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The Gentle Art of Force: Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and Institutional Change in American Policing

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Abstract

The Gentle Art of Force: Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and Institutional Change in American Policing

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This thesis explores the dynamic relationship between institutional reform, technology adoption, and cultural influences, using Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) as a lens to investigate its integration into policing practices to mitigate excessive force incidents. Beginning with the context of recurrent crises of legitimacy in American policing, particularly highlighted by the tragic murder of George Floyd in 2020, the research examines the emergent trend of training officers in BJJ as a reformative measure. Drawing from extensive qualitative data, the study demonstrates that the existing cultural norms within police departments act as formidable barriers to the effective implementation of BJJ. This thesis unveils how BJJ, heralded for its potential to mitigate use of force, encounters challenges within the entrenched cultural frameworks of law enforcement. Despite proponents' arguments citing BJJ's holistic approach to physical and psychological factors influencing force usage, the research highlights the struggle of institutional culture to absorb this technology without distortion. Instead of catalyzing significant institutional change, BJJ tends to adapt to prevailing norms, resulting in a modified version termed Police Jiu-Jitsu (PJJ). This adaptation, tailored to address the emphasis on lethal violence within policing, dilutes the potential benefits of BJJ, undermining its intended purpose of reducing police violence.

Ultimately, the research underscores the complex interplay between technology adoption, institutional culture, and resistance, shedding light on the limitations of technological reform within deeply entrenched social institutions like policing. The study's insights bear significant implications for both theoretical discourse surrounding policing, culture, and technology and practical policy considerations aimed at addressing police misconduct and use of force.

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Introduction

Organizations and institutions often turn to technology when real or perceived challenges to their legitimacy arise. In the United States, policing has experienced several crises of legitimacy accompanied by public protests and calls to reform or abolish the institution of policing (Hinton and Cook 2021). The most recent of these crises centered on the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in the summer of 2020. In the wake of this tragedy, a new reform aimed at reducing excessive force began to gain traction among the law enforcement community: training officers in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ). Through a combination of media coverage and grassroots organizing BJJ has been incorporated into policing through both formal institutionalized training and informal socialization (HBO Real Sports 2021, Lartey 2021). BJJ is a martial art argued to reduce use of force incidents and the severity of those incidents where other technologies have failed to do so. Proponents argue that it addresses both the physical and psychological factors that contribute to the use of force. Though prior research shows that the introduction of new technologies can lead to cultural changes within an institution (Leonardi 2007), it remains less clear how institutional culture influences changes to technology introduced into new institutional contexts.

Policing provides a useful case for considering the limits of technological reform within social institutions. Policing has a long history of attempted technological reforms that have failed to solve enduring systemic issues stretching from the 18th century into the present (Beutin 2017, Brayne 2017, Hinton and Cook 2021, Sierra-Arévalo 2019). In addition to this history of reform efforts, scholars have noted the power of pervasive cultural frames in shaping police behaviors and perceptions (Carlson 2019, Sierra-Arévalo 2021, Simon 2022). Taken together, these aspects

of policing make it an ideal case to study how technology shapes institutional culture and how technology is reshaped by culture.

This thesis explores the relationship between institutional reform, technology, and culture. Specifically, I describe how BJJ is integrated into policing to reform how police officers use force and reduce the incidence of excessive force. I show that BJJ is subsumed by policing's existing institutional culture, and document how police officers both resist and incorporate BJJ into their practice of police work based on cultural and technological frames (Orlikowski and Gash 1994, Sierra-Arévalo 2021) . This research contributes to important ongoing theoretical discourse about policing, culture, and the role of technology in institutional change. It also has policy implications for developing strategies to address police use of force and other forms of misconduct. Drawing on qualitative data collected during two years of fieldwork and in-depth interviews, I show that the dominant cultural frame of policing and the occupational emphasis on the possibility of lethal violence limit the potential of technologies, such as BJJ, to reduce police violence.

Technology and Police Reform

Policing has a long history of adopting technologies that reformers believed would better enable police to do their jobs more effectively and with greater efficiency (Brayne 2017, Go 2020). In this thesis, I conceptualize technology as not limited to the material tools used in policing such as cars, guns, and communications equipment. Rather, it includes non-material forms such as knowledge aimed toward achieving a specific end “without itself necessarily being translated into something physical or material... (e.g., instructional methodologies in education, processes, ideas)” (Carroll 2017:18). Technology broadly encompasses the products of human

knowledge that function together when applied to a specific purpose to that can provide some benefit. For police, examples of non-material technology include practices like training methodologies and crime prevention strategies, such as Community Oriented Policing and Hot Spot Policing (Braga, et al. 2019, Gill, et al. 2014).

This broad definition of technology recognizes that the physical and social aspects of technology are “inextricably related,” an insight which is key to understanding how historical changes in policing shape and are shaped by technology (Orlikowski 2007:1437). In recent decades, attempts at technologically induced change in policing have occurred in response to public outcry and legal challenges over cases of excessive force, particularly against Black men, such as the beating of Rodney King and the killing of Eric Garner (Beutin 2017, Jiao 2020). The ever-increasing technological sophistication of law enforcement has not been sufficient to address long standing issues such as racial discrimination and excessive force which continue to be sources of tension between police and the public (Benjamin 2019, Desmond, et al. 2016, Moule, et al. 2018).

Concerns over bias and misconduct by police including excessive force have led police to seek high-tech solutions to mitigate the effects of individual bias and increase officer accountability. The rise of “big data” in modern policing is one example. Intended to address issues such as racial bias, predictive policing technology seeks to replace flawed human discretion with data driven tools that in theory better enable police to avoid the pitfalls of bias. Law enforcement “have adopted big data analytics as a means to increase efficiency, improve prediction, and reduce bias” (Brayne 2017:979). However, these technologies do not necessarily reduce bias and can serve to obfuscate it, ultimately contributing to the reproduction of the

inequalities they are meant to address (Brayne 2017, 2021). Surveillance technology has also been implemented in the form of body worn cameras (BWCs) to increase officer accountability and public trust by providing a record of police conduct during interactions with the public. As is the case with the other technologies discussed above, BWCs have not proven to be reliable tools in changing the behavior of either police or citizens (Lum, et al. 2020).

