About Use of Force	40	12
Use of Force Training	33	11
Use of Force and Department Policies	24	8
Hesitancy to Use Force	10	4
Law Enforcement Powers	10	3
Use of Force and Experience	7	2

Theme 3: Critical Thinking Is an Important Skill for Law Enforcement Officers.

When discussing critical thinking, 13 of the 15 participants discussed the need for officers to have good critical thinking skills when involved in incidents that were “happening fast” or incidents that were stressful in nature. When reviewing the transcripts, I found many of the participants related the need for critical thinking to incidents that were unfolding rapidly.

Participant 10 stated, “The ability to be able to, uh, act and understand things at a certain point in time when something is going down fast.” Participant 20 echoed this sentiment by stating, “Critical thinking is being able to, having the ability to get information and make a quick, rapid decision.” Participant 30 stated, “Situations that take some rapid critical thinking to get you from point A to point B to make your decision and make a solid decision.” Participant 60 stated, “Be

able to observe, you know, analyze and interpret what you have in front of you and be able to come up with a resolution right away.” Participant 80 stated:

I would say that’s a, the ability of somebody to see a situation, analyze it and, uh, apply their knowledge, their training, their experiences, uh, pretty quickly to, to, what they’re seeing, what they’re observing, to what the problem that they’ve got going on.

Obviously, a skill the police use every day, and we have to do it very quickly, within seconds.

Law enforcement is inherently stressful. Many of the participants described the need for law enforcement officers to be able to think critically under stress. Participant 10 stated, “But, in a stressful situation, you’ve got to be able to think critically quickly.” Participant 130 described critical thinking as stressful thinking, stating:

Um, basically stressful thinking. When, when placed under stress, how you process under stress and you get through it, or if you are, um, in a tight spot and you’re trying to figure out a way to make or resolve an issue that is placed in front of you.

Some participants indicated that officers who cannot think critically begin to struggle when placed under stress. Participant 140 stated:

Everything requires you to be able to think that way and to be able to know okay, I’m making this decision based off of this. Or maybe this isn’t a good decision because of this. If you can’t do that, then maybe you’ll get by for a while. But when you start getting into the high, high-stress instances, that’s where you’re going to start struggling.

Participants in this research study stated there is a need for officers to have good critical thinking skills in order to make sound decisions. Of the 15 participants in this research study, 12 expressed this to be their experience. Each day law enforcement officers are required to make

numerous decisions and exercise discretion as to when to arrest, write a citation, or give a warning. Officers may even decide how and when to patrol various areas of their assigned patrol district. Participant 100 stated:

I think that has to deal with the making good sound decisions, whether it be, whether it be making an arrest versus writing a citation versus, maybe it is a life or death situation that where you do have to use your weapon.

Participant 140 stated:

It affects everything because we have to make decisions with just about everything we do. We come out, we go here, are we going to patrol? Are we going to stop this vehicle? You know, what are we fixing to do next?

Participant 110 stated rather bluntly, "If you do not have those critical thinking skills, you are going to make poor decisions."

Officers are required to look at situations through many lenses, including local ordinances, state law, federal law, constitutional law, and procedural law. Participant 80 brought to light the many different thought processes an officer must go through to make a decision, stating:

We have to make those critical thinking decisions within seconds, whereas other, other careers, other jobs, you know other, other times you would use critical thinking, you have the comfort of time to apply, apply that, you know, as a law enforcement officer you have to rely on, you know, the region you're in, the community that you're working for, the training, your experience, how long you've been a cop, all these things, your use of force policy, your state law, your constitutional law, you have to apply all of that within seconds when you're making any decision.

Table 6 displays the invariant constituents related to Theme 3, the reporting frequency of the invariant constituents, and the number of participants reporting the invariant constituents.

Table 6

Theme 3: Critical Thinking Is an Important Skill for Law Enforcement Officers

Invariant constituents	Times reported	Participants
Critical Thinking Under Stress	32	13
Decision-Making	46	12

Theme 4: Participant Experiences Differ on Critical Thinking Abilities of Fellow Officers, but Critical Thinking Is Required to Be Successful in Law Enforcement.

Participants in this research study expressed critical thinking skills are gained through experience as a law enforcement officer. Of the 15 participants in this research study, nine stated the importance of experience in gaining critical thinking skills as a law enforcement officer. Some officers stated they worked with officers who had many years of experience, and that experience translated to good critical thinking skills. Participant 20 stated:

The ones that I do interact with, which is maybe three or four at most a day. Um, I would say that their critical thinking, their ability to critically think, whether it is an irate subject, or a high intense situation, is pretty darn good. But they've also been in law enforcement for 12, 14 years.

Participant 110 shared, "Most of our officers are going to be experienced officers. So that's what I think our critical thinking goes pretty well here."

Other participants spoke about how a good field training officer and that field training officer's experience could impart critical thinking skills to a new officer as they progress through

the various field training programs. Participant 100 expressed, “A lot of that is honestly sitting in the front seat of my field training officer, with my field training officers and then just going over the day-to-day activities on different calls and stuff.” Participant 150 shared:

If you have a good FTO that teaches you like they’re supposed to and they know the laws and they know how to explain them to the officers, or these new officers, you learn to think through things and come, you know, and do better.

Participants described the critical thinking skills of other law enforcement officers as either being good or lacking. Participant 10 stated, “The vast majority were pretty good. There’s a few though that they have problems with it.” Participant 30 stated:

I don’t think, for the most part, everybody I’m around, um, is fairly solid with their critical thinking skills. Um, I’ve had officers in the past that lacked those skills very much so. I guess that would be why they’re not here now.

Participant 60 stated, “I say that it’s average, you know, we, the department that [we] work for, we have some good officers and some who just do the minimum to get by.” Other participants, who described the critical thinking skills of other officers as being good, accredited their ability to their experience. Participant 110 stated, “We don’t have ah, young department. Most of our officers are going to be experienced officers. So that’s what I think our critical thinking goes pretty well here.” Participant 20 stated:

I would say that their critical thinking, their ability to critically think, whether it is an irate subject or ah, high intense situation, is pretty darn good. But they’ve also been in law enforcement for 12, 14 years.

Table 7 displays the invariant constituents related to Theme 4, the reporting frequency of the invariant constituents, and the number of participants reporting the invariant constituents.

Table 7

Theme 4: Participant Experiences Differ on the Critical Thinking Abilities of Fellow Officers

Invariant constituent	Times reported	Participants
Critical Thinking and Experience	26	9
Critical Thinking and Law Enforcement	74	15

Theme 5: Academies Could Do Better in Teaching Critical Thinking Skills Through the Use of More Hands-On and Scenario-Based Teaching Methods. All 15 participants in this research study addressed the need for academies to do better in teaching critical thinking skills to cadets. As expressed in Theme 6, academies seem to spend a great amount of time preparing cadets to pass the TCOLE licensing examination but do not impart critical thinking skills to cadets. Fourteen of the 15 participants expressed this experience. Participant 60 stated, “There was certain times, there were certain instructors that, actually, you know, force you to think, you know, to critically think and make decisions based on that. But not as much as I would like to see.” Participant 50 shared the experience stating, “I don’t really think it prepared me for that because it was more like, ingrained in my head that I had to maintain an 80% average and that I had a pass TCOLE.”

Fourteen of the 15 participants expressed the need for more scenario-based training in the academy to help with critical thinking skills. Participant 110 expressed this experience, stating, “I think what you need to look more and, in some academies, may have this. Mine didn’t. Uh, what you, I think what we do need more is probably more scenario-type training.” Participant 150 expressed the need for more scenario-based training in a more graphic sense, stating:

More, more scenario-based training. I think in all aspects of it because they have one day of family violence. I think they have patrol procedures is maybe two days, and I mean, those two things are where all of our officers getting killed, domestic violence and traffic stops.

Similar to scenario-based training, other participants expressed the need for more hands-on training. Twelve of the 15 participants expressed this need. Participant 100 expressed this need, stating:

I think what would have really helped, maybe a little bit more of a hands-on application, uh, instead of just reading it day after day after day through the criminal, you know, the CCP [Code of Criminal Procedure], the, you know, the government code and the penal code stuff.

Participant 60 shared this need by stating:

I believe more hands-on, hands-on type of training. You know what I mean? Like in academy, you're more focused on, uh, academic side of, of the things, you know. So, I think if we can actually mix up just a little bit more and allow, um, the recruits to do like, a ride along, you know what I mean? And then we see how, you know, things get handled on a patrol level instead of just books, books, books, books.

Eleven of the 15 participants shared their experience regarding critical thinking and the academy. When asked about their academy experience and critical thinking, participant 40 stated, "I think, I think it wasn't much, the academy because the academy pretty much focused on the laws getting you ready to pass the test and know what the laws are." Participant 150 shared the experience stating, "I don't really know that the academy did. I don't. Back then, it was just book[s]. It was book work and stories until you get out on the street."

Table 8 displays the invariant constituents related to Theme 5, the reporting frequency of the invariant constituents, and the number of participants reporting the invariant constituents.

Table 8

Theme 5: Academies Could Do Better in Teaching Critical Thinking Skills

Invariant constituents	Times reported	Participants
Problems With the Academy	70	14
Scenarios	64	14
Hands-on Learning	41	12
Critical Thinking and the Academy	35	11

Theme 6: Cadets Are Not Prepared for the Streets Once Academy Is Completed.

Participants expressed concern over the fact that many new officers just leaving the academy were not ready to begin working the streets in the various field training programs once the cadets completed the academy. Fourteen of the 15 participants addressed the issue of how cadets learn in the academy. Participant 140 stated, “A good chunk of it was giving information and then wanting to see how you took notes. Um, so they would actually make us, like practice note-taking and study habits there in the academy.” Participant 20 addressed the issue of cadets who did well in the academy but could not translate that academic knowledge to the application on the street by stating:

Some of the, some of the guys and girls that were the best academically during our academy, whenever situations actually happened, it wasn't on a piece of paper. Um, you could see they had a pale look on their face. They went blank. They didn't have the ability, ability to process what was given to them and then react to it.

Five of the 15 participants addressed the issue of cadets not being ready for the job once they completed the academy. Participant 120 stated:

They don't know what to say. They don't know what to do. They stumble a lot in what they're doing with words, with how to talk to people or even being physical. Like, when do I, you know, when do I take it there? When do I need to up the ante?

Participant 50 expressed cadets may not be ready because of their lack of life experience, stating:

A lot of them lack life experience. Um, or maybe they haven't been submitted to diversity even in, in, like, a high school setting. Maybe they haven't had the diversity of having other people from different backgrounds. So, whenever they come to the police department or they want to start a career as a law enforcement officer, it's like they don't, they can't relate to the citizens because either they've been sheltered all their lives or they're just oblivious to what's going on within their own community.

Three of the 15 participants mentioned a lack of education as a possible issue with some cadets. Participant 150 stated:

Um, that comes along with education, and I think that comes along with training. And I think that comes along with just the person themselves as to how you are mentally, if you're, if you're a fast thinker, if you're one of the ones that can put things together and that goes along with education and all those other things go into that.

Participant 60 shared their experience, stating:

But, you know, being able to have a high-level education helps you with critical thinking, and then what we're seeing sometimes it's like lack of critical thinking just because some people they just didn't pursue the high level of education as far as like a college degree or associate's degree, you know, and, uh, you see the difference sometimes, you'll see,

you'll see that effect on certain officers you know, don't have the ability to critical think just because they never had that level of education.

Two of the 15 participants mentioned hiring standards as a possible issue with the level of cadet preparedness after leaving the academy. Participant 60 stated:

I remember one of my lieutenants in academy, and he was talking about, he was, his deal was like in 10, 15 years from now, you know, all of the police academies we require for recruits to at least have a college degree in order to become a police officer.

Participant 150 stated:

They took our college standards away, and we've definitely noticed that the quality of the reports is not there ... Um, dropping the standards, you get what you get, and we're starting, a lot of departments are having to do that just to get the staffing up. So, I think they need to up the standards. But with the pay like it is and the work conditions that this is what we're getting.

Three of the 15 participants mentioned how new officers just leaving the academy sometimes "freeze" in certain situations. Participant 50 expressed this experience by stating:

A lot of the times I've seen newer officers that don't have the confidence in themselves. So, then, whenever they're in a high-stress situation, they freeze because they're not sure of what they can and cannot do. And I'm like, okay, once, once it's said and done and over with and we watch videos we're like, okay, so kind of Monday night quarterback it. But we're like, okay, what happened there? Like, like, where was your thought process going? And a lot of the times, they say, well, I don't know.

