



Awe: Helping leaders address modern policing problems

Jeff Thompson*

ABSTRACT

Policing in America is facing unprecedented issues, including surges in violent crimes, record-low levels of morale, recruitment and retention issues, COVID-19 as the leading cause of death in policing in 2021, police suicide described as an epidemic, and an overall increase in mental health conditions. As the resilience of police officers is pushed to the limits, police leaders must develop innovative approaches to enhance and sustain their workforce's mental health and well-being. This paper shares how one aspect of resilience—reflecting on and experiencing awe—can assist police leaders in exploring creative and meaningful ways to address current policing issues.

Key Words Police; leadership; resilience; law enforcement; well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Policing in America is facing unprecedented issues, such as surges in violent crimes (including murder and shootings) (Kaste, 2021), recruitment and retention issues (IACP, 2020; PERF, 2019a; Smith, 2016; Westervelt, 2021), low morale (Westervelt, 2021), unenforceable COVID protocols (Chan, 2021), 62% of police officers' deaths in 2021 related to COVID-19 (Barr, 2021), the "silent epidemic" of officer suicide (Dvorak, 2021), and an overall recent increase in mental health conditions, with depression rates tripling (Van Beusekom, 2020).

The resilience of police personnel is being pushed to the limits, and their leaders, tasked with addressing all of these issues, must find new, innovative methods to genuinely address each of them while also building and sustaining a mentally healthy agency. Practices in awe are an innovative approach that can be applied not only for the overall well-being of police personnel but specifically for members of the leadership, who are responsible for countering negative elements and enhancing positive practices and programs.

One might ask how experiencing awe can be helpful, specifically with the challenges police leaders are currently facing. But that uncertainty is exactly the advantage that experiencing awe can provide. Awe has been described as an epistemological emotion, meaning that it helps bring awareness to gaps in one's knowledge (De Cruz, 2020; Keltner & Haidt, 2003; McPhetres, 2019; Stellar et al., 2018) and promotes creative thinking (Chirico et al., 2018; Ke & Yoon, 2020; Zhang,

2017; Zhang et al., 2021)—two traits that are necessary to tackle the current issues head on in meaningful ways.

If police leaders are to explore ways of addressing modern policing issues, a logical first step would be acknowledging the fact that the answers are not yet known and need to be developed. Additional benefits of experiencing awe will be explained later in this paper, but for the moment (and apropos of police leaders' need to accept this epistemological knowledge gap), it is important to emphasize that awe is linked with humility. Humility is a well-known requisite skill for high-performing leaders (Ou et al., 2018), especially in policing (Barker, 2011; Coleman, 2014; Colwell & Huth, 2010; Mills, 2019).

Chirico and her colleagues' study, cited above, demonstrates how experiencing and reflecting on moments of awe can contribute to creative thinking. In policing, creative thinking has been described as a beneficial and necessary skill for police leaders to possess (Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2013; Koivuniemi, 2018; Martin et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2016). Therefore, it would be reasonable to embrace awe-inducing techniques and practices that facilitate the recognition of knowledge gaps, promote and enhance creative thinking, and foster humility among police leaders.

PROMOTING CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION IN POLICING

The idea of promoting creativity and innovation in policing is not new. Demonstrating resilience involves having a sense

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of agency, or acknowledging that certain things are beyond one's control while other things can be controlled (Hanson, 2018). Police leaders and experts have recognized the current challenging moment in policing history and have embraced the opportunity it provides by calling for creative and innovative approaches to address these issues.

Chuck Wexler (2022), executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, embraces this resilient approach and calls on police leaders to recognize that we are in different times that require different thinking. Deloitte (Mirkow, 2021), a global leader in consulting and related services, emphasizes that police innovation comes in the form of new concepts, methods, and tools. In their reference book for police chiefs, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) (2018) explains that "creativity, innovation, and experimentation are hallmarks of our philosophy" (p. 39).

The Major Cities Chiefs Association (MCCA) (2018) identifies a similar approach, with one of their three strategic goals being to "promote innovation and evidenced-based practices in policing" (p. 1). The MCCA further elaborates this by encouraging police leaders to open their agencies as "learning laboratories, advocating for funding to develop, testing new technology, practices, and approaches" (p. 4).

PROMOTING RESILIENCE

Before examining awe more deeply, it is important to acknowledge how resilience and, more broadly, officer well-being are considered necessary for police personnel of all ranks to possess in order to be effective in their work and flourish in their lives overall. Leading police authorities have called for greater attention, training, and resources to be dedicated to officer well-being (Spence, 2017).