Some of the most widely adopted of technologies for addressing concerns about use of force are less lethal weapons, such as conducted energy devices (CEDs) like the popular TASER. Less lethal weapons were introduced to reduce the use of lethal force by providing officers with another, less injurious way to incapacitate suspects (Downs 2007). The intention was to simultaneously increase the safety of police officers and the public. However, their effectiveness in achieving these goals is not well established. A recent systematic review of the literature found that there was a small reduction in officer injuries when they employed CEDs, rather than going hands on (Sheppard and Walsh 2022). However, the authors are careful to note their findings are far from conclusive because, “the evaluation literature of police use of these weapons in the field is woefully underdeveloped”(Sheppard and Walsh 2022: 8). Despite the intentions of those who develop and implement these tools, research shows that these technologies can nonetheless be used in ways that violate citizens’ rights resulting in serious injury or death, and contribute to escalating otherwise non-violent situations (Ariel, et al. 2019, Infantides, et al. 2020, Kaske, et al. 2021)

Rather than summarily restructure how organizations operate, new technologies can be subsumed into the norms and structures of an organization in ways counter to their intended purpose (Vaughn 1990,1999). In particular, the occupational culture of policing places

significant emphasis on the possibility of violence during encounters with the public. For example, prior research has shown the powerful influence of police officer's preoccupation with danger and violence exerts over police culture and practice (Sierra-Arévalo 2021). This emphasis on the potential for violence operates as part of the cultural frame of policing. Cultural frames refer to the cognitive lenses developed by individuals to give meaning to information as individual experiences are filtered through these frames which, "highlight certain aspects and hide or block others" (Goffman 1974, Lamont and Small 2008:80). Sierra-Arévalo describes this frame as the "danger imperative," which "encourages particular safety-enhancing behaviors, (re)constructing an organizational culture and lived experience that highlight the mortal peril faced by officers on patrol." (2021:76). These behaviors are modeled for police by their mentors and peers as part of an ongoing socialization process through which officers are taught that they need to engage in these behaviors to keep themselves and fellow officers safe. This socialization process begins in police academies which foster a "warrior" mindset among officers but continues throughout and even after their careers (Carlson 2019, Simon 2021). The failure of technological reforms stems from a failure to address underlying cultural issues that impact how officers use or misuse the tools at their disposal (Sierra-Arévalo 2019, Wozniak and Uggen 2009).

Past reforms have not altered police culture in ways that solve the problems surrounding use of force, yet there is a continuous cycle of new technologies being introduced in order to address them only to be subsumed into the existing culture and structure of policing. Policy makers are aware of the challenges these elements of police culture pose when attempting to enact meaningful reform, yet it has not stopped them from seeking technical solutions to the issues of violence and discrimination (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015).

BJJ is among the most recent of these proposed solutions to gain traction following a high-profile case of police violence. Between the summer of 2020 and the time of this writing, 47 states have approved some form of BJJ training as part of their standards for training police, up from 3 during the period prior (gracieuniversity.com). However, unlike the other examples discussed above, its proponents argue that it is uniquely capable of addressing use of force issues at both the technical and cultural level. In order explain why BJJ advocates hold this belief in the following section I describe how BJJ operates as a technology which is embodied by practitioners offering unique benefits compared to more instrumental forms of technology such as TASERS.

Brazilian Jiu Jitsu as a Technological Reform

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu is an elaboration on a martial art, which can be traced back to Japan. “Jiu-Jitsu” translates roughly into “gentle art” in English or “Arte Suave” in Portuguese. BJJ is a grappling based martial art that emphasizes the use of leverage to control and subdue opponents through takedowns, physical pins, and submission holds. Like all martial arts, it is fundamentally a technology of violence, one which may have utility for police who often find themselves in situations where the ability to control a resisting person and place them in handcuffs is necessary. In that sense, BJJ is no different than any other less lethal weapon in that its intention is to incapacitate an individual with the goal of arresting them.

However, proponents of BJJ argue that it differs from other tools as learning how to use it requires practitioners to go through a process of embodiment which provides unique benefits compared to more traditional less lethal technologies. BJJ training can act as a “civilizing process” as training to fight can contribute to the cultivation of a “habitus of restraint” and a

seemingly paradoxical reduction in violence (Elias 2000, Gong 2015:615). Below I identify three characteristics of BJJ that make it an appealing option for reducing use of force and excessive force: control, social calibration, and stress inoculation.

BJJ's reputation as the "gentle art" stems from the great amount of control practitioners can exert in the execution of techniques. Rather than operating along a binary where the only option is force or no force BJJ allows for force to be exerted along a continuum. This is one of two ways in which we can think about control. Unlike other less-lethal technologies, BJJ techniques allow the practitioner to control the amount of force they apply with a great deal of precision which in theory could help reduce instances of excessive force. The ability to control the degree of force used is not something that comes ready made to practitioners; it requires them to develop a feel for the techniques and how they operate against actual human bodies in motion. To use Jiu-Jitsu effectively and with control requires an individual to go through a process of embodiment (Bourdieu 1986). The knowledge of the techniques is not merely inscribed into their minds, but into their bodies as they come to understand how to use it as a tool, something common to all martial arts (Burke 2022, Green 2016, Wacquant 2021).