Three of the 15 participants addressed officer safety as an issue with cadets just leaving the academy. Participant 50 expressed this experience, stating, "I would rather fight through it by

myself than have them on my scene and have to worry about their safety, mine and then the perp.” Participant 20 shared the experience stating, “Someone else had to step in. Um, definitely being [an] officer safety issue, definitely being something that gets you hurt or killed, if you couldn’t critically, critically process the information.”

Table 9 displays the invariant constituents related to Theme 6, the reporting frequency of the invariant constituents, and the number of participants reporting the invariant constituents.

Table 9

Theme 6: Cadets Are Not Prepared for the Streets Once Academy Is Completed

Invariant constituents	Times reported	Participants
Cadet Learning	53	14
Cadets Not Prepared for the Job	20	5
Education	9	3
Hiring Standards	7	2
Freeze	6	3
Officer Safety	4	3

Final Identification of Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application

The next step in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis involves validating the themes and invariant constituents previously identified in this chapter. This step was completed by rereading the participant transcripts while checking the accompanying invariant constituent and theme by asking two questions:

- Is the invariant constituent and accompanying theme explicitly expressed in the transcript?

- If the invariant constituent and accompanying theme are not explicitly expressed, are these compatible?

If neither of the above is true, these are not relevant and should be completed.

Continuing the practice of epoche, I once again read and reread the participant transcripts while comparing the invariant constituents and accompanying themes listed in Tables 4 through 9. An analysis of the invariant constituents and accompanying themes against the complete individual participant transcript yielded no deletions. Therefore, the invariant constituents and accompanying themes were determined to be validated and relevant to the participant experiences.

Individual Textural Descriptions of Experiences

The next step in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis is the construction of individual textural descriptions of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of individual textural descriptions in phenomenological research is to provide rich descriptions of what the experiences were for each research participant. A textural description of experiences is created to portray the experiences of each participant within a research framework. Using HyperRESEARCH®, I constructed individual textural descriptions of participant experiences using participant interviews to provide clear examples of how the participant described the experiences discussed. The individual textural descriptions were integrated into the individual textural-structural descriptions of participant experiences provided later in this chapter.

Individual Structural Descriptions of Experiences

The next step in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis is the construction of individual structural descriptions of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Using the memo feature of HyperRESEARCH®, the individual structural descriptions of each research

participant were constructed using the individual textural descriptions of each research participant. The purpose of the individual structural description of experiences for each research participant is to convey how the participant connected feelings to the conditions of an experience. This is often accomplished through the researcher by invoking what Moustakas (1994) labels imaginative variation. For example, an individual structural description of a law enforcement officer who is training a new officer in the field training program may be proactive in training the new officer to think critically based on their academy experience. The individual structural descriptions were integrated into the individual textural-structural descriptions of experiences detailed later in this chapter.

Textural-Structural Descriptions of Critical Thinking in Law Enforcement Training Academies

The next step in the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis is the construction of individual participant textural-structural descriptions of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Individual textural-structural descriptions of experiences for each research participant were developed by combining the individual textural and individual structural descriptions described above and combining the themes developed from the invariant constituents. Themes developed from invariant constituents are as follows.

- a. Academies focus on cadets passing the TCOLE licensing exam primarily through a lecture-based teaching modality.
- b. Officer attitudes toward use of force are varied but generally focus on department policies, experience, and training.
- c. Critical thinking is an important skill for law enforcement officers.

- d. Participant experiences differ on the critical thinking abilities of fellow officers, but critical thinking is required to be successful in law enforcement.
- e. Academies could do better in teaching critical thinking skills through the use of more hands-on and scenario-based teaching methods.
- f. Cadets are not prepared for the streets once academy is completed.

Participant 10

Participant 10 (P10) in this research study attended the academy before the state of Texas began licensing peace officers; therefore, P10 did not have experience relating to the academy preparing P10 to take the TCOLE licensing exam. Participant 10 did experience teaching and learning in the academy. While attending the law enforcement training academy, P10 experienced a lecture and test teaching style primarily with some hands-on application, which included defensive tactics, how to work automobile crashes, and some scenarios. Participant 10 expressed their experience, stating:

We had, uh, physical fitness every day. We had how to handle situations and stuff. Not so much hand-to-hand combat so much, but how to handle just group things in which we practice on each other. Some, some hand-to-hand stuff in the light way and how to work accidents and stuff. Mock stuff set up, scenarios.

Regarding the law training enforcement academy, P10 seemed to have a positive experience. Participant 10 delivered facts regarding his experience and did not elaborate beyond what was asked.

Participant 10 shared his experience regarding training and policy in dealing with use of force as a law enforcement officer by stating:

Well, I mean, you don't use use of force unless that force has been used against you to begin with, that is usually what starts it. You always use whatever force is necessary to affect whatever you're doing, whether it's an arrest or stop or situation or whatever.

Participant 10 did not elaborate, nor did he share any personal feelings regarding use of force during their career.

Participant 10 was asked to define critical thinking. Participant 10 defined critical thinking, stating, "The ability to be able to, uh, act and understand things at a certain point in time when something is going down fast." Participant 10 expressed their opinion as to the importance of critical thinking as a skill for law enforcement officers and referred to critical thinking in situations that were stressful or dynamic in nature. Participant 10 shared their experience about critical thinking skills learned during their academy and referred to being placed in various scenarios and "...putting you on the spot, making you think fast and quick with it."

Participant 10 believed cadets in academies should be put under stress in scenarios and forced to figure things out in order to learn critical thinking skills. Participant 10 shared their experience with other officers regarding critical thinking skills as "The vast majority were pretty good. There's a few though that they have problems with it."

Regarding cadets not being prepared for the streets once their academy experience is completed, P10 expressed some new officers have difficulty applying the law:

I mean, I just think that they need to have, make sure that their ability to understand the law and apply it, how it is intended to be applied to different people. It seems like sometimes they come out with no idea how to apply the law. Sometimes you have to be flexible with it.

Participant 10 did not share feelings and was very closed off. Participant 10 had a very positive outlook regarding law enforcement and seemed to enjoy their work. Participant 10 believed critical thinking is needed in law enforcement, but it was difficult to ascertain if they believed academies are doing an adequate job based on the interview. Participant 10 did express their experience stating, “I have not had any input within academy for years now, so it’s kind of hard to think of what they’re at, how they’re doing it now.”

Participant 20

Participant 20 (P20) shared their experience regarding their law enforcement training academy preparing them for the TCOLE licensing examination. Participant 20 shared their experience stating, “The academy definitely set us up for success on that TCOLE, TCOLE test.” Participant 20 shared cadets in the academy P20 attended were required to maintain an 85% average throughout the academy or they would be expelled, and cadets were informed the reason for the requirement was to be better prepared to pass the TCOLE licensing examination. Participant 20 stated they were given several practice TCOLE tests, and by the time they took the TCOLE licensing examination, “our practice tests or our test we took during the academy were much more difficult.”

Participant 20 expressed his experience regarding the academy teaching and learning style as being lecture-based on a PowerPoint presentation. Cadets would sit through lectures and would take notes and receive handouts and would place this information into binders that were tabbed to be studied later. Cadets used flashcards and their class books along with their binders to study and prepare for their academy tests, practice TCOLE exams, and ultimately, the TCOLE licensing exam.

Participant 20 shared their experience about a need for more opportunities to apply information through hands-on learning opportunities to prepare cadets better for the TCOLE licensing exam, stating:

I'm a hands-on learner. I can read something over and over and over, but until I actually physically do it and I actually write it down myself, such as, like, I'm filing that charge for possession of controlled substance or whatever it is, that's the way it really sticks with me.

Participant 20 had an overall positive academy experience but believed the application piece was missing from their academy experience and that additional experience would have benefitted them in preparing for the TCOLE licensing exam and as a law enforcement officer.

Participant 20 shared their experience regarding use of force situations focusing on their feelings and training, stating:

For me, personally, I felt like it was, it was a second, second nature. Yeah. I mean, they taught us extensively how to use, in their, in their terminology, verbal judo, you know, you want to do everything you can to de-escalate the situation by your words.

Participant 20 shared their training and ability to go to hands-on in use of force situations was based on their experience in mixed martial arts, but their first goal was to avoid having to employ those skills. Participant 20 also discussed use of force regarding department policy discussing the force continuum, stating:

So, whenever we finally went to the application of when do you use hands-on? When do you go hands-on? When do you have to use force? I know we had a utility belt with our Taser and our pepper spray and batons and all that good stuff, but for me, it was more natural to physically go hands-on and detain the subject.

Participant 20 did not have difficulty discussing use of force. Participant 20 trains a great deal and is confident in their ability to de-escalate a situation, but if the need arises, is confident in their ability to go hands-on with a suspect.

Participant 20 was asked to define critical thinking and did so, responding, "Critical thinking is being able to, having the ability to get information and make a quick, rapid decision." Participant 20 expressed the importance of critical thinking as a skill for law enforcement in stressful or dynamic situations, stating:

Being able to process the information that's given to you even though it sometimes overwhelming and make a very on the spot, I want to say educated guess in a way that not only helps you, protects you, but also protects the individual you're dealing with.

Participant 20 expressed their experience regarding the critical thinking abilities of their fellow officers as being good but qualified this by stating that their fellow officers had many years of experience. Participant 20 further expressed their belief that critical thinking ability is gained through experience. Participant 20 stated many officers arrive at their first major crash and do not handle the situation properly the first time, but those who have the ability to learn from their experience learn and handle the situation better the next time, improving as an officer.

Unlike some participants, P20 expressed they did learn some critical thinking skills during their academy experience through the use of scenarios. During their academy experience, P20 would be forced to run or perform other physical tasks to get their heart rate elevated, then P20 would be subjected to a scenario where they would be forced to make decisions in the state of physical exertion. Participant 20 stated that to improve the critical thinking skills of cadets, they would like to see more scenarios in the academy in general and more training, stating,

“They say there’s never too much training. You can’t be over trained. You can’t be too good at what you do. And I mean, so of course, I believe even more, even just adding more to it.”

Participant 20 expressed their experience regarding cadets not being prepared for the streets once their academy experience is completed, stating those officers tended to “freeze” even though some of those officers were the best academically. Participant 20’s experience was one of witnessing officers who did not have the ability to process information and make decisions based on that information, resulting in situations placing officers and civilians in jeopardy.

Participant 30

Participant 30 (P30) shared their experience regarding their law enforcement training academy preparing them for the TCOLE licensing examination. Participant 30 stated they had attended an academy previously, which played a part in their preparation to take the TCOLE licensing examination but went on to share their experience in the academy, stating, “I think I scored mid-90s, um, first attempt. So, the academy really drove home the points that I needed for the test.” Participant 30 shared their experience regarding some issues with the academy.

Participant 30 believed the academy could have spent more time in areas such as civil process and the Code of Criminal Procedure and believed the academy did not provide them with enough information about those topics. However, overall, P30 did well on the TCOLE licensing exam.

Participant 30 shared their experience regarding the teaching and learning in their academy experience, stating, “Um, it was pretty much just lecture and review and tests. That was kind of one of those areas where other people may have struggled, um, at the time.” Participant 30 expressed their concerns with their academy focusing on a lecture and test-teaching methodology because P30 struggles to learn when they only have an opportunity to hear the material. Participant 30 shared:

I've got to be able to see it. And a lot of the information, uh, even present-day in the academy, is verbal instead of written. Uh, and I think that could be a disadvantage for some people. Definitely for me in some areas.

Participant 30 seemed genuinely concerned with the way academies go about teaching. Participant 30 shared some of his experience from his studies in college and expressed the need to examine the way academies present information to recruits. Participant 30's experience in the academy, though successful, did seem to be positive, but P30 had to work hard to earn that success essentially because of the teaching methodology.

Participant 30 shared their experience with use of force situations focused mainly on feelings, stating, "I would say that's the terrifying situation. Um, because you're, you're faced with, you know, potentially a life or death situation for somebody, either yourself or someone else." Participant 30 explained they had been involved in incidents in the past, and these incidents never go away. There is an element of second-guessing involved, and P30 has experienced second-guessing their actions on more than one occasion, thinking the situations turned out positively but had P30 done something a little bit differently, there may not have been a positive end. Participant 30 also expressed their belief that unless someone has been through a use of force incident, they cannot truly understand the experience.