There are notable advancements in resilience programs as they are implemented in police academies (Ramey et al., 2017), with the general workforce (Thompson, 2020; Weltman et al., 2014), and nationally (FBINAA, n.d.; IACP, n.d.). According to McCraty and Atkinson (2012), agencies developing resilience programs for their workforce can lead to fewer citizen complaints and lawsuits as well as increased community safety.

Additionally, conferences and other gatherings are being convened where police officer resilience and well-being has been either the primary focus or a leading topic. This includes the Police Executive Research Forum (2019b), the International Association of Chiefs of Police (n.d.), and the Fraternal Order of Police (2022). The New York City Police Department, along with the Psychiatry Department at Columbia University Medical Center, co-hosted an online symposium devoted exclusively to police officer resilience (Resilience Symposium, 2020) for which more than 3,000 people registered from over 30 countries. Their second co-hosted symposium focused on how awe contributes to enhancing officer resilience and featured leading awe researchers from across the globe (Resilience Symposium, 2021).

Various techniques and skills fall within the realm of resilience practices, and a person must be able to call upon different techniques based on the context and circumstances (Bonanno, 2005). Recently, emotional intelligence, an attribute linked with resilience, has received increased attention. Emotional intelligence has been closely linked with the previously

mentioned trait of humility, and it has also been described as critical to police leaders' effectiveness (Closson, 2022; Hawkins & Dulewicz, 2007; Ramchunder & Martins, 2014). Emotional intelligence has been described as the foremost skill that New York City Mayor Eric Adams was looking for when selecting his new police commissioner (Rubinstein, 2021). Mayor Adams further stated that it was Keechant Sewell's proficient demonstration of emotional intelligence that separated her from the other candidates (Southall et al., 2021). A highly cited research study by Brunetto and colleagues (2012) demonstrated a connection between an officer's emotional intelligence and both their job satisfaction and well-being. Magny and Todak's (2021) recent review of police research studies on emotional intelligence revealed that not enough attention has been dedicated to this topic, despite its importance.

If attention to emotional intelligence research in policing has been limited, it could be argued that it has been nearly nonexistent regarding awe. However, considering the advances being made with resilience initiatives, the opportunity exists to embrace various novel practices, and these certainly should include awe. This is especially the case considering the evidence-based benefits associated with awe.

THE SCIENCE OF AWE

Awe, described in the simplest of terms and adapted from a definition provided by Dr. Jennifer Stellar, is a complex emotion that an individual experiences in response to something or someone that is extraordinary and challenges their current thinking (Thompson, 2022a). Examining the definition of awe more deeply, Keltner and Haidt (2003), in their seminal work, describe how awe is felt when there is a perception of vastness and then a need for accommodation. The vastness can be something physical and perceptual, such as the Grand Canyon, but it can also be conceptual, such as discerning a complex theory, contemplating eternity, or trying to come to terms with the size of the earth compared with the sun. This vastness alters the way you see the world and requires a modification of your mental schema.

Awe can be elicited through a variety of means, including the contemplation of nature, space and the universe, music and the arts, accomplishments (of self and others), social interactions, and religious and spiritual moments (Allen, 2018; Anderson et al., 2018; Graziosi & Yaden, 2019; Pilgrim et al., 2017; Shiota et al., 2007; Sturm et al., 2020; Yaden et al., 2018).

Awe can also be induced through virtual reality (Chirico et al., 2017; Limpt-Broers et al., 2020; Quesnel & Riecke, 2018), watching videos (Chirico et al., 2017; Prade & Saroglou, 2016; van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2012), looking at images (Shiota et al., 2011; Silva et al., 2015), as well as sharing (Bai et al., 2017; Chen & Mongrain, 2020; Danvers & Shiota, 2017; Stellar et al., 2018) and reading awe-inspiring narratives (Cuzzolino, 2021; Piff et al., 2015; Rudd et al., 2012; Thompson, 2022b; Walker & Gilovich, 2020).