Students are taught to use their bodies to create levers and wedges allowing them to off-balance and trap opponents in disadvantageous positions or reverse the position when they find themselves at a disadvantage. Students are also taught that there is a hierarchy of positions which represent a continuum of control or physical dominance. Typically, positions where the practitioner is on top of or behind their opponent are considered superior to those where they are on the bottom. This ability to control a suspect is the second sense in which control is seen as one of the major benefits of BJJ for police. While other technologies also allow police to exert

control over a suspect, they do so through less reliable means. Pointing a gun at a suspect for example relies on threat to gain compliance. A TASER is only effective if electricity is being conducted. If the electrified probes of a TASER do not make proper contact, the device will fail to incapacitate a suspect. Further, there is a temporal gap between when a suspect is successfully incapacitated by a TASER and their being placed in handcuffs. During this gap, it may be difficult for police to retain control. BJJ, by contrast, enables an officer to use their body to reliably and completely restrain a resisting suspect.

Through the systematic application of BJJ techniques, practitioners can move through advantageous positions to achieve control and potentially apply a submission hold. Submission holds include joint locks and choke holds. In a training or competition setting the submission is held until the opponent “taps” indicating they have given up by physically tapping a hand or foot on the opponent's body or saying tap verbally. In cases where an individual does not tap or in a situation where the rules that govern training and competition are not in place, these techniques are capable and in fact developed to maim or kill. Broken bones, torn ligaments, and asphyxiation are the inevitable outcomes of these techniques when they are applied to their fullest extent.

Recognizing the potential consequences of the techniques they are using, BJJ schools place a great deal of emphasis on safety and developing a sense of mutual trust between training partners (Burke 2022, Gong 2015, Green 2016). Learning the appropriate level of force with which to apply a technique is an important lesson in BJJ. In her study of commercial BJJ training, Burke refers to this learning process as “social calibration,” which teaches BJJ practitioners to determine the appropriate amount of force or intensity required in a given

situation based on contextual factors such as the size, fitness, age, and gender of those with which they are sparring (2022). In the context of police work, being able to determine how much force is appropriate in a given situation enables officers to take advantage of the control aspects of BJJ and, ideally, apply the minimal amount of force required to gain control of a suspect.

The third characteristic of BJJ is stress inoculation”, a gradual and controlled exposure to stress which increases an individual’s resilience over time (Rutter 2012). Most new students of BJJ can expect to spend at least the first several months being dominated by those with more experience due the steep learning curve. In practice this means being pinned to the ground and submitted repeatedly. Finding yourself stuck in these positions can be simultaneously painful, humbling, and stressful, but it is a necessary requirement for learning. One can easily begin to panic and feel claustrophobic when someone forces you into a position where you are forced to bear their weight and your breathing is restricted. As students’ progress, they learn to remain calm in these positions and overcome their initial discomfort. By being forced to experience the effects of the techniques and being placed in stressful situations as part of the learning process, students benefit from stress inoculation. Those advocating for police to learn BJJ argue that the stress inoculation that occurs during training will make them less likely to panic when confronted with stressful situations on the job and thus less likely to turn to force.

Taken together, these three aspects of BJJ underlie its hypothesized utility for reducing officers’ use of lethal force: officers will not only be better able to remain calm under stress but will also possess the technical ability to subdue an individual with the minimum amount of force necessary when required. These supposed benefits notwithstanding, current discussion of BJJ in policing fails to account for how these benefits may be undermined by the occupational culture

of policing. The remainder of this thesis examines whether and how police come to embody BJJ and how this process is shaped by the dominant institutional culture of policing. I argue police culture undermines the potential of BJJ as an effective means of reducing police violence and that BJJ is ultimately transformed to fit within the existing framework rather than contributing to institutional change.

Data and Methods

This project draws on ethnographic observations and interviews gathered in Austin, Texas, Marietta, Georgia, and several other field sites. I observed commercial BJJ gyms, police departments, police academies, BJJ and policing seminars, and BJJ tournaments. My two primary field sites were selected based on their status as what Luker refers to as “data outcroppings”—spaces which provide unique and particularly rich insights into a particular social phenomenon or process (2008). In addition to these physical locations, supplementary data were gathered from digital sources such as websites and social media run by or targeted to the overlapping law enforcement and BJJ communities. Combining observations, interviews, and analysis of digital materials enabled me to better contextualize what I saw in the field by giving me insight into how information was shared, discussed, and understood by police.

Austin is a large city and the capital of Texas with a current population of roughly 1 million people. Austin is a strategic site for investigating the relationship between BJJ and policing. Since 2020, it has become one of the premier destinations in the world for BJJ practitioners, having attracted a number of world champions, high-level competitors, and renowned instructors (Lindsey 2021). It has also been a site of significant debate over police

reform and funding, particularly in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020. The police response to Floyd protests in downtown Austin which resulted in severe injuries to several protestors, including Anthony Evans and Sam Kirsch caused by improper use of less-lethal munitions (e.g., beanbag rounds) (Autullo 2022, Freer 2022).

My field observations in Austin took place predominately at Renzo Gracie Austin (RGA), a BJJ gym opened in late-2020 by Jason Rebsch, a BJJ black belt who retired from a 24-year career in law enforcement. Many of the gym's members work as law enforcement in and around the Austin area. Jason is also a leading proponent of making BJJ mandatory in law enforcement training. To that end, Jason co-founded Invictus LEO, an organization that promotes "making it [BJJ] mandatory." Through a combination of social media, seminars, merchandise, and self-published studies, they work to spread awareness about the benefits of BJJ in a law enforcement context and advocate for its adoption as a standard practice. Jason also works as an instructor with Code 4 Combat (C4C), a for-profit organization which provides BJJ-based defensive tactics instruction and certification for law enforcement officers. For these reasons, RGA is an especially useful site to study how BJJ is being integrated into BJJ culturally and institutionally.