Participant 30 defined critical thinking as "The ability for someone to see a problem and not have a particularly clear-cut solution to the problem and finding a way to make that, a solution work for that problem, um, in, in the moment." Participant 30 expressed their experience regarding the importance of critical thinking as a skill for law enforcement officers, stating, "I would say if, if you don't have solid, critical thinking skills as a police officer, you're probably not going to stay in law enforcement long." Participant 30 shared their experience that officers

who do not have the ability to think critically will encounter issues with an inability to solve problems and will have incidents escalate because of that inability. Participant 30 stated that they had observed officers who did not have good critical thinking skills complain because those officers had the appearance of not knowing what they are doing. Participant 30 also shared their experience regarding critical thinking and use of force by stating:

Um, for use of force-type situations that take some rapid critical thinking to get you from point A to point B to make your decision and make a solid decision, um, so if you don't have those skills, they're not solid in your background, it's going to end badly.

Participant 30 further stated, "If you have within a community a pattern of officers that lack critical thinking skills, you're going to have issues when it comes to use of force."

Participant 30 shared their experience regarding the critical thinking skills of the officers they serve with each day as being good. Participant 30 has experienced officers with poor critical thinking skills but shared those officers are no longer around. This exhibited the importance of critical thinking skills to be successful in law enforcement.

When asked how their law enforcement training academy helped prepare them to think critically, P30 stated:

I think it wasn't so much in the standard curriculum. Uh, but me and a couple of the other recruits did tons of situational shoots, don't shoot type scenario training, uh, on the video trainer that we had at the time.

Participant 30 shared their experience that cadets in their academy worked on their critical thinking skills on their own time during lunch breaks and on weekends when an instructor would open up the academy and allow them to use the shooting simulator. Participant 30 shared their experience regarding the extra time put in on their own, stating:

We would get to do some of that stuff, and that that really opened my eyes to, honestly, it probably created, a, a little compartment somewhere in my brain that more than likely saved one or more lives in my career. Uh, because I was able to see the full picture of what I was dealing with and not necessarily take lethal force action, uh, when it, it may very well have been justified, but it may not have been the right choice.

Along with scenarios, P30 believes academies can improve the critical thinking skills of cadets by decreasing class sizes and focusing on the individual cadet learning styles. Participant 30 expressed their frustration with this idea of the lack of time to do so and the lack of instructors in academies to complete the task. Participant 30 expressed frustration in their answers to this topic. The underlying tone in P30's answers regarding the academy's ability to impart critical thinking skills to recruits was one of frustration. Participant 30 shared their experience with cadets' preparedness for the streets once their academy experience was completed and the critical thinking skills of those new officers stating, "Um, but yeah, it's definitely, definitely an issue, especially with less experienced officers coming out of the academy in the last three years. Um, I would say."

Participant 40

Participant 40 (P40) was asked about their experience regarding their law enforcement training academy preparing them to pass the TCOLE licensing examination. Participant 40 expressed their academy prepared them by providing the cadets in their academy with the information needed to pass the TCOLE licensing exam. Participant 40 shared their academy provided them with a good mixture of both audio and visual material to prepare them for the TCOLE licensing examination. Participant 40's experience was an exception to that of most participants in this research study as P40's training consisted of morning lectures in the

classroom then afternoons of physical training and scenarios combined with hands-on training.

Participant 40 has over 20 years of experience. Participant 40 stated:

Uh, you know, you can't cover every scenario, you can't cover every situation that you're, thing that you're going to run across. But, you know, being able to go out there and experience what you're fixing to experience, I think helps out a lot. So, doing that situational, um, audio and visual deal, it's, it's great.

Participant 40 was asked about their experience with use of force. Participant 40 shared their experience focusing on their feelings and training, stating, "It's very stressful, and I can speak from experience having been involved in, in, uh, three, uh, actual live shootings. Um, it's very stressful." Participant 40 shared their belief that the body actually protects a person by shutting down certain functions allowing one to better focus on what is in front of them.

Participant 40 shared their experience as one of slow motion and silence, with the memories being very vivid. Participant 40 kept referring to the situations as stressful and credits training with keeping them alive.

Participant 40 defined critical thinking as "The process of your mind to throw everything at you at once, and you decipher and decide what you need to do." When asked about the importance of critical thinking as a skill for a law enforcement officer, P40 responded, "I think it, it's important. It's very important because, without that, you wouldn't be able to make split-second decisions if you need to."

Participant 40 shared their experience with the critical thinking abilities of other officers as being mixed. Some officers are good, and some need work. Participant 40 further shared some officers can handle the job and some cannot. Participant 40 shared their experience in how they deal with the day-to-day stress of being a law enforcement officer through humor.

Participant 40 was asked to share their experience regarding their law enforcement academy's ability to prepare them to think critically. Participant 40 stated their academy was focused on the laws and preparing cadets to pass the licensing exam. Participant 40 expressed their experience as one of gaining critical thinking through the experience of actually being a law enforcement officer. Participant 40 stated:

I think that was focused more on experience, you know, going out there on the actual calls. Whether it's a small decision to where you have to arrest somebody. I think I learned more from that than, you know, a personal experience than I did from the actual academy preparing me.

Participant 40 shared their belief that the academy cannot go over every potential situation, but there is a need for more scenario-based training in academies and to place cadets under stress. Participant 40 further added there was no training that could replace the experience of actually going out and doing the job of a law enforcement officer.

Participant 40 did not share any experiences regarding new officers and their preparedness for the streets after their academy experience.

Participant 50

Participant 50 (P50) was asked about their experience regarding their law enforcement training academy preparing them for the TCOLE licensing exam. Participant 50 shared their experience, stating the cadets were given multiple comprehensive tests and were required to maintain an 80% average during the academy. Participant 50's experience was the academy providing comprehensive testing with verbiage consistent with the verbiage cadets would see when taking the TCOLE licensing exam. Participant 50 shared their experience for the need of knowing one's learning style because their academy experience was one of lecture and test,

lecture with a PowerPoint and test, so if a cadet was more of a hands-on learner, they tended to struggle. Participant 50 was asked in what ways the academy could do better to prepare cadets for the TCOLE licensing exam, and their experience was, “I was just kind of going back to like, knowing the type of learner that each cadet is. It’s very important because what may work for one person may not work for the other.” Participant 50 also stated academies are more relaxed now and lack structure, stating:

I think it should have more of a structure because from what I’ve seen now, um, because I’m also an instructor for the academy now, it’s like the accountability for each student is not there. Um, so we always remind them, hey, this is your job, like being made to study. So, your job is to study to make sure that you know the material, not just to pass the TCOLE, but you’re going to be a police officer, you’re going to make decisions that change people’s lives, like it’s not just like going to college for a degree, like you’re actually starting off your career, and it’s a fluid type of environment. So, I don’t know if it has to do with, like, structure or the fact that they feel more relaxed.

Participant 50 expressed experience regarding use of force focusing on training and their need to “always be on high guard, regardless of the situation.” Participant 50 also practices a “what-if” scenario approach to calls for service. As they are en route to a call for service, P50 begins a series of what-if scenarios about the type of call they are going to in order to prepare their mind for what they may encounter. Participant 50’s focus is to get home safe, so their preparation about staying in shape and practicing defensive tactics is important, but they also have the experience to calm down an irate subject de-escalating a situation and therefore not having to employ force.

Participant 50 was asked to define critical thinking and did so, stating, “I define it as having a mental preparation, or, or a mental plan for high-risk situations like thinking on your toes, which that kind of stems from thinking and going through, like, what-if scenarios.”

Participant 50 explained that academies really do not provide cadets with scenarios to prepare the cadet for what they will face on the street, so when they encounter a situation they cannot handle, they freeze.

Participant 50 shared their experience and the importance of critical thinking as a skill for a law enforcement officer, stating:

I think it can either make or break the officer. Um, because if they don't have the ability to do that, then things can go south very quickly. Um, if they do have the ability to, then maybe they can resolve the issue with less use of force or more of a peaceful resolution at that point in time because they're actually taking everything into consideration before they make a decision.

Participant 50 described the critical thinking skills of fellow officers as mixed but expressed they would rather be in a volatile situation with a more experienced officer than with the newer officers coming out now.

Participant 50 was asked how their academy prepared them to think critically, to which they expressed their experience, stating:

Um, I don't really, so the academy, that the second academy that I went through, I don't really think it prepared me for that because it was more like, ingrained in my head that I had to maintain an 80% average and that I had a pass TCOLE. So, a lot of the times, we never really got scenario-based training. It was just here is the PowerPoint. Here's a lecture. This is what you need to know to pass the test, study this, and that was it.

Participant 50 expressed their experience regarding the need for more scenario-based training in academies to prepare cadets to think critically. Currently, the academy P50 attended has very limited scenario-based training.

Participant 50 expressed concern for cadets not being prepared for the street once their academy experience is completed. Participant 50 believed younger cadets have not been exposed to other cultures and are not prepared for the fact that people actually break the law. When cadets leave the academy and encounter these situations, they tend to freeze up, and another officer is required to step in. When this occurs, this places the new officer and other officers in danger. Participant 50 shared their experience with new officers coming out of the academy, stating again that in some situations, these officers tend to freeze up. Participant 50 shared when they review video in after-action meetings, and the newer officers are asked what happened, they usually do not know. Participant 50 went on to express their experience, stating, “So, I think that a lot of the times it could lead to excessive use of force, or it could lead to the officer getting hurt, depending on which way it goes.”

Participant 50 is quite passionate about the lack of training in academies currently. Participant 50 is experienced and teaches in the academy from time to time. Participant 50 referred to newer officers freezing up several times and expressed their lack of faith in many officers’ ability to think critically with whom they currently serve.

Participant 60

Participant 60 (P60) was asked about their academy experience with regard to preparing them to pass the TCOLE licensing exam. Participant 60 responded that passing the TCOLE was not difficult because their academy was more focused on them passing the TCOLE licensing exam than on the cadets becoming a police officer. Participant 60 also expressed their experience

in traveling to other academies and observing academies focus on passing the TCOLE licensing exam.

Participant 60 shared their experience regarding teaching and learning during their academy experience, stating, "It's pretty much PowerPoint presentation is up. You know, and most of the instructors just went through the PowerPoint, you know, just that PowerPoint, that was mainly it." Participant 60's experience was primarily a lecture based on a PowerPoint and testing. Participant 60 expressed their desire to see more hands-on learning in the academy to help cadets prepare for the TCOLE licensing exam but stated they did not have an issue passing the test.

Participant 60 expressed their experience with use of force focusing on feelings and the reasons some officers become hesitant to employ force, stating:

It's hard, it's hard, you know. It's hard. Especially nowadays, it is even harder because we, um, we have a lot of people, the community you know, people outside with, with, with, with cell phones now. Everybody's recording everything, so we have some officers really hesitant to actually take action just because they don't want to be on TV, they don't want to be scrutinized for doing their job, you know. But if you train properly and you practice or train, train, train, you know it's much easier to be able to, um, to take action.

Participant 60 shared their experience regarding an incident from a different state P60 was made aware of and explained the officer involved was so hesitant to use force, and the officer placed a great many people in harm's way.

Participant 60 was asked to define critical thinking, to which they responded, "You just got to be able to, um, be able to observe, you know, analyze and interpret what you have in front of you and be able to come up with a resolution right away." Participant 60 shared their belief

that critical thinking came with education and shared their experience that they were told many years ago that officers would be required to have a degree, but this has never happened. Unlike other participants, P60 did not express the importance of critical thinking as a skill for law enforcement officers.

Participant 60 was initially reluctant to express their experience regarding the critical thinking abilities of fellow officers but ultimately shared their experience as being some officers were good, and some were minimal. Participant 60 shared their academy experience did not provide much preparation to think critically as a law enforcement officer, but there were a few instructors who did force P60 to think during their academy experience. Unlike other participants, P60 did not assert the need for scenario-based or hands-on training styles to increase the critical thinking skills of cadets, but P60 did express in their experience a need for these activities to improve the preparedness for the TCOLE licensing examination.

Participant 70

Participant 70 (P70) shared their academy experience regarding preparing them to pass the TCOLE licensing exam. Participant 70 shared their experience as one of practice testing and online practice testing to prepare for the TCOLE licensing examination. Participant 70 expressed they were prepared for the TCOLE licensing exam by the end of their academy experience, and their academy teaching and learning experience was one of lecture and tests. Participant 70 shared cadets would take notes and study their notes for tests at the end of each block of instruction.