Why is awe such an important emotion to experience for police personnel, especially the agency's leadership? As Professor Helen de Cruz (2020) shares, awe can encourage and bolster the outside-the-box, paradigm-shifting thinking that is necessary to tackle the policing issues currently faced by departments across the country and globally. Although

she is referring to scientists and their work, it can certainly be applied to leaders in policing as well:

Awe thus plays an important role in the day-to-day work of scientists, which Kuhn called “normal science,” when it is business as usual and scientists are tweaking, rather than changing, their views. But, as I suggested at the outset, awe is especially important in revolutionary science, when scientists are grappling for new ideas and new concepts. (paragraph 24)

As previously mentioned, awe can promote creativity, bring awareness to gaps in knowledge, and promote humility. Yet it is not limited to these three. Experiencing awe can also promote open-mindedness (Silvia et al., 2015), optimism (Nelson-Coffey et al., 2019), prosocial behaviours (Bai et al., 2017; Piff et al., 2015; Prade & Saroglou, 2016), learning (Limpt-Broers et al., 2020), enhanced decision-making (Rudd et al., 2012), connectedness with others (Shiota et al., 2007), augmented critical thinking (Stellar et al., 2018), a “slowing-down” of time (Rudd et al., 2012), and increased curiosity (Anderson et al., 2020). Further, Bai and colleagues’ research (2021) demonstrates that experiencing awe can reduce stress and everyday worries. Finally, awe has also been described as an example of a self-transcendent experience (STE). Self-transcendent experiences can contribute to a sense of connectedness with others, promote prosocial behaviours, and provide numerous benefits in terms of a person’s well-being (Thompson, 2022b).

Each of these benefits can increase the effectiveness of a police officer on patrol. Also, and importantly, awe can support police leaders as they attempt to develop new, innovative means of crime-fighting and genuine, meaningful relationships with the community. Experiencing awe can contribute to enhancing police leaders’ creativity in cultivating healthier police officers and more effective and just agencies.

Awe Practices

Implementing awe practices to support police leaders and the police workforce must be practical and evidence based. In research laboratories, when studying emotions such as awe, scientists often try to isolate the emotion being studied from other emotions. However, in real life, emotions are frequently clustered together. In the case of awe being used to assist police leaders, a benefit of experiencing awe often is the feeling that it can be connected with other positive emotions. Further, certain programs designed for policing are already embracing this by incorporating awe and other related resilience practices (Thompson, 2020; Thompson & Drew, 2020). Examples of such resilience-related practices include controlled breathing, gratitude, cognitive reappraisal, and prospection, or future thinking (Southwick & Charney, 2012; Tabibnia, 2020).

One program, The Awe Project,¹ has had promising results, based on preliminary data collected from program evaluations. The program’s design is based on the previously cited awe studies, and it was developed initially for police personnel. It has since been extended to the general public. Participants have included police leaders from numerous countries, including Canada, Scotland, Sweden, and the

United States. The five-day, cohort-based program entails watching awe-evoking videos, sharing reflections on the videos, and also sharing personal awe stories. The program generally takes place via a private Google Classroom on participants’ personal mobile devices but has also since been adapted for police leadership and investigative courses that take place in person in a classroom setting.

When designed with a specific purpose, brief interventions can include other resilience practices and have a meaningful impact on participants. Additional examples of how awe practices can be practically implemented by both police agencies and individual police leaders include writing and sharing awe narratives from a police leader’s professional and personal life, watching videos, looking at images, and taking nature-based walks.

Creating awe programs to assist police leadership and the entire agency workforce should be a collaborative effort with researchers to ensure it is grounded in evidence-based practices. As awe research and incorporating awe practices in policing begins to emerge, agencies such as the Pinole Police Department (California) are already implementing awe practices agency-wide, as is the New York City Police Department, especially in their leadership training. Additionally, Durham College (Ontario, Canada) has incorporated awe and other resilience practices in a course for students aspiring to work in law enforcement.

It is important to note that, as Dr. Kirk Schneider (2009) reminds us, if one goes looking for awe, one most likely will not find it. Instead, the key to experiencing awe is being open to the opportunity for it. These three examples of awe programs demonstrate how awe is accessible in our daily lives, and it is already being embraced by both police agencies and individuals, including members of law enforcement.

CONCLUSION

From a practical perspective, it must be acknowledged that awe experiences on their own will not solve the current issues that police leaders and their agencies are facing. Nor are awe practices being advocated here as a silver bullet that will immediately fix modern policing woes. What awe can do, when used along with other evidence-based resilience practices, is provide a spark that inspires policing leaders to think creatively, practically, and sustainably in their approach to the problems currently facing the policing profession.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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¹The Awe Project was created by the author. More information can be found at www.5DaysOfAwe.com.

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