Marietta is a small city with a population of some 60,000, located 20 miles north of Atlanta. The Marietta Police Department (MPD), which employs approximately 150 sworn officers, was the first in the country to introduce a mandatory BJJ training program. This program has drawn significant attention from members of the law enforcement and BJJ communities, as well as the media (HBO Real Sports 2021). The program has been touted by organizations like Invictus and other advocates as an example of how mandatory BJJ training can be successfully implemented to reduce use of force and address issues in modern policing. One

example of this is the widely touted, but unreviewed study produced by the MPD that shows reductions in the rate of use of force and the level of force used by officers after the implementation of the BJJ program (King and Culpepper 2020).

Data collection took place between 2020 and 2023, though I began to train BJJ in 2017. My observations in Austin throughout this period took place primarily at Renzo Gracie Austin (RGA) where I participated in training between 2 and 10 hours a week throughout the duration of the study period. These classes were open to the public and included both law enforcement and civilians training with and alongside one another. Typically, classes lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, though instructors and some students spent time in and around the gym before and after class. This dynamic allowed me to form connections and build rapport with law enforcement and civilian gym members. I was able to leverage my relationships with active and retired law enforcement officers to identify interview participants and facilitate my entry into other field sites. This included the Austin Police Academy where I was able to observe training, speak with administrators and instructors, as well as participate in “open mat” sessions during which I trained with APD officers and other first responders from the Austin area. These connections, in turn, helped me gain access to the MPD.

Data collection in Marietta took place during a month of intensive field work in the summer of 2022. Field work was carried out primarily via ride-alongs and classes at Borges BJJ, the local BJJ gym which the MPD has partnered with to provide training to its officers. During ride-alongs, I accompanied an officer for their 8-hour shift. These ride-alongs were split between morning shifts (7am to 3pm) and evening shifts (3pm to 11 pm). They were also staggered to cover all days of the week. I was not permitted to ride with officers during the overnight shift because of departmental concerns for my physical safety. Participant observations at Borges BJJ

(BJJ) took place during regularly scheduled classes attended by members of the public and sworn MPD officers. Classes ran for a total of 90 minutes and as occurred at RGA in Austin, many people spent time in the gym before and after class. The mixture of more structured interaction during class and informal interactions outside of class time were vital for creating and reinforcing social bonds in the gym and provided opportunities to develop rapport with MPD officers outside of their time on patrol.

In addition to ethnographic observations, this thesis draws on 31 in-depth interviews. These interviews were conducted with patrol officers, police administrators, and BJJ instructors, as well as BJJ practitioners with no direct connection to law enforcement. The questions asked were theoretically informed and designed to address the themes emergent in my fieldwork as part of an abductive approach to data collection (Lareau 2021; Luker 2008). This approach allowed me to develop working theories based on the data I had collected up to that point. As part of an iterative process, I was able to alter my theories as new information was presented to me during my fieldwork. The majority of my respondents were white, male, and had some current or past affiliation with law enforcement (Table 1). Interviewees were recruited during field work and through snowball sampling in which interviewees suggested others whom I might be interested to interview. Although snowball sampling has limitations in terms of representativeness, it is often a useful way to access hard to reach communities (Parker and Scott 2019). Additionally, the process of snowball sampling can provide some insight into the social networks of respondents (Noy 2008). To address the limitations of snowball sampling and the predominately white, male demographics of my field sites, I supplemented my snowball sample with targeted sampling of women and people of color among police and instructors. This was part of a broader

strategy of seeking out demographic variation in my sample to assess whether differences in race.

and gender manifested in beliefs and attitudes (Jensen and Auyero 2019).

Gender	Count
Male	28
Female	3
Race/Ethnicity	Count
White	21
Black	3
Hispanic	5
Asian/Pacific Islander	2
Law Enforcement Experience	Count
Current or Former	26
None	5

Interviews took place primarily in-person at a location of the respondent's choice, including coffee shops, parks, and cars. In some cases, interviews took place over the phone or

via video conference due to logistical constraints. Interviews followed a semi-structured format and queried participants about their background in policing and martial arts, the type and quality of training they received, and their personal experiences with use of force. In my interviews with those that did not have a background in law enforcement, questions about law enforcement and use of force were modified to address their experiences interacting with law enforcement and instances of violence outside of a training or competitive context. The goal of these interviews was to move beyond surface level discourse and reveal the emotional, visceral, feelings of my subjects (Pugh 2012). In this sense, interviews were used to access the “deep truth” of participants’ world view— “the mental maps that people carry around inside their heads” (Luker 2008:167). These “mental maps” are a tool which people use to help navigate real life situations, combined with observations of behavior they can potentially illuminate how belief and behavior influence one another.

Data analysis, like data collection, followed an abductive approach in which my analysis occurred alongside and in conversation with my observations (Lareau 2021, Timmermans and Tavory 2012). My fieldnotes and interview transcripts were coded and analyzed using the Atlas Ti software package. Data was initially coded into broad “index codes,” such as “use of force” and “training.” As new questions and themes emerged, these codes became more specific and refined, which informed the questions I was asking in the field (Deterding and Waters 2018). This recursive process of data collection, analysis, and recoding was aided by the writing of thematic memos and discussions with my advisors and colleagues.

My identity and positionality affected my data collection and experiences in the field in important ways. My reception in the field was typically enthusiastic, a fact which surprised me given the “blue wall” that often pervades American policing (Skolnick 2002). Although, I was

occasionally met with either overt or covert suspicion of my intentions, these instances typically occurred early in my fieldwork. After introducing myself to one officer, he asked me if I was “one of those critical race theory nuts.” In another case, when I got into a car for a ride along, I saw a message exchange between the officer I was riding with and one of his colleagues that he had left up on the screen of his laptop. They were discussing whether I was a “hardcore leftist” and how their supervisor had made a big deal out of my presence. My status as white man of roughly the same age as many of my respondents—late-20s to early-30s—undoubtedly made negotiating some of these challenges easier. Additionally, years of prior BJJ experience helped me develop rapport and trust with participants through shared experiences which I would not have been able to draw if I had started training only upon entry to my first field site. This was particularly true for respondents who I had the opportunity to train with as there is a unique kind of intimacy that often develops through combat sports (Green 2016, Wacquant 2021). These factors were all a part of my “ethnographic toolkit” which consists of all the visible characteristics of the researcher (e.g., age, race, and gender) and the less visible tools of social and cultural capital (Reyes 2019).

I chose not to anonymize my field sites and key individuals. Although the practice is common among ethnographers to shield participants from harm, the effectiveness of these practices is questionable. As Jerlomack and Murphy argue, ethnographers often fail to “acknowledge the extent to which decisions about what and how to mask are inherently theoretical choices” (Jerlomack and Murphy 2016). They highlight the tradeoff between effective masking and a loss of specifics that may be significant. Field site transparency allowed me to include analytically relevant historical context of my field sites that is often obscured when research sites are de-identified. In Marrietta for example, it was a viral video of an arrest gone

wrong that provided the impetus for the city's adoption of its BJJ program (Dixon 2019, Lartey 2021). Similarly, my choice not to anonymize certain participants was based on their status as public figures. These individuals engage both publicly and openly as advocates for BJJ's incorporation to policing and thus their identity can help in understanding public discourse on the subject. In cases when I engaged directly with these individuals, they were given the opportunity to speak "off the record" if they felt it necessary.

From BJJ to PJJ

In this section, I show that the culture within police departments poses a significant obstacle to the effective implementation of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) as a tool for reducing police violence. I explain that rather than catalyzing institutional change, BJJ tends to adapt and conform to prevailing norms and attitudes within law enforcement. This adaptation diminishes BJJ's potential to bring about substantial shifts in police behavior. I demonstrate this by showing how the preoccupation with deadly violence within policing contributes to a new form of technology: Police Jiu-Jitsu (PJJ). I show how PJJ utilizes the same technical principles as BJJ but applies them to the context of police work with its attendant focus on deadly violence which undermines the benefits that are derived from control, social calibration, and stress inoculation.

When I began this research project, one of the first people I reached out to was Jason, the owner of Renzo Gracie Austin and co-founder of Invictus LEO, a grassroots organization that promotes BJJ for police. As a recently retired police officer, Jason has deep ties to both the BJJ and law enforcement communities and is among the most vocal advocates for police adopting BJJ as a standard part of their training. He extensively uses social media sites like Instagram, where he has over 10,000 followers, to encourage others to train. He does not limit himself to his

own platforms to spread this message, appearing as a guest on several podcasts where he has discussed policing and BJJ at length. He will often share videos of BJJ techniques and officers using BJJ in the field as evidence of how effective BJJ is for law enforcement. In other cases, he may share a video as a cautionary tale of the consequences of failing to receive adequate training. In addition to operating a commercial gym where he teaches BJJ to the general public, he also teaches material designed specifically with law enforcement in mind through Invictus and as instructor working for Code 4 Combat (C4C).

C4C is one of two main organizations that provide grappling based defensive tactics training to police officers, along with Gracie Survival Tactics (GST). Both promote themselves as solutions to deal with the challenges that arise when dealing with non-cooperative suspects during arrests. In promotional materials both organizations frame grappling as a way to protect both the police and the policed by equipping officers with a safe and effective use of force option that minimizes the need to turn to other options such as TASERS or firearms.

On the surface, there seems to be little difference between the two organizations, both teach officers techniques to take down, restrain, and handcuff suspects. Both organizations' curricula include techniques that would be familiar to any practitioner of BJJ, albeit with modifications for the specific needs of police. However, as one digs a bit deeper into the perspective and rhetoric which informs both the techniques that are taught and how they are understood by officers in practice differences begin to come into focus.

GST is a part of Gracie University, which is run by Renner and Ryron Gracie, the sons of Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) brainchild Rorion Gracie. They have long been involved in training military and law enforcement and are credited with aiding the development of the unarmed combat systems used by the U.S. Army and Marines (Larsen 1995). The Gracie's are an

exceptionally large family that is deeply tied to the development and diffusion of BJJ. Other members of the family members run their own gyms and affiliations; however, Gracie University is among the largest and most widespread claiming 267 certified training centers with students in 196 countries (Gracie University 2023). Although the Gracies have a long history of working with military and police in Brazil, the U.S., and elsewhere, some officers I spoke with continue to view them as outsiders due to their lack of firsthand experience working in law enforcement.

In contrast to Gracie University, which was founded by non-police, C4C was created by Chad Lyman, a police officer with the Las Vegas Metro Police Department. Chad has a Black Belt in BJJ and promotes what he calls Police Jiu-Jitsu (PJJ). Unlike BJJ, PJJ is designed specifically with police officers in mind. The tagline on their website is “Created During Combat in the Gym, Proven During Combat in the Street.” (Code4Combat 2023). Additionally, all of their instructors are current or former law enforcement officers. It was in a conversation with Jason that the distinctions between BJJ and PJJ became clear to me.

It was after class on a Friday evening when another student asked if we wanted to go to the pizza shop next door for dinner. Six of us, including me and Jason, headed over. After grabbing a beer and settling in at a table outside, we started chatting about training. During this conversation, one of Jason’s assistant instructors was scrolling through Instagram posts on his phone. He stopped on a post and turned toward Jason, asking if he had seen it. It was a video of Renner and Ryron Gracie, the founders of Gracie Survival Tactics (GST), demonstrating a technique for handcuffing a suspect who was prone on their stomach with their hands underneath them. He said that someone had sent it to him earlier asking him his opinion. He said in all honesty it was “bullshit” and that he wouldn’t teach it that way.

When I asked what he meant, he explained to me that the technique is flawed from a law enforcement perspective because, “if the person had a weapon tucked in their waistband, they may still be able to access it.” Without at least two other officers present, he said, he would prefer to restrain the suspect until backup arrives and try to verbally deescalate. Should the suspect make furtive movements, he said he would disengage and shoot the suspect. He said once backup arrives, you have another officer controlling the far side arm while the third keeps his gun drawn and “if the guy makes any furtive movements, he is going to get killed.” Referring to the technique shown by the Gracie’s in the video, he told me, “Cops know this isn’t gonna work in the street unless they are drinking that Gracie Kool-Aid.” This was the first time I had heard someone articulate the belief that the BJJ one uses in the gym is different from what should be used by police and that the legitimacy of certain techniques and instructors were contested.

Jason praised Rener Gracie during our conversation for his efforts to encourage police to train grappling, but he criticized those coming from a strictly BJJ background for not understanding the dangers that come along with being a police officer. He made a point of highlighting that police need to be thinking in terms of worst-case scenarios, not simply likely scenarios. A few days later, he created his own video showing the technique's flaws. With the help of two others, one who I recognized from an Invictus seminar, they went on to drill the technique with the person playing the role of the suspect alternating being armed with either a dummy training gun or knife. The larger man, who I recognized from the Invictus seminar, played the role of the police officer. The smaller man played the role of the suspect.

The man playing the suspect resisted and attempted to draw the weapon to attack the officer or imaginary bystanders. After successfully performing the mock attack multiple times,

the man portraying the officer instructed the man acting as the suspect to move his wrist extensively. Upon doing so, the person in the role of the officer said, “look how many people you just shot.” At the end of the video, the officer mock drew his own imaginary gun from its holster and pointed it at the head of the suspect pinned to the ground underneath him and pantomimed pulling the trigger. “Boom. Gone.” he said as he walks away. Off camera, Jason can be heard saying “Exactly. Exactly. It’s not a game.”

Though the technique demonstrated by the Gracie’s would be a sufficient way to control and potentially submit someone in the context of recreational BJJ or even an unarmed confrontation, Jason and his confederates viewed it as insufficient to guarantee survival during a police encounter. This is because there is a widespread belief among officers that I spoke with that the techniques must be modified to account for the presence of potentially deadly weapons including their own. The ubiquity of firearms and other weapons elevate the consequences of making a mistake to the level of life or death (Ariel, et al. 2019, Carlson 2020, Sierra-Arévalo 2021)

Multiple officers I spoke with across field sites consider BJJ to be a useful but significantly limited tool. To address the limitations of non-police focused BJJ, they seek out their own solutions which fit with their lived experiences on the job. The result is a proliferation of techniques that fit within the existing cultural parameters of policing, which is one that teaches officers it is a graver error to use too little force than too much (Hunt 1985). This was something I observed firsthand at seminars for law enforcement where techniques were modified to allow officers to retain their gun if a suspect tried to take it or to allow officers to draw and fire while they were in a disadvantageous position such as being stuck on their back with someone pinning them down.

Over a year after my conversation with Jason and his video critique, I attended a GST course where the technique he had criticized was being taught. Jim, the head instructor, remarked to the students that he knew “this move is a little controversial for some.” He demonstrated the original version of the technique along with a new variation meant to address Jason’s criticisms. Although he didn’t mention him by name, Jim and the other GST instructors were aware of the issues Jason had raised and sought to correct them.

This example demonstrates that BJJ is not a technology readymade for the needs of police. Techniques are modified based on those needs, which are shaped by an institutional culture that places a special emphasis on not just violence, but *deadly* violence. This, in turn, limits the benefits of BJJ as an intervention because it fails to address the assumption of potentially lethal threat. Officers who are trained in BJJ are still armed and empowered to use deadly force. BJJ is also not distinct from deadly force and can be integrated with the use of firearms. Modified BJJ techniques that would allow an officer to draw and fire a weapon while grappling with a suspect are commonly taught during seminars and training for law enforcement. Rather than BJJ making police less concerned about violence, BJJ in the context of police work becomes more concerned with the possibility of a lethal encounter.

In fact, some techniques such as lateral vascular neck restraints (LVNRs) are classified as deadly force options only to be used when the law and departmental policy allow for that level of force. LVNR’s are any techniques that occlude blood flow to the brain by placing pressure on the sides of the neck. The specifics of departmental policies vary, but typically deadly force is permitted in two circumstances: a situation in which a police officer believes a suspect poses an imminent threat of serious bodily harm to themselves or another, or when a suspect of a crime involving the infliction of serious physical injury is attempting to flee and is believed to pose an

ongoing threat (*Tennessee v. Garner* 1985). BJJ includes many techniques that fall under the umbrella of LVNRs, including the rear naked choke (RNC). This technique, which is one of the most commonly used submission in BJJ, requires a practitioner to be behind their opponent while wrapping an arm under their chin and around their neck. In training or competition, one can normally expect their opponent to tap before they lose consciousness. A responsible BJJ practitioner would then be expected to immediately release the choke to preserve the safety of their opponent or training partner. Individuals who do not tap lose consciousness within a few seconds.

However, as I heard from some of the police BJJ practitioners with whom I spoke, the respectful nature of BJJ does not extend outside of the gym. As one officer said, “there is no tapping in the street.” In a street-fight scenario, some officers felt that until they had incapacitated a suspect and placed them in handcuffs, they should ignore suspects who cry out in pain or verbally signal that they have given up. In the BJJ gym, both of these signals immediately stop a choke or submission—not on the street. One can understand that officers would be concerned about a suspect feigning submission only to continue fighting when a chokehold is loosened. But this seemingly pragmatic approach can have potentially dire consequences for suspects, including severe injury and death.

This was apparent during a day of training I observed at a regional police academy¹ near Marietta. Sgt. Cano, a brown belt from MPD with 8 years of BJJ experience and over 20 as a police officer, had been invited to help incorporate BJJ techniques into the defensive tactics training for a group of police recruits. At one point late in the day, Sgt. Cano demonstrated a rear

¹ In Georgia and several other states, smaller municipalities and counties cooperate to maintain regional police academies to train law enforcement officers. Graduates of these regional academies may end up working in different agencies in the area including municipal Police departments and Sheriff’s offices.

naked choke for recruits. He and Major Henry who ran the academy were both careful to reiterate several times that this technique was considered deadly force and should only be used in accordance with department policy. Sgt. Cano was demonstrating the technique on me when he took a brief pause and said, “I just want to point out that ‘I can’t breathe’ is bullshit. If you can’t breathe, you can’t talk.”

I was taken aback by the suddenness of his declaration, but more importantly it struck me as extremely misleading. As Sgt. Cano and Major Henry had taken the time to explain to the recruits, an LVNR may or may not result in the obstruction of an airway because they are primarily targeting the blood vessels in the side of the neck. While these holds do not technically obstruct breathing, the subjective experience of being strangled (i.e., loss of blood flow) versus being suffocated (i.e., loss of airflow) is not something that most individuals are able to distinguish between unless they have received specific training. Tragically, there have been numerous cases where victims of police violence have uttered the words, “I can’t breathe,” only moments before their death. The killing of Eric Garner by NYPD officers in 2014 is one such case. An LVNR was applied during an arrest and Garner pleaded with officers to release the choke, telling them he couldn’t breathe multiple times before he died (Snyder, et al. 2017).

Sgt. Cano is someone who should know that saying, “I can’t breathe is bullshit,” is not accurate. He demonstrated both the theoretical and embodied knowledge of how these techniques work and how they feel having been on both the giving and receiving end. I questioned him about what he said and cited how I verbally said the word “tap” when he had demonstrated the technique on me just moments ago. He told the recruits and me that I wouldn’t have been able to keep talking and that, “you can’t risk letting go of someone who might kill you.” His words demonstrate an inherent tension between the respectful, safety-focused ethos of

BJJ in the gym and the message of survival-at-all-costs into which police are socialized. While advocates of BJJ in policing emphasize that BJJ is a tool that allows officers to restrain suspects without the risk of serious injury from striking or shooting them, the emphasis of officers like Cano on officer survival justify using BJJ techniques in a way that *increases* the likelihood of suspect injury.

Insider/Outsider Dynamics

The disconnect between BJJ as a martial art or sport and BJJ as a police technology was further reflected in debates over whose knowledge about BJJ was legitimate. The tension between insider and outsider knowledge affects how officers internalize the training they receive and how they use it in the field. The skepticism of training offered by those who are experts in BJJ but do not have experience as police was not reserved solely for the Gracie's. For police, the utility of BJJ is tied not only to its techniques' effectiveness, but its resonance with existing frameworks through which they understand the world around them. In Marietta, many officers suggested that the six months of mandatory training they received at Borges BJJ did not fully prepare them for what they encounter on the job. Borges BJJ is a commercial BJJ gym which the MPD has contracted with to provide training to their officers. It is run by Humberto Borges who has an extensive background in BJJ and has been involved in training law enforcement for several years, however he himself does not have a law enforcement background. They attributed Professor Borges' lack of experience implementing techniques in the street with a disconnect between how he taught and the conditions they encountered. Frontline workers, such as the police, often encounter a disconnect between training and practice because, "learning takes place in complex contexts, requiring practitioners to overcome various motivational, systemic, emotional, and social barriers to the application of knowledge." (Kalke, et al. 2019:227). This is

true among the work of many “street-level bureaucrats,” including medical professionals, social workers, and police (Braga and Weisburd 2019, Hill 2003, Kalke, et al. 2019, Lipsky 1983). In the context of policing, “the problem of having to make a quick decision in life-threatening circumstances is a major foundation of occupational conservatism in police practice.” (Lipsky 1983:30). The degree of skepticism among officers toward BJJ varied but critiques fit broadly into two categories: those who felt that BJJ was useful but wanted to incorporate more training specifically tailored to law enforcement, and those who felt BJJ was a waste of time or even a legal and safety liability.

Typical of those in the first group was Officer Rossi. Unlike other officers who stopped training as soon as they finished the departmentally mandated 6-month training period, Rossi continued to train regularly. I met him a few months after he received his blue belt, about two years after he first began training BJJ. When I asked him what he thought of the departments’ mandatory training program he told me, “BJJ is great, especially for cops, but the way we train at Borges leaves some important stuff out. “When I asked him to explain what he meant he gave the example of a hip-escape, a basic BJJ technique used to create space necessary for getting back to one’s feet when someone has you on the ground. He told me how this technique that they drill in every BJJ class as a warm-up becomes vastly more difficult when you are attempting to perform it while wearing a bullet proof vest and duty belt strapped to your hips which are normally unencumbered. Officer Rossi praised Professor Borges as a BJJ instructor but lamented the fact that he did not set aside time to have his law enforcement students do things like train with their equipment on. Telling me “It’s not the same in the gym where you can tap if you’re stuck. It’s life or death for us out here.”

Similar sentiments were expressed by Officer Smith, who had also earned his blue belt and was pointed out to me by the Sargent Cano as someone I should talk to because he had successfully used the BJJ techniques he was taught to restrain suspects. Cano showed me a video of Smith, taken from bodycam footage, using a back mount to control a suspect while he waited for backup to arrive. Cano smiled as he told me, “I show this one to all the new guys.” When I spoke with Smith during a ride along, he told me that despite the fact that he believed in the skills they were being taught because he had used them successfully, they didn’t cover things that he felt were important like dealing with weapons or even an unarmed, combative suspect.

“Like, I’m glad I can take someone down,” he said. “But, man, in the gym you don’t deal with knives or guys trying to smash your face.” The statements of Officers Smith and Rossi reflect the disconnect between theory and practice, but also how interpretation of what constitutes “correct” practice is shaped by context. For them, Professor Borges did not apply his knowledge to fit their circumstances because he did not fully understand the context in which they worked. As a result, it undermined his credibility to some extent and made it less likely that they would invest fully in what he was trying to teach.

Other officers were decidedly more critical of BJJ and its applicability to their work. Some went so far as to argue that BJJ was actively detrimental to officer safety. Lieutenant Rogers told me that BJJ instilled bad habits like playing guard (being underneath an opponent), which would endanger officers. Unlike training or competition where some practitioners actively choose to fight from their back, being on one’s back on the street was seen as an unacceptable and potentially deadly disadvantage. He also explained that techniques like chokes that are trained regularly in the gym are likely to be misused, not necessarily because of ill intent, but because they become an automatic reaction through repetition during training. I mentioned that

within BJJ generally and from what I had observed of Prof. Borges' teaching, there was a great deal of emphasis on controlling how and what techniques are used.. He countered that Borges and me, "who only use this stuff in the gym," didn't appreciate how people revert to their instincts under the type of stress that police face when they are trying to make an arrest of someone who "has superman strength because he's cracked out." Although officers varied in their beliefs about the usefulness of BJJ for police work, the same underlying concern motivated their critiques: non-police instructors lacked necessary firsthand experience with police work to understand the unique pressures faced by officers on the street.

For police, the utility of BJJ is tied not only to its techniques' effectiveness but its resonance with existing frameworks through which they understand the world around them. The result is that the technologies and practices that cannot be aligned with existing norms are likely to be rejected. To successfully convince police to adopt BJJ, proponents and instructors rely heavily on showing that their techniques were developed and modified with the needs law enforcement in mind. This was apparent during my conversation with Charlie, an ex-cop who is now in charge of developing the curriculum for GST. I asked Charlie if he had encountered skeptics among those he taught. He told me he had and explained that in those situations where he was teaching police, "My law enforcement background was the single most useful tool I had to build trust." His shared experience allowed him to make claims not just as BJJ instructor, but as a police officer who shares lived experiences and understanding with trainees who are also police.

BJJ advocates across groups are aware of the need to establish legitimacy in the eyes of police. Officers place a premium on the expertise of those with shared experience and try to appeal to police as insiders. Invictus maintains a database on its website of individuals who have

both BJJ and law enforcement experience. The Invictus site gives two reasons for tracking this information:

“The first is an easy way for people to check and verify an instructor that they are both LEO's (former or active) and also Black Belts in BJJ. The second reason is to build a database for an Invictus Black Belt conference in the future where we can all get together and combine our collective experience to push the #BJJMAKEITMANDATORY movement. (Invictus LEO 2023).

The dominant culture of policing encourages a distrust of those who seek to change policing from the outside for fear that they may place police at even greater risk even if they are well meaning. The reliance on insiders limits the potential of BJJ as disruptive force within the culture of policing as instructors are often subject to the same biases and misconceptions as those they are teaching.

Discussion and Conclusion

This thesis contributes a growing body of research analyzing how police practices are shaped by culture and technology. BJJ is one of the most recent examples of police seeking technical solutions to ongoing institutional problems, particularly those arising from the use of force. My findings show that despite the best intentions of reformers, BJJ does not address the hegemonic culture of danger and violence that has come to define American policing (Sierra-Arévalo 2021, Simon 2021). The beneficial aspects of BJJ are not sufficient to escape the cultural gravity of danger imperative leading BJJ to be transformed by policing rather than transforming it. The case presented here is an instantiation of this, but it is only the most recent

example of how the meaning and usage of technology are shaped by cultural and institutional frames.

This study was not designed to establish the relative effectiveness of BJJ in reducing use of force incidents, cases of excessive force, or rates of injury among suspects or officers. This study's qualitative methodology is not suited to answer these questions. Further, the relatively recent adoption of BJJ by police and a lack of high-quality data prevents reliable, longitudinal analysis needed to establish the precise effects of BJJ training on use of force. Internal data from early adopters like the MPD suggest that the introduction of their mandatory BJJ program has contributed to a reduction in use of force (King and Culpepper 2020). However, we cannot draw generalizable conclusions based on two years of data from one department. As highlighted in the literature review, the significance of data accuracy and accessibility regarding the use of force is an essential factor for policymakers and administrators to consider when implementing BJJ or other similar technologies. Making informed decisions about the effectiveness of policies and technology will require police agencies to take steps to improve data collection in line with recommendations established by past research (Fryer 2019, Sheppard and Walsh 2022).

Control, social calibration, and stress inoculation were cited by officers as having tangible benefits on the job and in their personal lives. This finding aligns with my own experience and the findings of research on martial artists more broadly (Burke 2022, Gong 2015, Green 2016, Wacquant 2021). Although violent by nature, martial arts do appear to act a civilizing process which can counter *some* of the effects of police culture (Gong 2015). The findings of this study along with those of prior research suggest that the socialization of police into the danger imperative represents a countervailing "decivilizing process" (Elias 2000, Wacquant 2004). It is through this process that the meaning and use of technology comes to be

redefined in terms of the danger imperative's preoccupation with violence and officer safety and more closely aligned with the warrior mentality that pervades policing (Sierra-Arévalo 2021, Simon 2021). Until the cultural issues of how police view the role of violence in their work are addressed, comprehensive solutions to the problem of police violence will remain as elusive.

Finally, while this thesis has focused on the institution of policing, analyzing technological reform efforts in other institutions, such as schools and hospitals, is a fruitful avenue for future researcher to explore. My findings here suggest that attempts to use technology to bring about cultural change can be undermined by existing institutional/cultural frames. The influence and nature of these frames varies a great deal across different institutions (Benford and Snow 2000, Lamont and Small 2008). Future research may want to investigate how these specifics may alter the outcome of attempts at technological reform. BJJ resonates with the existing culture of policing in several ways that have contributed to its adoption. Technology that is less easily aligned with existing frames may be less susceptible being assimilated and more successful in triggering more fundamental changes to institutional culture. Whether or not this is the case and how these dynamics may affect the willingness to adopt changes are open empirical questions that can and should be addressed by future studies.

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