Participant 70 shared their experience with use of force situations, stating:

I think the first thing that comes into mind is training, and that's always because I've been in certain situations where I'm so stressed out and it's, it's not even, I don't even

think, question what I should do at this point, it's more of a, I know what to do at this point, and I know what I can do at this point.

Participant 70 went on to express:

But I see that a lot and, and I think it has to do with, and I go back to repetition again, the more you do it, the more, it's like it becomes a like, it's not even, I don't say the second nature. It's like, really quick. I already know what to do in this situation, and sometimes they change. But you know what? You can adapt to that situation by using the same training that you were used back, that I would use back in the, in my training academy.

Participant 70 shared their definition of critical thinking, stating:

I think to me it's those, those moments when you're in a stressful situation, is that's, what I would think in a stressful situation, or maybe a situation that you're out of the, your comfortable zone and you have to make a decision right away to think like, what can I do in this moment? What can I, how can I solve it in this moment?

Participant 70 expressed their experience regarding the importance of critical thinking as a skill for law enforcement officers by stating, "Because not every day is going to go as planned," and there are very few routine days in law enforcement. Participant 70 went on to share their experience as most shifts requiring critical thinking for the entire shift from when an officer leaves the driveway until they arrive home.

Participant 70 shared their experience with the critical thinking skills of fellow officers as being good. Participant 70 believes the critical thinking skills of law enforcement officers have gotten better over the last five years. Participant 70 attributes this change to the fact that law enforcement officers' critical thinking skills increase as they work the streets responding to calls each shift.

Unlike other participants, P70 shared their experience regarding their law enforcement academy experience as preparing them to think critically as a law enforcement officer, and this preparation was one of physical fitness and being in “tip-top shape” while at the same time being mentally prepared for each day during the academy. Participant 70 seemed to believe their academy experience enhanced their ability to think critically through the use of scenarios during defensive tactics and family violence training and further expressed each day during the academy required critical thinking to be successful. Participant 70 further expressed a need for additional scenario-based training “of a high caliber” to continue improving the critical thinking skills of cadets.

Participant 70 did not express an experience regarding the preparedness of cadets once completing their academy experience.

Participant 80

Participant 80 (P80) expressed their academy experience regarding preparing them to pass the TCOLE licensing exam. Participant 80 experienced two academies. Participant 80 shared their experience about the first academy, stating, “...was by far the best for preparing them specifically for the test. Um, they were really good about generating practice tests that had similar verbiage questions to the actual TCOLE test.” Participant 80 expressed their second academy experience better prepared them to apply the information learned during the academy. During the second academy experience, P80 experienced hands-on learning, which allowed P80 to witness various violations and actually apply what was learned during the academy to the various violations, enhancing their learning experience. Participant 80 was not required to take the TCOLE licensing exam again after the second academy and was therefore unable to share

their experience regarding the actual preparedness to the TCOLE licensing exam after the second academy experience.

Participant 80 shared their experience regarding teaching and learning during the academy experiences. During their first academy experience, P80 was exposed to a lecture and test format of teaching and learning with limited hands-on or scenario-based learning. During their second academy experience, P80 experienced a lecture-based approach coupled with much more hands-on and scenario-based learning. Participant 80 seemed to feel they gained more from their second academy experience and expressed their dislike of the first academy coordinator's focus on the TCOLE exam and maintaining an 85% average throughout the academy in an attempt to cause the "weak links" to fail out of the academy. Participant 80 expressed their belief that there was such an emphasis placed on grades that the learning environment suffered, and there was a potential to lose good candidates from the cadets within the academy at the time.

Participant 80 shared their experience with use of force, stating:

Um, you know, I don't want to, I don't want to use force on people. I don't want to have to hurt people, whether that's, you know, just using a control technique or, or combative technique or, you know, the ultimate, you know, shooting someone. You know, I do not want to do that. That is, that would be a terrible thing to have to, to deal with for my family to have to deal with.

Participant 80 shared their experience that some officers are hesitant to use force currently because of the current climate surrounding law enforcement. Participant 80 shared their belief that sometimes the media will misrepresent a particular incident to gain ratings even though the officer followed procedure and did nothing wrong.

Participant 80 defined critical thinking, stating:

I would say that's a, the ability of somebody to see a situation, analyze it and, uh, apply their knowledge, their training, their experiences, uh, pretty quickly to, to, what they're seeing, what they're observing, to what the problem that they've got going on.

Obviously, a skill the police to use every day, and we have to do it very quickly within seconds.

Participant 80 further shared their experience regarding the importance of critical thinking as a skill for law enforcement officers, indicating law enforcement officers are required to make decisions quickly by applying local, state, and federal laws while also taking into account case law. When on a call for service, a law enforcement officer must also be able to focus on the person in front of the law enforcement officer and all of the surroundings as well. Participant 80 shared their belief that other professions had the opportunity to take time to think things through while law enforcement officers had to make decisions quickly. Participant 80 shared, "I would say it's paramount to a police officer to have good critical thinking."

Participant 80 shared their experience regarding the critical thinking skills of officers they serve with as being good at their current agency. Participant 80 accredited this to the fact that their current agency trains several hours each month. Participant 80 has experienced poor critical thinking skills at other agencies and believes if agencies trained more, this could be improved.

Participant 80 shared their experience regarding their first academy to prepare them to think critically as a law enforcement officer, stating the first academy:

Definitely lacked in that, um, we didn't have a lot of training where we dealt with application. It was mostly books. Their main purpose with passing TCOLE. Um, you know, it was all about passing the test, so it really was worthless as far as getting out there into the real-world application.

Participant 80 shared their experience regarding the second academy experience, stating that the second academy:

Was a lot better because we had a lot of scenario-based training, um, tactical simulations, that kind of stuff. So, um, you know, and it was a different type of approaches, you know we had several weeks where we, we did a traffic stop approaches, and they did real-world scenarios.

Participant 80 shared they attended the Texas Department of Public Safety Academy in Austin, Texas, as their second academy. This academy is longer and has access to more resources than some other academies. Local academies are limited in hours they can add to the curriculum and the number of instructor resources available.

Participant 80 did not share an experience regarding cadets being prepared for the streets once their academy experience was completed.

Participant 90

Participant 90 (P90) shared their experience regarding their law enforcement training academy's ability to prepare them for the TCOLE licensing exam. Participant 90 expressed their experience as the academy prepared them well through the use of exit tests, which were very much like the TCOLE licensing exam. Participant 90 was required to pass each test with at least an 80% grade, and anything lower was counted as a failure, with three failures resulting in dismissal from the academy.

Participant 90 shared their academy experience regarding teaching and learning as lecture-based on PowerPoint and testing. Participant 90 stated they wished their academy would have had more practical exercises and hands-on learning, and these opportunities would have better prepared them for the TCOLE licensing exam and to be a police officer. Participant 90's

experience each day in class was difficult as sitting and listening to someone talk all day became tiresome and very boring.

Participant 90 shared their experience with use of force, stating:

So, um, using, like, you know, use of force, when, when it's necessary. It's, it's the only thing that you know you're thinking about is what you got to do in order to achieve compliance. So, when, when I've had to use force in the past, it's not because I want to hurt that person. I don't, I don't do it like that, it's because I want to achieve compliance, and I want to do it in the least, with the least amount of force possible.

Participant 90 shared their experience as one of adrenaline. Participant 90 shared after a use of force incident, a supervisor is called to the scene and speaks with the suspect, not about the crime, but only about the use of force, and the officer involved does not have any further contact with the suspect.

Participant 90 defined critical thinking, stating:

So critical thinking would be making those, uh, using, using your, your thought process in order to make, make decisions. Um, you know, especially important or drastic decisions that are, that are, um, you know, not like small minor decisions, big major decisions and stuff like that. And making them accurately.

Participant 90 expressed their experience regarding the importance for law enforcement officers to have good critical thinking skills because law enforcement officers are required to enforce laws and make decisions each day. Law enforcement officers also have the power to take away a person's freedom, and an officer must follow the law in those situations. Participant 90 shared their experience, stating:

You have to make sure that you are, are, when you take somebody's freedom away, that it is according to the law, because [the] last thing you need to do, is do something unconstitutional or do something that is, that is illegal, and you could get sued. The department can get sued. Um, and you can even possibly be prosecuted yourself, you know? So, it's, it's very important that they have those critical thinking skills so that they don't find themselves in that situation.

Participant 90 shared their experience regarding the critical thinking skills of other officers they serve with as being good, but some officers cause P90 concern.

Unlike many other participants, P90 expressed their experience as their academy prepared them to think critically by providing them with a decision-making model, which has been modified and is still taught today. Participant 90 employs the model with new officers they train. Participant 90 does believe there is a need for more scenario-based training in academies to prepare cadets better to think critically once these cadets become officers.

Participant 90 did not express an experience regarding cadets' preparedness for the streets once their academy experience was completed.

Participant 100

Participant 100 (P100) shared their experience regarding their law enforcement academy's ability to prepare them for the TCOLE licensing exam, stating:

Uh, that's basically, they teach you to take the test, and they give you, we had, uh, if it wasn't daily exams, we had at least weekly exams basically, to gauge our progress of what we have is absorbing through the instructors, uh, that, that the classes and stuff were all geared toward passing the TCOLE.

Participant 100 shared their belief there is a need for more hands-on application during the academy to prepare cadets better for the TCOLE licensing exam and shared their teaching and learning experience was one of lecture and test. Participant 100 needed to see more application of what was talked about during the class and expressed that frustration. Participant 100 stated they were told during their lectures what to highlight as they may “see that again.”

Participant 100 shared their experience with use of force, stating:

It’s something that you don’t think about. It’s something honestly, it’s, it’s one of those things that, uh, you know, it’s the fight or flight type mentality. What? Are you going to go stand and fight, are you, are you going to run? You going to take care of business? Look the other way? As far as use of force. Ah, you don’t know what they teach you in school, you take, you take the threat level one higher than the one that just being demonstrated to basically neutralize that threat.

Participant 100 further shared their experience regarding using verbal judo and the force continuum.

Initially, when asked about critical thinking, P100 seemed to relate critical thinking to analyzing why a criminal was committing a particular crime. But after further explanation, P100 settled on decision-making and critical thinking, expressing their experience with regard to thinking about a situation and whether to arrest a suspect or simply write a citation or in use of force situations. Participant 100 did not express an experience regarding critical thinking being an important skill for law enforcement officers.

Participant 100 shared their experience with the critical thinking skills of fellow law enforcement officers as being good. Participant 100 shared they got along well and had been working with the same officers and supervisors for quite some time. Participant 100 believed if

they take care of their fellow officers and look after the best interests of their agency, other officers and the agency would look after P100.

Participant 100 expressed their experience regarding critical thinking skills gained during their academy experience, stating:

Oh, man. Uh, to be honest with you, I didn't have a whole lot of that in the academy. A lot of that is honestly sitting in the front seat of my field training officer, with my field training officers, and then just going over the day-to-day activities on different calls and stuff.

Participant 100 went on to share their belief that academies should be better at improving cadets' communication skills. Participant 100 then expressed anger regarding the current climate and law enforcement, in particular the "defund the police" movement. Participant 100 expressed anger at politicians who do not understand what it is like to be a law enforcement officer and further expressed their belief law enforcement officers should be given the benefit of the doubt in critical incidents until internal investigations are completed. Participant 100 expressed their belief that if the situation continues, there will be fewer people who will want to be law enforcement officers and further stated, "The whole culture toward law enforcement has got to change."

Participant 100 did not express an experience regarding cadets' preparedness for the streets once their academy experience was completed.

Participant 110

Participant 110 (P110) shared their experience regarding their academy and preparing P110 for the TCOLE licensing exam, expressing, "Uh, they did a really good job preparing us.

They, you know, they, they had that test, you know, pretty well down to what we needed to know and things like that.” Participant 110 went on to express:

They were, they really had it down to what they knew what was, what was going to be on that test. What they needed to go over, high points. Things like that. Uh, you know, their, their final really wasn’t too far off of what I ended up seeing on the TCOLE.

Participant 110 could not think of anything from their academy experience that their academy instructors could have done better to prepare P110 for the TCOLE licensing exam.

Participant 110 shared their experience regarding teaching and learning during their academy experience as lecture-based on PowerPoint and tests. Participant 110 attended an accelerated academy attending 12 hours per day, five days per week, with some Saturdays. Participant 110 attended the lecture and took notes, then cadets would take an end-of-day quiz and multiple tests per week. Participant 110 stated that though they were prepared for the TCOLE licensing exam, they wished there had been more scenario-based training and further would like to see more crisis intervention and training dealing with mentally impaired individuals.

Participant 110 shared their experience with use of force focusing on department policy and training, stating:

I think it’s one of those that pretty much is going to get, it’s going to go back to your training, your training, your, excuse me, your training and what you know of your policy and that, that’s going to find how you can make these use of force decisions. The use of force decisions that I make now I know my policy.

Participant 110 explained their agency's policy regarding the use of force continuum. Participant 110 expressed their experience the use of force continuum and agency policy was meant to protect both the officer and the suspect.

Participant 110 expressed their experience regarding critical thinking, stating, "Critical thinking is going to be the thinking that you make under stress that, that's how I define it." Participant 110 described their experience with critical thinking as an important skill for law enforcement officers as falling back on one's training for law enforcement and how one has prepared for a career in law enforcement. Participant 110 expressed the need to know one's policies and procedures as well, and those fell into the critical thinking piece of decision-making. Participant 110 further expressed their experience with critical thinking skills and law enforcement, stating, "If you do not have those critical thinking skills, you are going to make poor decisions" and further stated there needs to be additional scenario-based training in academies to impart critical thinking skills to cadets.

Participant 110 expressed their experience regarding the critical thinking of other officers as being good. Participant 110 expressed their department is composed of experienced officers and believes that experience has allowed officers to develop the critical thinking skills needed. Participant 110 described working with their fellow officers as a "luxury."

Participant 110 shared their experience regarding critical thinking skills gained during their academy experience, stating, "That's where my academy did lack a little bit." Participant 110 explained their academy was set in a college, and P110 believes college-based academies have liability issues and therefore cannot do some of the things other academies can. Participant 110 believed cadets were forced to hold back for fear of injury during defensive tactics, and there was no training on pepper spray or Taser. Participant 110 again expressed their belief there needs

to be more scenario-based training placing cadets in stressful situations, forcing the cadets to use critical thinking skills and further explained academies should find ways to send cadets into the field with actual law enforcement officers to observe officers in the field.

Participant 110 did not share any experience regarding cadet preparedness after completion of their law enforcement academy experience.

Participant 120

Participant 120 (P120) shared their experience regarding their law enforcement academy and preparing P120 to pass the TCOLE licensing exam. Participant 120 stated the academy prepared them by providing cadets with notes and writings from previous students and by requiring cadets to maintain an 80% average. Cadets who fell below that average were removed from the academy. Participant 120 described their daily academy experience as a lecture in the morning and physical fitness or defensive tactics in the afternoons. Participant P 120 did not provide any information as to how instructors during their academy experience could have prepared better P120 for the TCOLE licensing exam but wished they would have been given more instruction on how to better communicate with people and how better to read and understand people and suspects. Participant 120 also expressed their experience as being rushed and wished their academy experience could have been longer.

Participant 120 described their experience with use of force focusing on department policies, stating:

Intense. It's extremely intense. It's from 0 to 100 real quick. Um, I have had both on duty and off duty experiences with that as an officer. And among, depending on what department you work for, life or death situations, your safety, their safety, other people's safety. A big one is, um, departmental policies that are running through your head.

Participant 120 expressed their experience seeing other officers who hesitate because they fear making a mistake and being written up or fired and are not focused on the threat or the issue that is right in front of the officer. Because of this fact, those officers tend to make bad or wrong decisions regardless.

Participant 120 defined critical thinking as “Thinking everything through in a short amount of time, making sure it’s correct.” Participant 120 did not believe critical thinking was an important skill for law enforcement officers but stated officers just need to use common sense to make decisions instead of focusing so much on department policies and being in fear of making a decision. Participant 120 expressed their experience regarding the critical thinking skills of the officers they serve with each day as many do not know how to communicate with people or how or when to employ force properly. Participant 120 expressed that many people cannot be officers, but those who can, can become good officers with training and experience.

Participant 120 was another participant whose academy experience prepared them to think critically as a law enforcement officer. Participant 120 expressed the experience as being exposed to scenarios and the “shoot house,” which is a live ammunition shooting range using scenarios. Participant 120 also differed from other participants in that P120 did not state the need for scenarios in the academy to improve critical thinking but instead stated their belief that critical thinking actually comes from experience, and there is only so much an academy can teach a cadet because the streets and working patrol is an officer’s real training.

Participant 120 expressed their opinion that cadets are not ready for the streets after their academy experience by simply stating, “They don’t know what the hell they are doing.” Participant 120 expressed frustration at the fact that field training programs are becoming shorter because there is a need to get more officers on the streets, and less experienced officers are now

becoming field training officers, which only compounds the problem. Participant 120 expressed that many departments have cut field training programs from 16 weeks down to four, and many field training officers only have six months of experience.

Participant 130

Participant 130 (P130) expressed their experience regarding their academy and preparing for the TCOLE licensing exam. Participant 130's experience involved practice tests, which allowed P130 to become familiar with how the TCOLE exam questions would be constructed. During P130's experience, P130 was required to maintain a 90% average and managed to do so even with a learning disability. Participant 130's experience regarding academy teaching and learning was lectures and tests coupled with some scenario or practical-based training. Participant 130 was also exposed to test-taking methods and strategies during their academy experience.

Participant 130 expressed their experience with use of force relating to their training and their agency use of force policy. Participant 130 described their experience, stating:

There are, there's been multiple fights that I've been involved in and where things happened in a split second, and there is no time for use of any type of verbiage. There's no verbal judo that could be used, uh, it's faster than [a] snap of a finger, and you have to react. Uh, you react upon the type of training that you receive.

Participant 130 expressed the training they have received since the academy has allowed them to "do the right thing" and "not to exceed use of force." Participant 130 also expressed the need to have command presence and not allow oneself to be overrun because of a lack of command presence, which is also in the force continuum.

Participant 130 defined critical thinking as:

When, when placed under stress, how you process under stress and you get through it, or if you are, um, in a tight spot and you're trying to figure out a way to make a resolve of an issue that is placed in front of you.

Participant 130 expressed their experience and the need for officers to have good critical thinking skills, stating:

I believe to be able to think critically weighs a lot. Um, you start seeing that in the academy and especially in the PPO [probationary police officer] program. As an FTO [field training officer], you look to see if they can think, uh, critically in situations and, uh, if, if they can't figure out why, why they're not processing.

Participant 130 expressed new officers who cannot think critically usually do not complete the field training program successfully. Participant 130 expressed their experience regarding the critical thinking skills of the officers they serve with each day as being good. Participant 130 stated they served with a squad of outstanding officers for a few years, and they grew to know how each other would react in certain situations.

Participant 130 was another participant who expressed they gained critical thinking skills during their academy experience through the use of practicals, which were described as scenario-based training. Participant 130 was placed under stress through physical exertion and then placed into a scenario. This experience imparted critical thinking skills to P130. Participant 130 does believe there is a need for more of this type of training to the point that P130 now volunteers at their law enforcement training academy to participate with cadets in scenario-based training.

Participant 130 further expressed their experience regarding cadets who were not prepared for the streets once they completed their academy experience. Participant 130 expressed

some new officers did not successfully complete the field training program because the officers did not have adequate critical thinking skills.

Participant 140

Participant 140 (P140) shared their experience regarding their academy and preparing to pass the TCOLE licensing exam as one of mock tests set up and timed to simulate the TCOLE exam experience. Participant 140's experience was one of being mentally prepared for the exam through the academy experience. Participant 140 could not make any suggestions as to how the academy instructors could better prepare cadets for the licensing exam because:

There's a lot of, there's a big mixture of trying to get like, get officers prepared to be on the streets mixed in with trying to pass that exam. I don't, it's just not a lot of time to cram all that in together.

Participant 140's academy experience and teaching and learning were lecture-based with very little hands-on or application-based teaching.

Participant 140 described their experience regarding use of force focusing on training and experience, stating:

Um, I would say it's different based off of your training and experience, so I know if it's something that's very new to you, and if you're not well trained in it, um, it's just very fast. Um, stress hits you, and you get tunnel vision very easily. And then that's your only focus at that point. And you know now the last use of force situation that I was in, I remember it happening, gaining control, and then I remember wondering what's around me.

Participant 140 expressed the more experience and training an officer has, the "mind works a lot better" in those situations.

Participant 140 defined critical thinking as:

I would define it just as the ability to look at an issue and determine what's the best solution based off of everything you're being presented at the time. And if that doesn't work, what you're going to do next.

Participant 140 expressed their experience with the importance of critical thinking as a skill for law enforcement officers as being very important because law enforcement officers make decisions all day, every day. Participant 140 expressed those law enforcement officers without the skill will begin to struggle in high-stress situations.

Participant 140 expressed their experience regarding the critical thinking skills of fellow officers as being very good. Participant 140 attributed this to the fact their department trains a great deal and that training has led to better critical thinking skills. Participant 140 believes even new officers at their agency have good critical thinking skills.

Participant 140 did not implicitly express the need for more scenario-based training in academies, nor did P140 express any experience regarding cadets and their preparedness for the job after completion of the academy.

Participant 150

Participant 150 (P150) expressed their experience regarding their academy and preparing to pass the TCOLE licensing exam as one of practice testing on the TCOLE website as well as group studies and scenarios. Participant 150 explained that their academy was a paid academy, and they attended in the evenings after working a day job. Participant 150 believes the instructors prepared the cadets in their class well, as all passed the TCOLE licensing exam on the first attempt. Participant 150's experience regarding teaching and learning in the academy was described as "death by PowerPoint," consisting of lecture based on a PowerPoint presentation

and note-taking. Participant 150 believed there needs to be more scenario-based training in academies and was disappointed when their current agency significantly decreased the academy scenario days.

Participant 150 shared their experience with use of force focusing on training and department policies, stating:

I think that a lot of it is if you're trained well and you, and you do your training, and you keep up with your force policies, and you read them, and you know what's going on, mentally you're already there, and it's kind of second nature, and I think that's what it should be.

Participant 150 discussed the use of force continuum and the importance of reviewing agency use of force policies and training on defensive tactics.

Participant 150 expressed their experience regarding critical thinking and law enforcement, stating, "You don't have a whole lot of time for critical thinking." Participant 150 believes critical thinking is more applicable to barricaded subject situations and describes law enforcement thinking as "outside of the box thinking." Participant 150 further expressed they were unsure how to teach someone critical thinking skills but believes critical thinking comes with education training and experience. Participant 150 did express law enforcement entailed "thinking" and "figuring things out," and if a person did not have those abilities, law enforcement was not a job for that person. Participant 150 further expressed their academy did not prepare them to think critically but believes the field training program is where those skills should be learned and further stated, "I hate critical thinking."

Participant 150 expressed their experience regarding the critical thinking skills of the officers they serve with as being mixed. Participant 150 believes older officers are more

dependable and fears the cutting of training hours will negatively affect the skills of younger officers, but again referenced the importance of experience as well.

Participant 150 believes there is a need for additional scenario-based training in academies and is disappointed this training is being cut. Participant 150's experience is that many officers are being killed on traffic stops and family violence calls for service, and these types of situations can only be covered in scenario-based training. Participant 150 stated, "That's where we need the training, and they're cutting it." Participant 150 was very passionate about this topic.

Participant 150 expressed her frustration with newer officers, believing many are not ready for the streets when they leave the academy and further expressed frustration that many new officers do not view law enforcement as a career but simply as a job to simply gain insurance and a retirement plan before moving on to something else.

This section completes the seven steps of the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis as described by Moustakas (1994). These seven steps included the following.

1. Horizontalization.
2. Reduction and Elimination.
3. Clustering and Thematizing of Invariant Constituents.
4. Final Identification of Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application.
5. Individual Textural Descriptions.
6. Individual Structural Descriptions.
7. Individual Textual-Structural Descriptions.

The following section will identify the essential meanings of the experience for the participants as a whole by identifying what Moustakas (1994) refers to as essences of the experience.

Essential Meanings of Critical Thinking in Law Enforcement Training Academies

After the seven steps of the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis have been completed, researchers employing this method of data analysis are required to identify the essential meanings of the experience for all research participants by identifying the essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Employing epoche to remove any bias from my thoughts, I again read through the participant transcripts, the notes made regarding participant individual textural descriptions and individual structural descriptions, and the completed textural-structural descriptions relating to the themes completed for each research participant. I then reflected on the essential meanings imparted by participants as related to the research questions for this research study. The research questions are as follows.

RQ1. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience during the law enforcement training academy with regard to the efficacy of the training academy to teach the law enforcement officer the materials required to pass the state licensing exam?

RQ2. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience with regard to critical thinking skills gained while attending the law enforcement training academy?

Based on the research questions and the aforementioned information, the following essences were developed.

1. Law enforcement training academies focus on cadets passing the TCOLE licensing examination.

2. Law enforcement training academies are limited in how information is presented to cadets.
3. Scenario-based and hands-on learning are important for cadet learning in academies, but these modalities could be utilized more frequently.
4. Though critical thinking is an important skill for law enforcement officers, law enforcement training academies do not focus on imparting this skill to cadets.
5. Passing the TCOLE exam does not equate to real-world skills needed by successful law enforcement officers.

Of these identified essences of participant experiences, Essence 1 addresses RQ1, Essence 4 addresses RQ2, and Essences 2, 3, and 5 address both RQ1 and RQ2. The following will discuss these findings in more detail.

Essence 1: Law Enforcement Training Academies Focus on Cadets Passing the TCOLE Licensing Examination. All of the participants in this research study attended the law enforcement training academy. Fourteen of the 15 participants in this research study had occasion to take the TCOLE (or TCLEOSE depending on their years of experience) licensing exam. The exception to this fact was a participant who attended the law enforcement training academy prior to Texas requiring law enforcement officers to be licensed.

The 14 remaining participants who took the TCOLE licensing examination all expressed their experience as one of preparedness when the time came to take and pass the TCOLE licensing exam. The 14 participants expressed their experience in various ways. Some participants were required to maintain a specific average while attending the academy, while others were forced to focus on specific test-taking or note-taking methods. Regardless of the various academy requirements, 14 participants shared the experience of their academies' focus

on passing the TCOLE licensing exam. The participants expressed this experience as “the classes and stuff were all geared towards passing the TCOLE,” or “academy was more focused on them passing the TCOLE licensing exam than on the cadets becoming a police officer,” or, “it was ingrained in my head that I had to maintain an 80% average and that I had to pass TCOLE.” To summarize, Essence 1 addresses RQ1, addressing the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to prepare participants to pass the TCOLE licensing examination.

Essence 2: Law Enforcement Training Academies Are Limited in How Information is Presented to Cadets. All of the research study participants described their primary teaching and learning experience within their academy as being lecture and test. Many of the participants in the research study were required to maintain a specific average while attending the various academies and were exposed to test-taking strategies and various forms of testing. Many of the participants expressed their experience as lecture-based accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation, with one participant describing the experience as “death by PowerPoint.” Though some participants had experience with the application of what was learned during their academy experience, these experiences were limited to only a few days during their academy experience and were expressed by participants who attended the academy over 10 years ago. Application of what was learned was very limited during law enforcement training academies according to participant experiences. To summarize, Essence 2 addresses RQ1 regarding the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to prepare participants to pass the TCOLE licensing exam and RQ2 regarding the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to teach critical thinking skills.

Essence 3: Scenario-Based and Hands-On Learning Are Important for Cadet Learning in Academies, but These Modalities Could Be Utilized More Frequently. Eight of

the 15 research participants had some scenario-based or hands-on learning during their academy experience, five of the 15 research participants had no scenario-based or hands-on learning during their academy experience, and one of 15 participants did not express if they did or did not have scenario-based or hands-on learning during their academy experience. Of the 15 research participants, 11 expressed the need for more scenario-based or hands-on learning, and two expressed the need for more scenario-based or hands-on learning coupled with experience as a need in law enforcement training academies. One participant did not express an experience regarding their experience with scenario-based or hands-on learning. Participant 150 described their experience as one of observing academies cutting this type of training, stating, “That’s where we need the training, and they’re cutting it.” Participant 100 shared their experience, stating, “I think, what would have really helped, maybe a little bit more of a hands-on application, uh, instead of just reading it day after day after day.” To summarize, Essence 3 addresses RQ1 regarding the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to prepare cadets to pass the TCOLE licensing examination and RQ2 regarding the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to teach critical thinking skills.

Essence 4: Though Critical Thinking Is an Important Skill for Law Enforcement Officers, Law Enforcement Training Academies Do Not Focus on Imparting This Skill to Cadets. Of the 15 participants in this research study, 12 believed critical thinking to be an important skill for law enforcement officers. Of the 12 participants who believed critical thinking to be an important skill for law enforcement officers, six of the 12 mentioned decision-making as part of their reasoning. One participant alluded to the fact that law enforcement officers are required to listen to facts while taking into account local, state, federal, and case law while monitoring their surroundings for potential threats and make a decision based on all of those

factors. One participant mentioned the need for critical thinking when “things happen fast.” Another participant mentioned the need for critical thinking when situations were “overwhelming,” and another stated that officers without the skill probably would “not be in law enforcement long.” Two participants did not express the importance of critical thinking for law enforcement officers, and one participant stated, “I hate critical thinking” but preferred to think of law enforcement as being “out of the box thinking.”

Of the 15 participants in this research study, nine expressed they did not gain critical thinking skills during their academy experience, one stated they gained some critical thinking skills, but others in their academy did not; one stated they were prepared through the use of a decision-making model; three expressed they did gain critical thinking skills in their academy experience; and one participant did not express an experience regarding critical thinking and their law enforcement academy. Two participants specifically mentioned their academy focused on passing the TCOLE licensing exam and very little else. Other participants expressed their experience with having to gain critical thinking skills through their experience in the field training program and actual service as a law enforcement officer.

One participant who attended a law enforcement training academy for a local law enforcement agency and passed the TCOLE licensing exam was later hired by the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) and had the unique perspective of expressing their experience of comparing and contrasting their two academy experiences. This participant expressed the first academy focused on cadets passing the TCOLE licensing exam while the DPS academy prepared the participant to pass both the licensing exam and to apply all they learned to their duties as a law enforcement officer. The participant expressed that even though they were not required to take the TCOLE licensing exam again, they were prepared and prepared to apply

what they learned in gaining critical thinking skills through the process. To summarize, Essence 4 addresses RQ2 regarding the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to teach critical thinking skills to participants.

Essence 5: Passing the TCOLE Licensing Exam Does Not Equate to Real-World Skills Needed by Successful Law Enforcement Officers. Seven of the 15 participants expressed an experience with cadets not being adequately prepared to be successful as a law enforcement officer after the cadet's academy experience. The participants expressed their experience in different terms. One participant experienced new officers who had passed the TCOLE licensing exam but did not "understand how to apply the law" in various situations. Two participants expressed an experience with new officers who passed the TCOLE licensing exam but would "freeze up" in situations because they simply did not know how to react in those situations. In those instances, other officers were forced to take over for the new officers, and the actions of the new officers placed officers and others on those scenes in potential danger. Some of the new officers who were observed by participants to "freeze up" were described as some of the best academically in their various academy classes.

Another participant observed new officers who had successfully passed the TCOLE licensing exam but were terminated because they could not pass the field training program. Another participant stated simply that some of the new officers did not know what they were doing. This participant expressed that the new officers were exiting the academy and entering field training programs, which were being shortened because of staffing shortages and were being trained by officers without enough experience to be field training officers. Another participant expressed their experience that some newer officers never improved, and these officers did not seem to care about law enforcement as a career. To summarize, Essence 5

addresses RQ1 regarding the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to prepare cadets to pass the TCOLE licensing examination and RQ2 regarding the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to teach critical thinking skills.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of Chapter 4 was to discuss the sample of research participants, how data was collected for this research study, and how the data for this research study was analyzed. The modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis (Moustakas, 1994) was selected for this study. Each of the seven steps of van Kaam's method was described within the various sections of Chapter 4. The essential meaning of participant experiences regarding critical thinking in law enforcement training academies was described and presented within Chapter 4 in the form of essences as described by Moustakas (1994). The results of data analysis were referenced to the two research questions formulated for this research study. The use of epoche to diminish potential bias was discussed.

The recruitment process of potential participants and the procedure to obtain consent from potential participants were discussed. Semistructured interviews utilizing the Zoom online meeting platform and the recording and transcription of interviews were reviewed. Storage of data and the procedures for the processing of data, including the use of epoche, was discussed. The use of HyperRESEARCH© to assist in the maintenance of notes and some coding tasks was discussed. After the initial steps of data analysis were completed, 24 invariant constituents were identified.

These invariant constituents were clustered into six themes. The identified themes were discussed in Chapter 4 with supporting quotations from various participant interviews. Continuing to employ the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis,

individual textural and structural descriptions of participant experiences were developed. Using this data, I then developed individual textural-structural descriptions for each research participant. From these descriptions, essential meanings of participant experiences were developed in the form of five essences. These five essences were:

1. Law enforcement training academies focus on cadets passing the TCOLE licensing examination.
2. Law enforcement training academies are limited in how information is presented to cadets.
3. Scenario-based and hands-on learning are important for cadet learning in academies, but these modalities could be utilized more frequently.
4. Though critical thinking is an important skill for law enforcement officers, law enforcement training academies do not focus on imparting this skill to cadets.
5. Passing the TCOLE exam does not equate to real-world skills needed by successful law enforcement officers.

Chapter 5 will present a discussion of the findings of this research study, the findings of this research study as it relates to previous literature, limitations of this research study, recommendations, and conclusions.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This chapter's purpose is to provide a summary of the research study, including a summary of the problem statement, the purpose of the research study, and the methodologies utilized during this study. This chapter will also include an overall discussion of the study's findings and a discussion of the findings of this research study related to past literature. This chapter also discusses the limitations of this research study, recommendations for future research, and conclusions.

Law enforcement officers in Texas are required to possess a high school diploma or GED to become a licensed law enforcement officer in Texas, but one must question if the law enforcement training academy adequately prepares the law enforcement officer to respond to the problems they will encounter in a modern, globalized world. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to investigate the experiences of law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas during their law enforcement training academies and to assess the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to teach critical thinking skills based on those officers' experiences. This research study was completed to answer the following two research questions.

RQ1. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience during the law enforcement training academy with regard to the efficacy of the training academy to teach the law enforcement officer the materials required to pass the state licensing exam?

RQ2. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience with regard to critical thinking skills gained while attending the law enforcement training academy?

The literature review completed for this research study provided a conceptual framework, which guided this research study and included relevant research on procedural justice, law enforcement legitimacy, the Ferguson effect, use of force, law enforcement education, and critical thinking. The literature provided information as to how law enforcement is granted authority to carry out their duties, how communities perceive the legitimacy of the law enforcement officers serving their communities, the perceived Ferguson effect and how use of force incidents can negatively impact legitimacy, use of force related to law enforcement officers, law enforcement education, and critical thinking. The literature regarding critical thinking and law enforcement was essentially nonexistent and required me to seek research in other high-stress professions such as nursing, the military, and emergency management. This research study seeks to fill this void in the research regarding critical thinking and law enforcement.

The chosen qualitative method of data collection and analysis for this research study was transcendental phenomenology. This study sought to understand the lived experiences of the law enforcement officers during their academy experience. Because transcendental phenomenology is used to explore the experiences of individuals and understand the meanings individuals assign to those experiences, transcendental phenomenology was the most effective method to collect data for the research questions posed in this research study. The modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis described by Moustakas (1994) was used to analyze the data gathered during the semistructured interviews with participants conducted over the Zoom virtual meeting platform.

Qualitative phenomenological research studies generally do not require a large number of participants. For this study, 15 participants were interviewed. These participants were asked

about their lived experience regarding their law enforcement training academy and the participants' preparedness for the TCOLE licensing examination and critical thinking skills gained during their academy experience. Because of the nature and design of this research study, the findings do not necessarily represent the experiences of every law enforcement officer in the United States regarding their academy experience and their preparedness to pass a state licensing examination or critical thinking skills gained during their academy experience. However, the findings of this research study do allow for a new understanding of how law enforcement officers perceive their law enforcement training academy experience with regard to the efficacy of the law enforcement training academy to prepare law enforcement officers to pass a state licensing examination and the efficacy with which law enforcement training academies teach critical thinking skills to law enforcement officers during their academy experience.

I recruited participants. I contacted chief executives of law enforcement agencies in the western region of Texas and obtained the email addresses of potential participants. Potential participants were contacted by email, and those who agreed to participate signed a consent form. Participants were all law enforcement officers in the western region of Texas with at least five years of experience assigned to the patrol division of their agencies. Saturation was achieved at 15 participants when it was discovered participants were providing similar responses to interview questions presented during the semistructured interviews conducted using the Zoom virtual meeting platform.

The modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis (Moustakas, 1994) was used to analyze data gathered from participant interviews. During the horizontalization process, 24 invariant constituents were identified. From the 24 invariant constituents, six themes were developed regarding critical thinking in law enforcement training academies. These themes

revealed participant experiences regarding passing the TCOLE licensing examination, participants' attitudes toward use of force, critical thinking in law enforcement, scenario-based and hands-on learning, and preparedness of cadets once their academy experience was completed. From these themes, individual participant textural descriptions and individual participant structural descriptions were developed. These were used to complete an individual textural-structural description for each participant. The individual textural-structural descriptions for each research participant were then used to develop essential meanings of the participant experiences in the form of five essences. These essences provided descriptive answers to the research questions developed for this research study and provided a better understanding of law enforcement officer experiences regarding critical thinking in law enforcement training academies.

Discussion of Findings

Fifteen law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience assigned to the patrol division of their agencies were recruited as participants for this research study. Consent was obtained from each participant, and I conducted semistructured interviews with each participant regarding their law enforcement academy experience utilizing the Zoom virtual meeting platform. These interviews resulted in data in the form of descriptions of participant experiences during their law enforcement academy to address the research questions developed for this research study. The modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis procedures resulted in the development of textural-structural descriptions of the individual participant experiences. These textural-structural descriptions led to the emergence of essential meanings in the form of five essences of participant experiences. These were:

1. Law enforcement training academies focus on cadets passing the TCOLE licensing examination.
2. Law enforcement training academies are limited in how information is presented to cadets.
3. Scenario-based and hands-on learning are important for cadet learning in academies, but these modalities could be utilized more frequently.
4. Though critical thinking is an important skill for law enforcement officers, law enforcement training academies do not focus on imparting this skill to cadets.
5. Passing the TCOLE exam does not equate to real-world skills needed by successful law enforcement officers.

The research questions developed for this research study were designed to advance understanding of law enforcement officer experiences regarding their academy's efficacy to prepare participants to pass the TCOLE licensing examination and teach the participants critical thinking skills during their academy experience. These research questions were:

RQ1. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience during the law enforcement training academy with regard to the efficacy of the training academy to teach the law enforcement officer the materials required to pass the state licensing exam?

RQ2. How do law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience within a Permian Basin region of West Texas describe their lived experience with regard to critical thinking skills gained while attending the law enforcement training academy?

The five essences of participant experiences contributed to answering these research questions.

Based on the information gained from this research study concerning RQ1 and Essence 1, law enforcement training academies attended by the participants in this research study were effective in preparing participants to pass the TCOLE licensing examination. Of the 15 participants, 14 were required to pass the TCOLE licensing examination to become law enforcement officers. The exception was a participant who became a law enforcement officer prior to the state of Texas requiring law enforcement officers to be licensed. Of the 14 remaining participants, all 14 expressed their experience as being prepared for the TCOLE licensing examination after completing their academy experience. Further, based on the information gained during this research study, these academies were hyperfocused on this objective and may neglect other important skills law enforcement officers need to gain during their law enforcement training academy experience. As discussed in previous chapters of this research study, law enforcement officers are only required to possess a high school diploma or general equivalency degree to become a law enforcement officer; therefore, the law enforcement training academy may well be the law enforcement officer's only exposure to postsecondary education. With the participants expressing an experience their academies demonstrated such a focus on passing the TCOLE licensing examination, cadets in those academies may not be receiving training in other areas or acquiring needed skills to be successful as a law enforcement officer.

Based on the information gained during this research study regarding RQ1 and Essence 2, law enforcement training academies attended by participants in this research study are limited in how information is presented to cadets. Essentially, information is presented to cadets through lectures with limited opportunity for application. All participants in this research study expressed lecture as the primary source of teaching and learning during their academy experience. These

lectures were sometimes accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation and were usually followed by testing or some sort.

As previously discussed, 14 of the 15 participants expressed their experience as well prepared for the TCOLE licensing exam. The exception to this fact was that one participant, who entered law enforcement before there was a licensing examination, was not required to complete the TCOLE licensing exam. This limited form of presentation of the information cadets are required to learn in academies had no apparent bearing on the effectiveness of academies to prepare the participants in this research study to pass the TCOLE licensing exam. One must question the efficacy of a lecture and test modality of teaching and learning where cadets memorize and regurgitate the information during testing to impart the ability of cadets to apply the information learned in a real-world setting, even though participants were successful in passing the TCOLE licensing examination. However, regarding RQ2 and Essence 2, one must question using a lecture-based teaching modality with limited application to impart critical thinking skills to cadets.

Based on the information gained during this research study from participant experiences regarding RQ1 and Essence 3, law enforcement training academies attended by participants in this research study should utilize more scenario-based and hands-on learning opportunities for cadets. Though some of the participants experienced these types of learning opportunities during their academy experiences, 13 of the 15 participants believed these opportunities could be utilized more frequently. As previously discussed, 14 of the 15 participants expressed their experience as being well prepared for the TCOLE licensing exam. The exception to this fact was a participant not required to complete the TCOLE licensing exam. The apparent need for additional scenario-based and hands-on learning opportunities had no apparent bearing on the

effectiveness of academies to prepare the research study participants to pass the TCOLE licensing exam. However, regarding RQ2 and Essence 3, one must question the effectiveness of using a lecture-based modality, as previously discussed, coupled with limited exposure to scenario-based and hands-on learning opportunities to impart critical thinking skills to cadets. Further, without the application of information through the utilization of scenario-based and hands-on learning opportunities, one must question the ability of cadets to apply what has been learned in the academy in a real-world setting.

Based on the information gained during this research study from participant experiences regarding RQ2 and Essence 4, law enforcement training academies attended by participants in this research study did not effectively teach critical thinking skills. Though some of the participants did express an experience of gaining critical thinking skills during their academy experiences, the vast majority, nine, stated they did not, and one additional participant stated they did gain some skills, but others in their academy did not.

As previously discussed, 14 of the 15 participants expressed their experience as being well prepared for the TCOLE licensing exam. The exception to this fact was a participant not required to complete the TCOLE licensing exam. Their experience and preparation were accomplished primarily through a lecture-based teaching modality. Essentially, 10 of the 15 research participants believe they, or others in their academy, did not receive adequate critical thinking skills. Participants expressed the need for additional scenario-based and hands-on learning opportunities. One must question if the application piece is missing to create the opportunity for those critical thinking skills to be imparted to cadets during their academy experience. Further, without the application of scenario-based and hands-on learning

opportunities, one must question the ability of cadets to apply what has been learned in the academy in a real-world setting.

Based on the information gained during this research study from participant experiences regarding RQ1, RQ2, and Essence 5, passing the TCOLE licensing examination alone does not predict success as a law enforcement officer. As discussed in Chapter 4, though only seven of the 15 participants expressed their experience with new officers as not being prepared to serve as a law enforcement officer after completion of their law enforcement training academy, those participant experiences were significant, and it appears even though cadets entering participant agencies pass the TCOLE licensing exam, passage of the exam alone does not necessarily predict success as a law enforcement officer. As presented in Chapter 4, participants discussed the issues experienced with some new officers entering the various agencies after completing their law enforcement academy experiences.

As previously discussed, participant experiences indicated participants believed their academy experience prepared the participant to pass the TCOLE licensing exam. Few participants believed their academy experience prepared them to think critically as a law enforcement officer though most participants believed this to be an important skill for a law enforcement officer. One must question if there is a correlation between the lack of critical thinking skills gained in the academy and the success of cadets as they move into their career as law enforcement officers.

Further, all participants expressed an experience with use of force. Many related their experience with use of force to training and experience. Based on the various definitions provided by participants for critical thinking as a requirement in stressful or fluid situations, which “happen fast” or require “split-second” decisions, use of force situations as described by

participants would fit into these categories. Though participants did not link critical thinking and use of force, this seems to be an area that should be investigated further.

Finally, though questions and horizons regarding law enforcement legitimacy were removed and not included as invariant constituents as ultimately these did not align with the research questions for this research study, I would be remiss if he did not mention that seven of the 15 participants did not have knowledge of the term or concept of law enforcement legitimacy. Though many participants attempted to define the term, their definitions were not accurate. One must question if this is typical of law enforcement or is this only common in the region where this study was completed.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Past Literature

Though critical thinking has been identified as a needed skill for those who work in other high-stress environments such as nursing, the military, and disaster management, there has been very little study completed regarding critical thinking in law enforcement, leaving a significant gap in the literature. Through this study, I hoped to begin to address this gap in the literature concerning critical thinking in law enforcement training. This section of Chapter 5 will discuss the findings in relation to existing literature.

Procedural Justice and Law Enforcement Legitimacy

As discussed in the literature review, procedural justice is essentially why people obey the law. Tyler (2006) discovered people obey the law when they perceive the group enforcing the law to be doing so in a fair and just manner. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this research study, legitimacy is the ongoing dialog between two groups: those who hold power and audiences (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). Those in power make a claim to legitimacy, and the audience responds to that claim (Nix & Wolfe, 2017). Because those in power need to convince

themselves their power is rightfully held, those in power will evaluate the audience's response and may adjust their claim to power (Nix & Wolfe, 2017). When law enforcement is perceived to be unjust, legitimacy within a community suffers. Though interview questions were developed regarding law enforcement legitimacy for this research study, seven of the 15 participants could not accurately define the term or express knowledge of the term. Though the horizons relating to law enforcement legitimacy did not pass the two-pronged test to become invariant constituents, it is still important to note the fact that nearly half of the participants in this research study were unable to define or correctly explain the term law enforcement legitimacy. Ultimately, this study did not add to the literature on this topic.

The Ferguson Effect

Though the Ferguson effect is an important concept to be studied regarding law enforcement in the future, many participants in this research study did not have an understanding of law enforcement legitimacy. Law enforcement legitimacy is a core component of the Ferguson effect. Ultimately, this study did not add to the literature regarding the Ferguson effect.

Use of Force

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this research study, many in the law enforcement and criminal justice circles have called for a better understanding of how and why law enforcement officers use force during citizen encounters (Mears et al., 2017; Kahn et al., 2017). Law enforcement use of force has long been thought to be required and acceptable in certain situations, but concerns about law enforcement use of force have continued to grow (Mears et al., 2017), especially regarding the many use of force incidents involving excessive or apparent excessive force resulting in the death of unarmed citizens (Kahn & McMahon, 2015; Nix et al.,

2017). Participants in this research study shared their feelings concerning use of force, with many expressing strategies to avoid the use of force.

The literature indicates, if a suspect is unarmed and not a physical threat, officers know to use verbal commands or use empty hands to gain compliance (Terrill & Paoline, 2013; Worrall & Schmallegger, 2016). Participants expressed these facts through their descriptions of the use of “verbal judo” and hands-on techniques employed to gain control of irate suspects. Other participants spoke of their experience and how they have learned through that experience how to de-escalate situations with only their words and tone of voice. This may add to what Brandl and Strohshine (2012), Lim and Lee (2015), and Paoline et al. (2012) found, indicating officers with higher levels of education and more years of experience being less likely to rely on verbal or physical force.

Other participants expressed their training and the use of force continuum dictated by their various department policies. This seems to support the literature, which states agencies with higher educational standards and formalized policies restricting officer discretion have fewer lethal force incidents, while agencies without these requirements have higher complaint rates (Nowacki, 2015; Shjarback & White, 2016). It is important to note with regard to the educational levels of participants in this research study, 11 of the 15 participants had at least an associate’s degree, with two additional participants having at least some college (see Table 2).

Law Enforcement Education

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this research study, there were many who argued for additional educational requirements for law enforcement officers. One participant in this research study and I have experienced the upcoming new educational requirement of an associate’s degree to be a law enforcement officer in the state of Texas, which never materialized. Though

additional education would lead to a better mentally equipped professional law enforcement officer, law enforcement culture has slowed additional education requirements (Christopher, 2015). Participants in this research study expressed their experience with having the educational standards of their agency decreased, with one participant expressing the experience of observing the decline in the quality of the cadets as the cadets exited the academy. Many argued that higher education requirements for law enforcement officers, especially in the social sciences, would lead to better cultural awareness for officers, the ability to apply appropriate professional discretion in operational situations, and increase the officer's ability to respond to the needs of the diverse communities served (Christopher, 2015). One participant expressed their experience with this issue, describing how they observed new officers who had apparently never had a job prior to entering the law enforcement academy and did not understand how to deal with individuals from other cultures and communities. Currently, in Texas, once an officer has completed their academy experience, the officer is only required to attend 40 additional hours of training every two years.

Some literature indicated law enforcement training academies exposed cadets to hyperaggressive strategies with instructional blocks dedicated to survival strategies, encouraging officers to go into battle with the communities they will ultimately be serving (Lynch, 2018). On the contrary, there seemed to be very little survival training or scenario-based training of any kind based on participant experiences. Participants in this research study did not express any kind of an "us versus them" mentality. The literature surrounding law enforcement training indicated limited time was spent on subjects of cultural understanding, fair and impartial law enforcement, procedural law, and de-escalation strategies (Martinot, 2014). Some participants in this research study did support these findings, though overall, there was no information gained to

support Lynch's (2018) assertion suggesting law enforcement training academies had the potential to normalize violence as a means to resolving conflict. If anything, it would appear law enforcement training academies attended by participants in this research study are hyperfocused on cadets passing the TCOLE licensing examination.

Critical Thinking

As previously discussed, critical thinking has been identified as a necessary skill for those in high-stress occupations such as nursing, the military, and disaster management, but there has been very little research regarding critical thinking in law enforcement, leaving a large gap in the literature. This study revealed that most participants believed critical thinking to be an important skill for law enforcement officers. Some participants believed those without critical thinking skills ultimately would have difficulty being successful as law enforcement officers. Though more studies should be completed regarding this topic, this study can begin to fill the gap in the literature regarding critical thinking as an important skill for law enforcement officers.

As previously discussed in Chapter 2, Lyman (2018) defined critical thinking for law enforcement purposes as:

The use of rational skills, worldviews, and values to get as close as possible to the truth. It is judgment about what to believe or what to do in response to observations or experiences. Critical thinking can also involve determining the meaning and significance of what is observed to determine whether there is adequate justification to accept whether a conclusion is true. (p. 14)

Participants in this research study provided a varied definition of critical thinking regarding their experiences, but these definitions generally focused on high-stress situations when "things

happen fast.” Participants provided to the academic definition of critical thinking by providing a more real-world definition of critical thinking in law enforcement from their experiences.

Participant experiences also brought to light how experience can play a part in developing critical thinking skills. Todak and James (2018) further found more experienced law enforcement officers were less likely to use force in citizen encounters. Participants in this research study shared their experience regarding critical thinking and use of force. Many participants expressed their experiences with gaining critical thinking skills through their actual law enforcement experience since they did not gain these skills during their academy experience. Many participants also expressed their experience with learning how to talk to people to de-escalate situations without having to employ force.

After the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States military began to transform military education in the hopes of preparing military leaders to be better innovative and critical thinkers in the new, modern world (Dike et al., 2006). The U.S. Air Force went a step further testing Air Force officers, finding many had below-average critical thinking skills (Stone, 2017). This research study has revealed participants believe critical thinking to be an important skill for law enforcement officers, as did military leaders, yet law enforcement as a profession has ignored this skill within the literature. Participants suggested some cadets did not have exposure to various cultures and many were “sheltered” and struggled when they encountered situations involving different cultures. Miller and Tucker (2015) found that military leaders with high critical thinking skills demonstrated higher cross-cultural competencies. As participants in this research study expressed their experience with critical thinking skills not being imparted during their academy experience, there may be a correlation between those cadets who struggle

when dealing with individuals from other cultures as those cadets may lack critical thinking skills.

Nursing is another high-stress field, which has stressed critical thinking as a needed skill by listing critical thinking as an essential outcome for the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, and the instructional methods used in nursing schools has been researched to assess the efficacy to which students gain critical thinking skills (Adib-Hajbaghery & Sharifi, 2017; Carter et al., 2016). This study has discovered through participant experiences the need for additional hands-on and scenario-based learning opportunities for cadets to allow cadets to apply better what is learned, with the end result being additional critical thinking skills gained through the academy experience. Adib-Hajbaghery and Sharifi (2017) discovered traditional Socratic seminar-type teaching and learning alone yielded little critical thinking skills in nursing students. But Socratic methods combined with other strategies increased the critical thinking abilities of nursing students. Through this study, participants expressed the traditional method of lecture and test was not an effective method of teaching critical thinking skills, mirroring the results of the nursing studies.

Limitations

One limitation inherent to qualitative research is the sample size. In this research study, saturation was achieved after completing 15 interviews. This was intentional as the purpose of this research study was to document the experiences of law enforcement officers with at least five years' experience in West Texas during their law enforcement training academies and to assess the efficacy of law enforcement training academies to prepare participants for the TCOLE licensing examination and to teach critical thinking skills based on those officers' experiences. This was achieved by gathering detailed descriptions of participant experiences through the

interview process. The participants were also a very specific group of individuals with similar experiences as law enforcement officers in the western region of Texas. One cannot expect the experiences of other officers in other parts of the country to be the same. Further studies in additional regions of the country should be conducted regarding critical thinking in law enforcement training academies to fill the gap in the literature.

Another limitation of this research study as this research study gathered data from participant interviews was participants might not always be honest in their responses to researchers. Data in research studies, which use this type of data, may be skewed as participants may give false or misleading answers to interview questions because they desire to maintain their own self-image (Connelly, 2016). Further, data gathered from participants as law enforcement officers interviewed for this research study may not respond to interview questions the same as participants as law enforcement officers in other areas of the United States.

Another limitation of this study was the use of an interviewer during the data gathering process. Though I utilized the practice of epoche prior to each interview, there was potential for biases to influence how data was analyzed and interpreted. A different researcher may have gathered or interpreted data differently. Further, with the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis, one step in the process involves imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). This step in the data analysis process can be interpreted in many ways and may depend on the researcher who is analyzing the data.

Another limitation was that qualitative research is difficult to verify. Because an individual participant or group of participants may respond to interview questions differently than another individual participant or group of participants, it is difficult to state that further research will verify previous research findings. But one advantage of qualitative

phenomenological research, especially when utilizing the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis, is participant experiences as described through textural-structural descriptions allowing participant experiences to be explored and described.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this research study have opened several potential areas for future study. Based on the results of this research study, the same study with the same research questions, interview questions, and methodology should be conducted in different regions of Texas, possibly in metropolitan areas. This would reveal if the same focus on passing the TCOLE licensing examination is the same in other areas of the state, or is this simply a focus in the western region of Texas. Another potential area of study involving critical thinking in law enforcement would be a pretest-posttest study utilizing a scored critical thinking instrument to test the level of critical thinking abilities of academy cadets before and after they have completed their academy experience. This would truly reveal the level of critical thinking abilities imparted on cadets during their academy experience, comparing cadets' critical thinking abilities before entering the academy and upon exiting the academy.

During this research study, nearly half of the participants revealed a lack of knowledge of law enforcement legitimacy. Law enforcement legitimacy is an important part of law enforcement. If law enforcement officers do not understand their own legitimacy, it is difficult for law enforcement to serve their communities effectively. Studies should be conducted to assess if this is simply a localized issue or a national phenomenon.

Use of force was discussed by many participants concerning training and experience. Though there have been some studies completed with regard to use of force, training, and experience, there is limited study regarding critical thinking and use of force. This is a gap in the

literature that needs to be filled. Further, participants in this research study indicated the need for critical thinking skills in stressful situations. Use of force situations would fall into that category. Additional research regarding critical thinking under stress should be conducted.

Finally, there have been many use of force deaths in recent years, resulting in many issues across the United States. These incidents have led to a call for a restructuring of law enforcement, and in some cases, a disbanding of law enforcement agencies. Generally, these are high-stress situations. There has been limited research into the backgrounds of the various officers involved in these incidents. What are these officers' educational levels? What are their experience levels? How many complaints do these officers have? Some of these questions have been answered. An assessment of these officers' critical thinking levels based on a particular instrument would be an interesting set of data.

Conclusions

The preceding chapter represents a summary of the findings of this research study and includes limitations of the study and potential avenues for further research. Since the data collected during this research study consists of answers to interview questions provided by participants, the results must be viewed through the lens of the experiences of those participants as experienced law enforcement officers serving in the western region of Texas. Participant responses nevertheless provide a window into the participants' experiences regarding their law enforcement training academy experience and the efficacy of those academies to prepare the participants to pass the TCOLE licensing examination and to teach participants to think critically during their academy experiences.

Based on the findings of this research study, there are challenges regarding the training of law enforcement officers in the western region of Texas. Law enforcement training academies

attended by participants in this research study focused on cadets passing the TCOLE licensing examination. Academies attended by participants seemed to attempt to teach cadets to take the licensing examination by providing practice tests, which were to simulate the TCOLE examination experience. Participants in this research study expressed their experience as a seemingly singular focus of academies to focus on this goal while sometimes ignoring other skills important for law enforcement officers.

This goal was achieved through a lecture and test teaching modality. Participants described their experience as lectures, sometimes accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation followed by some sort of testing. Participants shared their experience as one of a lack of application of what was presented during the lectures. One participant who attended the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) Academy was able to compare and contrast the two academy experiences, sharing how the local academy simply taught the participant to take the TCOLE examination while the DPS academy actually taught the participant to apply what was learned in the academy through various scenarios and hands-on learning opportunities.

Participants in this research study expressed critical thinking to be an important skill for law enforcement officers. Though participants in this research study expressed critical thinking to be an important skill for law enforcement officers, participants expressed their academies did not do enough or could have done more to prepare them to think critically as law enforcement officers. Participants expressed their belief additional hands-on and scenario-based learning opportunities would allow cadets to apply what is learned during their academy experience would allow for improved critical thinking skills of those attending academies. Further, participants expressed their experiences with some new officers who were not prepared to serve as law enforcement officers after completing their academy experiences, suggesting passing the

TCOLE licensing examination did not necessarily equate to the cadets having the required skills to be successful as law enforcement officers.

Though critical thinking has been a focus in other high-stress occupations and professions such as nursing, the military, and disaster management, critical thinking is not a focus in law enforcement. This research study was designed to assess the efficacy of law enforcement training academies in the western region of Texas to prepare cadets to pass the TCOLE licensing examination and to prepare cadets to think critically as law enforcement officers. Based on the findings of this research study, which examined data collected from participants, academies attended by the study participants focus on preparing cadets to pass the TCOLE licensing examination and do not prepare cadets to think critically as law enforcement officers.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. In what ways did your law enforcement training academy prepare you to pass the TCOLE licensing examination? What are some things your law enforcement training academy could have done better to prepare you to pass the TCOLE licensing exam?
2. What primary teaching and learning strategies did your academy instructors use during your academy experience?
3. What strategies would you like to see used in law enforcement training academies in the future to help cadets learn more effectively?
4. What does law enforcement legitimacy mean to you? How would you describe law enforcement legitimacy currently? To what do you credit your answer?
5. Describe what it is like to make a use of force decision in a stressful situation while on a call for service or self-initiated call for service.
6. How do you define critical thinking?
7. From your perspective as a law enforcement officer, what effect does a law enforcement officer's ability or inability to think critically have on their ability to carry out their assigned duties?
8. In what ways did your law enforcement academy experience prepare you to think critically as a law enforcement officer? What improvements would you like to see made to improve the teaching of critical thinking skills in your academy?
9. Overall, how would you describe the critical thinking abilities of the officers you serve with each day?

Appendix B: Participant Solicitation Email

Greetings,

My name is Billy Spruill, and I am a former law enforcement officer and criminal justice researcher. You have been identified as a possible candidate for a research study I am conducting involving critical thinking in law enforcement training academies. Your participation in the study would involve a single interview through the Zoom online meeting platform lasting approximately 30 minutes. Audio and video of the interview will be recorded. Your participation would be confidential. If you would like to learn more about this research study, please contact Billy J. Spruill at xxx or at xxx-xxx-xxxx; text messaging is accepted.

Thank you,

Billy J. Spruill

Appendix C: Participant Demographic Record

Participant # _____

Age _____

Race or Ethnicity _____ or _____

Gender _____

Educational Level _____

College Graduate Major or Minor _____ or _____

Appendix D: IRB Approval

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885



Dear Billy,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled

was approved by expedited review (Category 6 & 7) on 10/14/2020 (IRB # 20-155). Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Request Form within 30 days of study completion.

If you wish to make any changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Study Amendment Request Form.

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Unanticipated Events/Noncompliance Form.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs