#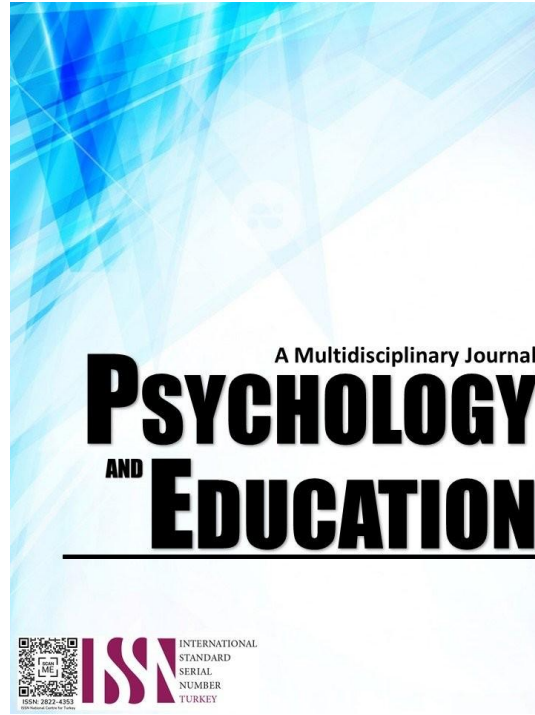 CRIMINOLOGY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE USE OF FORCE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORMS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Criminology Students' Perceptions of Police Use of Force and Criminal Justice Reforms:
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

This study examined the challenges criminology students face in learning about police use of force and criminal justice reforms using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Grounded in Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) and Procedural Justice Theory (Tyler, 2006), the study explored how students interpret legal ambiguity, negotiate moral and ethical tensions, and make sense of accountability within the justice system. Eighteen Bachelor of Science in Criminology students from six campuses of Isabela State University were purposively selected based on their exposure to policing and justice-related coursework. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit their lived experiences, and data were analyzed through Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis within an IPA framework. Four major themes emerged. First, unclear legal standards and confusing concepts showed how students struggled to grasp abstract doctrines such as reasonable force and proportionality without experiential grounding. Second, the emotional and cognitive toll of justice education highlighted the psychological strain of confronting moral contradictions, systemic inequality, and politically influenced reforms. Third, eroding trust and perceived absence of accountability revealed students' skepticism toward institutional transparency and how legal ambiguity weakens confidence in reform efforts. Fourth, the disconnect between classroom learning and real-world practice underscored students' difficulties reconciling theoretical instruction with inconsistent implementation in field contexts. These findings demonstrate the need for curriculum enhancements that promote applied understanding of legal concepts, integrate ethics and reflective learning, and strengthen simulation-based training. The study provides evidence-based insights for designing a context-responsive policy and instructional framework that better equips future criminology professionals to practice ethically and accountably.

Keywords: *criminal justice reforms, learning challenges, police use of force*

Introduction

Understanding how law enforcement applies force remains a critical concern in criminology because it shapes perceptions of legitimacy, accountability, and ethical practice. Recent studies highlight that the way young adults—especially criminology students—interpret coercive authority influences their confidence in justice institutions and their readiness to support policy changes (Hodge & Sexton, 2018; McLean, 2021; Sumala et al., 2024). In the Philippine context, these interpretations are further shaped by political climates, media narratives, and public discourse, all of which influence what students perceive as acceptable, justified, or excessive in police encounters (Curato, 2020; David et al., 2021).

As future practitioners, criminology students play a pivotal role in shaping the direction of policing. Their perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and accountability predict their willingness to support human-rights-based approaches and resist abusive practices once deployed in the field (Terry & Pepito, 2021; Dizon & Rivera, 2020). However, despite increasing research both locally and internationally, little is known about how Filipino criminology students make sense of coercive power within their educational context—particularly how they grapple with complex legal doctrines, ethical tensions, and conflicting societal expectations.

Beyond these contextual influences, criminology programs themselves play a crucial role in shaping student understanding. Literature shows that students frequently experience cognitive and emotional strain when learning about force standards, justice processes, and institutional reform. International findings indicate that abstract legal principles—such as necessity, proportionality, and reasonableness—are challenging to internalize without concrete casework or applied learning (Bell, 2017; Mullinix et al., 2020). Locally, scholars underscore persistent gaps between academic instruction and field realities, resulting in fragmented or incomplete understanding (Sumala et al., 2024; David et al., 2021). These gaps suggest that students' interpretations are shaped not only by doctrine but also by their emotions, experiences, and broader socio-political environment.

To frame these learning processes more systematically, this study is anchored on three interrelated theories. Procedural Justice Theory (Tyler, 2006; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003) explains how perceptions of fairness and transparency influence attitudes toward law enforcement. Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) illuminates the emotional and moral dissonance students experience when legal standards clash with personal or societal values. Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) clarifies why abstract principles remain difficult to master when instruction lacks real-world application. Together, these frameworks offer a multidimensional lens for understanding how students learn, internalize, and critique coercive authority and reform initiatives without repeating similar explanations.

Despite the rich international discourse, Philippine research has focused primarily on public trust, police performance, and political influences, leaving a gap in understanding how students themselves navigate the learning process. No qualitative study has examined

how Filipino criminology students interpret legal standards, confront moral dilemmas, and make sense of inconsistent reform implementation. This study addresses this gap by providing a thematic, context-grounded analysis of their learning challenges and by generating insights that may inform a more responsive, policy-aligned educational program. These gaps underscore an urgent need to explore the lived learning experiences of criminology students, particularly how they navigate legal, ethical, and emotional complexities surrounding police use of force and criminal justice reforms.

Research Questions

This study sought to explore the learning challenges criminology students encounter in understanding police use of force and criminal justice reforms, and to identify implications for educational policy and curriculum design. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students experience and interpret unclear legal standards such as "reasonable force" and "proportionality"?
2. What emotional or cognitive burdens do students face when studying morally complex or sensitive justice topics?
3. How do students perceive issues of trust, legitimacy, and accountability within the criminal justice system?
4. How do students describe the gap between classroom instruction and real-world policing or justice practices?

Literature Review

The study of police use of force remains a central concern in criminology, law enforcement, and social psychology because it shapes how legitimacy and authority are understood within society. Prior scholarship shows that grasping core principles such as necessity, proportionality, and reasonableness is essential in shaping both ethical and professional policing practices (Hodge & Sexton, 2018; McLean, 2021). However, these legal concepts often remain abstract in the classroom, making them difficult to apply in real-world situations, particularly in high-pressure encounters. Empirical work by Bell (2017) and Mullinix et al. (2020) demonstrates that ambiguity in force standards produces uncertainty not only among the public but also among learners of the criminal justice system. This body of research emphasizes the need for applied and experiential approaches in criminology education to strengthen comprehension of policing ethics and procedural justice.

Beyond conceptual difficulty, attitudes toward fairness, accountability, and institutional transparency shape how learners interpret reform efforts. Studies by McNeeley and Grothoff (2016) and Maguire et al. (2018) demonstrate that when individuals perceive justice processes as fair and transparent, they are more likely to support reform-oriented policing. Conversely, perceived bias, inconsistency, or impunity weakens trust in law enforcement institutions. Within academic programs, these dynamics surface as skepticism toward reforms that appear symbolic or politically motivated. Scholars such as Howes (2018) and Hemmens (2015) argue that integrating ethical reflection, lived experience, and scenario-based instruction helps bridge the gap between doctrinal knowledge and moral engagement, fostering accountability, empathy, and reflective practice among future justice professionals.

The present study is anchored on a constructivist–interpretivist philosophical foundation, which views knowledge about policing and reform as socially constructed through experience, dialogue, and context. This paradigm asserts that criminology students do not simply memorize doctrines; they engage in meaning-making shaped by personal values, emotional responses, and public narratives. Additionally, the transformative paradigm informs this work by recognizing that learning about force, justice, and reform inevitably involves issues of power, inequity, and moral judgment. Integrating these philosophical perspectives provides a strong conceptual rationale for employing a qualitative design to examine how students interpret and internalize police use of force and justice reforms within their educational experience.

Taken together, these strands of literature underscore the need for a context-grounded qualitative inquiry that examines how criminology students understand, negotiate, and make sense of policing and reform in the Philippine setting. In this area, empirical research remains limited.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to examine how criminology students experience and interpret the process of learning about police use of force and criminal justice reforms. IPA, a qualitative phenomenological approach, centers on how individuals make meaning of significant experiences in their lives, emphasizing interpretation rather than mere description (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This design is well-suited to the study's focus on deeply subjective phenomena—such as how students understand legal standards, navigate moral dilemmas, and interpret the perceived gap between classroom instruction and real-world policing practices.

Anchored in interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, IPA assumes that reality is co-constructed through language, reflection, and interaction. The researcher engages in a "double hermeneutic," interpreting participants who are themselves interpreting their own learning experiences. This methodological stance aligns with the study's goal of producing nuanced thematic insights into the challenges students encounter. It provides an appropriate analytic lens for addressing the research questions concerning meaning-making, ethical tensions, and educational disconnects.

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Participants

The participants in this study were eighteen (18) Bachelor of Science in Criminology students drawn from six campuses of Isabela State University offering the program: Angadanan, Cabagan, Cauayan, Echague, Jones, and Roxas. Three students per campus were purposively selected to capture a range of perspectives across institutional and academic contexts. Participants included students from 2nd to 4th year, with a roughly balanced representation of male and female students.

Inclusion criteria were: (a) currently enrolled BS Criminology students at the time of data collection; (b) aged 18 years and above; (c) with prior classroom exposure to topics related to policing, police operations, or the criminal justice system, including discussions of police use of force and reforms; and (d) willing and able to participate in a 30–45-minute interview conducted in Filipino, English, or Taglish. Exclusion criteria included: (a) students below 18 years of age; (b) those with no prior exposure to lessons or discussions on police use of force or criminal justice reforms; and (c) those unwilling or unable to provide informed consent or complete the interview. Pseudonyms (e.g., ANG1, CAB2, CAU3) were used in reporting to ensure confidentiality and protect participant identity.

Instrument

The primary instrument of the study was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide, designed to elicit detailed accounts of students' experiences and difficulties in learning about police use of force and criminal justice reforms. The guide consisted of open-ended questions organized around four broad domains: (1) understanding of key concepts and legal standards (e.g., "reasonable force," "proportionality," accountability); (2) emotional and cognitive reactions to course content; (3) perceptions of trust, legitimacy, and fairness in the justice system; and (4) perceived gaps between classroom learning and real-world practice, including suggestions for improvement or reform.

The interview guide was reviewed by two subject-matter experts in criminology/criminology education and one qualitative research specialist to ensure content relevance, clarity, and alignment with the research questions. Minor revisions in wording and sequencing of questions were made based on their feedback. The guide was also pilot-tested with two criminology students from a non-participating campus to check comprehension, flow, and approximate duration; data from the pilot were not included in the final analysis but informed refinement of the instrument.

Procedure

Data collection followed several stages. First, ethical approval was secured from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of the Philippine College of Criminology. Upon receiving clearance, the researcher coordinated with program chairs or designated faculty coordinators across the six campuses to obtain permission to conduct the study and identify participants who met the inclusion criteria.

Second, interested students were invited through class announcements and online postings. They were provided with a participant information sheet detailing the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights as research participants. Those who agreed signed an informed consent form prior to the interview. The researcher then arranged interview schedules based on participant availability, either face-to-face in a private campus room or through secure online platforms.

Third, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30–45 minutes were conducted in Filipino, English, or Taglish, at the participant's preference. With their permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure completeness and accuracy. The researcher used the interview guide flexibly—probing for elaboration when needed—while allowing participants to narrate their experiences freely.

Finally, recordings were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were returned to participants for member checking, allowing them to correct errors or clarify statements, thereby enhancing the accuracy and credibility of the data. All audio files, transcripts, and consent forms were stored in password-protected folders accessible only to the researcher. Field notes documenting contextual details and preliminary analytic impressions were maintained to support reflexive and analytic rigor throughout the study.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, applied within an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) orientation.

The researcher read each transcript multiple times while listening to the corresponding audio recordings to achieve deep familiarization. Initial impressions, notable phrases, and emotional cues were captured through brief analytic memos.

Transcripts were examined line by line, and initial codes were manually assigned to meaningful segments of text. Both descriptive and interpretive labels were used (e.g., "confusion about reasonable force," "emotional fatigue," "distrust in reforms," "theory–practice gap"). Coding was conducted systematically across all transcripts to ensure consistency.

Related codes were organized into preliminary themes. Codes reflecting legal ambiguity, confusing terminology, and difficulty applying standards were grouped under a broader theme on unclear legal frameworks. Fourth, these candidate themes were reviewed and refined by comparing them against the coded extracts and the complete data set. Some themes were merged, separated, or renamed to enhance coherence and clarity.

Each theme was clearly defined and labeled, specifying its central meaning and boundaries. Detailed theme descriptions were written to show how each theme addressed the research questions and related to other thematic patterns. This process resulted in four final themes: (1) unclear legal standards and confusing concepts, (2) overwhelmed minds and the mental toll of justice education, (3) eroding trust and absence of accountability, and (4) disconnect between classroom learning and real-world practice.

Representative quotations were selected to illustrate each theme and subtheme, ensuring diversity across campuses and participant backgrounds. The thematic findings were then integrated with interpretative insights and relevant literature. Throughout the analytic process, the researcher engaged in reflexive practice—revisiting memos, questioning assumptions, and remaining attentive to participants' own meaning-making—to preserve analytic rigor and minimize bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards for research involving human participants were strictly observed. Ethics clearance for the study was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of the Philippine College of Criminology. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were informed that they could decline to participate or withdraw at any point without penalty or academic consequence.

Before each interview, participants were provided with a written informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and their rights, including the option to refuse audio recording or skip any question they found uncomfortable. All participants signed the consent form before data collection.

To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms (e.g., ANG1, CAB2, JON3) were used in transcripts and when presenting findings. No identifying details, such as exact class sections, specific faculty names, or contact information, were included in the reports. Audio files, transcripts, and consent forms were stored separately in password-protected folders and locked cabinets accessible only to the researcher. Data will be retained for a specified period (e.g., five years) and then securely destroyed in accordance with institutional policy.

The study was designed to minimize potential harm, recognizing that discussions of force, injustice, and systemic failure may evoke emotional reactions. Participants were reminded that they could pause or stop the interview at any time and could decline to answer any question. When signs of discomfort emerged, the researcher slowed down, clarified the purpose of the questions, or shifted to less sensitive topics. Participants were also informed that they could seek further support from campus guidance or counseling services if needed.

Results

The study addressed two central questions: (1) What challenges do criminology students encounter in learning about police use of force and criminal justice reforms? Moreover, (2) based on these challenges, what insights can inform the development of a policy or educational program responsive to their learning needs?

Unclear Legal Standards and Confusing Concepts

Analysis revealed three interconnected subthemes that explain why students struggle to understand police use-of-force standards: Ambiguity of Legal Terms, which highlights students' difficulty interpreting concepts such as reasonable force, necessity, and proportionality; Moral–Legal Tension, which captures instances where actions may be legally justified yet feel ethically questionable to students; and Difficulty Applying Concepts in Real Scenarios, which reflects the challenge of transferring theoretical frameworks to fast-paced, unpredictable field situations. Together, these subthemes demonstrate how unclear doctrine, ethical uncertainty, and lack of experiential grounding converge to create confusion around use-of-force standards.

Ambiguity of Legal Terms. Students consistently reported difficulty understanding abstract legal concepts governing police use of force, particularly the terms reasonable force, necessity, and proportionality. ANG1 explained that "Ang hirap talaga minsan intindihin yung 'reasonable force' kasi iba-iba ang interpretation… minsan nagiging gray area kung kailan siya legal o excessive" ("It is really difficult to understand 'reasonable force' because interpretations vary… it becomes a gray area when determining whether it is legal or excessive"). This illustrates how learners struggle to anchor legal standards that are inherently situational, flexible, and subject to interpretation. CAB2 echoed this confusion, citing the difficulty of understanding "objective reasonableness," asking "sino ba magde-decide kung reasonable yung ginawa ng officer?" ("who determines whether the officer's action was reasonable?"). Their responses show how legal language, when presented as abstract doctrine, becomes inaccessible without contextual grounding or clear operational guidelines.

Tension Between Legality and Morality. Beyond technical challenges, students questioned the moral implications behind force-related decisions. Many expressed discomfort when legally justified actions appeared ethically troubling. As one student shared, "May mga situation na legal pero parang morally questionable pa rin" ("There are situations that are legal but still feel morally questionable"). This tension reveals that students are not only memorizing legal standards—they are grappling with more profound questions of right and wrong. Such dissonance reflects their awareness that legality does not automatically equate to fairness, especially when public perception and media influence complicate interpretations of police action. Students described feeling conflicted when laws were clear, but their personal moral compass pointed in a different direction, showing how ethical reasoning becomes intertwined with legal

understanding.

Difficulty Applying Concepts in Real-World Scenarios. Students also struggled to connect classroom theories to the realities of policing, where decisions must be made rapidly and under pressure. CAU1 noted, "Laging sinasabi sa class na dapat proportional sa threat, pero sa totoong buhay, paano mo malalaman kung tama na o sobra na?" ("We are taught that force must be proportional to the threat, but in real life, how do you know when it is just right or already excessive?"). This critique highlights the gap between the structured frameworks taught in classrooms and the unpredictable, fluid situations officers face. Students recognized that real-life policing involves incomplete information, heightened emotion, and immediate judgment calls—conditions not easily replicated in academic instruction. This disconnect suggests that theoretical knowledge alone cannot adequately prepare students for the practical and ethical complexities of assessing force.

Across these subthemes, the findings show that criminology students experience legal concepts related to the use of force as ambiguous, morally fraught, and difficult to operationalize. Their confusion stems not from lack of diligence but from the abstract, decontextualized manner in which these standards are taught. Consistent with Tyler and Huo's (2002) work on procedural justice, legal norms become meaningful only when translated into concrete, experience-based understanding. Likewise, McCold and Wachtel (2003) argue that case-driven and simulation-based teaching is essential for bridging the gap between doctrine and practice. The students' reflections align with these insights: without real-world examples, practice scenarios, or opportunities for applied reasoning, legal concepts remain abstract and confusing.

Overwhelmed Minds: The Mental Toll of Justice Education

Analysis revealed three major subthemes that shape the emotional and cognitive burden students experience while studying justice: Moral Conflict and Emotional Burden, as students wrestle with legal actions that contradict their ethical intuition; Systemic Overload and Interconnectedness, which reflects the overwhelming breadth of learning across policing, courts, and corrections; and Constant Change and Cognitive Fatigue, as shifting laws, new reforms, and political influences make it difficult to maintain a stable understanding of the justice system. These subthemes illustrate how learning about justice becomes not only intellectually demanding but emotionally and psychologically taxing.

Moral Tension and Emotional Strain. Students described how learning about the use of force and justice reforms often triggers moral conflict, particularly when legal standards appear to be misaligned with ethical intuitions. ECH3 explained, "May mga situation na legal nga pero parang morally questionable pa rin—kaya ang hirap i-judge minsan kung tama o mali talaga" ("There are situations that are legal but still feel morally questionable—it becomes hard to judge what is right or wrong"). For many, the emotional burden arises from confronting cases in which lawful actions still cause harm or controversy. ANG3 shared that such lessons "nakaka-drain" because understanding injustice or morally gray incidents forces students to reevaluate their values. This tension between legality and morality creates mental fatigue, especially when violence, inequality, or contested police decisions are involved. Students recognized that learning the law means confronting uncomfortable realities that affect their sense of fairness and ethics.

Cognitive Overload from System Complexity. Another layer of strain comes from the sheer complexity of the justice system. CAB3 described feeling overwhelmed because the system is "masyadong malawak—may policing, courts, corrections, at lahat interconnected pa" ("too broad—policing, courts, corrections, and everything is interconnected"). Students noted that constant policy changes, new proposals, and political influences make it difficult to maintain a clear understanding of how reforms are implemented. ECH2 emphasized that "laging may bagong batas, bagong panukala… tapos may political influence pa" ("there are always new laws, new proposals… and there is political influence as well"), making learning feel unstable and inconsistent. This volume of shifting information leaves students mentally exhausted and makes it hard for them to develop a coherent picture of how justice processes function in practice. The emotional weight increases when students feel that no matter how much they study, the system keeps changing faster than they can keep up.

Psychological Burden of Exposure to Injustice. Students also expressed that constant exposure to cases of injustice, violence, or unresolved wrongdoing contributes to emotional exhaustion. ROX2 shared that media coverage "nakakadagdag ng bigat… minsan kulang sa context kaya lalo kang nalilito o nai-stress" ("adds emotional weight… sometimes lacking context, which makes you even more confused or stressed"). ANG3 added that repeatedly engaging with unjust cases is "nakaka-drain," especially when systems fail to hold perpetrators accountable. CAU3 explained how emotionally difficult it is to study systemic failures, stating, "parang ang daming mali sa system pero parang wala kang magawa" ("there seems to be so much wrong in the system, yet you feel powerless"). These narratives show that criminology education exposes students not just to legal frameworks but to the human suffering, power imbalances, and systemic gaps that define real-world justice work—experiences that can trigger frustration, helplessness, and emotional fatigue.

Across these subthemes, students describe justice education as intellectually demanding and emotionally heavy. Their narratives reflect what Mezirow (1991) characterizes as transformative yet disorienting learning, wherein exposure to morally complex and emotionally charged material prompts deep reflection but also psychological strain. Harris (2020) notes that criminology students often face emotional burdens when confronted with violent cases or systemic injustices, which aligns with the students' experiences of fatigue, confusion, and moral discomfort. The complexity of the justice system, combined with constant legal shifts and sensationalized media reporting, amplifies cognitive overload. As students attempt to reconcile doctrine, ethics, and real-world inequities, learning becomes

a mentally taxing process that extends beyond academic mastery into emotional labor.

Eroding Trust and the Absence of Accountability

Analysis revealed three subthemes explaining students' declining trust in the justice system: Reforms Good on Paper, Weak in Practice, where policies appear strong theoretically but weakly applied in reality; Gray Areas in Judging Police Actions, which raise questions about fairness and consistency in determining what counts as appropriate force; and Media and Political Influence on Accountability, which generate conflicting narratives that obscure transparency and deepen skepticism. These subthemes illustrate how structural inconsistencies, ambiguous standards, and external influences converge to weaken perceptions of institutional accountability.

Perceived Systemic Disorder and Fragmentation. Students frequently described the justice system as confusing, fragmented, and difficult to trust because its processes appear inconsistent and overwhelming. CAU1 explained this clearly: "Ang daming gumagalaw—courts, police, prisons—lahat konektado. Tapos ang hirap alamin kung talagang epektibo ba 'yung reforms kasi minsan maganda lang sa papel, pero iba 'pag sa totoong buhay" ("So many sectors are moving—courts, police, prisons—all interconnected. It's hard to know if reforms are effective because they look good on paper but work differently in real life"). This perception reflects a loss of trust rooted in systemic complexity and disjointed implementation. Students expressed that when institutions appear chaotic or disconnected, confidence in the fairness and reliability of reforms diminishes. JON1 added that the lack of clarity makes it hard to assess whether the system is genuinely functioning or simply maintaining appearances. Such narratives suggest that institutional opacity contributes significantly to student distrust.

Tension Between Human Rights and Public Safety. Many students also grappled with what they perceive as an inherent tension between protecting human rights and ensuring public safety. ANG2 shared, "Minsan conflicting pa—like protecting human rights versus ensuring public safety… frustrating kapag reforms sound good pero hindi nagwo-work in real life dahil may resistance" ("Sometimes there is conflict—like protecting human rights versus ensuring public safety… it's frustrating when reforms sound good but do not work in real life because of resistance"). This reveals that trust declines not just because of system complexity but because institutions seem unable to balance these competing demands. Students observed that reforms are often resisted by those expected to implement them, reinforcing the belief that accountability mechanisms are weak or inconsistent. CAB3 similarly described how conflicting expectations and inconsistent enforcement deepen uncertainty about whether rights are genuinely safeguarded.

Moral Ambiguity and Unclear Accountability. Students repeatedly noted that accountability mechanisms feel unclear or unreliable. CAB2 explained, "Yung ibang terms like 'objective reasonableness' parang ang labo—sino ba mag-decide kung reasonable yung ginawa ng officer?" ("Terms like 'objective reasonableness' are vague—who decides whether the officer's actions were reasonable?"). This uncertainty extends to moral judgments, as CAB2 added that actions may be legal but feel "morally off." CAU3 echoed the sentiment, expressing frustration that "kahit may batas, hindi rin clear kung paano hinahandle yung cases ng excessive force" ("even if laws exist, it is still unclear how cases of excessive force are handled"). Students described feeling uneasy about the possibility that misconduct may be judged inconsistently or influenced by politics or public opinion. ROX3 noted that without transparency, it becomes "mahirap i-judge kung tama ba yung ginawa ng police kung hindi mo alam buong context" ("difficult to judge whether the police acted correctly when you do not know the full context"). These insights highlight how unclear standards and opaque investigations weaken students' trust in accountability processes.

Across subthemes, this theme reflects pervasive concerns about system disorder, inconsistent enforcement, and ambiguous accountability—factors that collectively erode students' trust in the justice system. Their concerns echo Goldsmith's (2005) argument that legitimacy depends on fairness, transparency, and institutional responsiveness. Similarly, Tyler (2006) asserts that when people believe procedures lack consistency or moral clarity, confidence in legal authorities declines. The students' experiences mirror these findings: trust is weakened when reforms appear symbolic, accountability mechanisms remain vague, or contradictions within the system are unresolved. These narratives reveal that distrust is not merely emotional; it is grounded in lived encounters with systemic opacity, conflicting priorities, and perceived failures in ethical enforcement.

Disconnect Between Classroom Learning and Real-World Practice

Analysis revealed three subthemes that illuminate the persistent gap between academic instruction and operational realities: Idealized Instruction vs. Operational Reality, where classroom lessons simplify complex real-world scenarios; Complexity and Interconnectedness of Justice Institutions, which makes textbook learning feel incomplete; and Perceived Ineffectiveness of Reforms, as students observe that theoretical reforms often do not translate into meaningful institutional change. These subthemes show how theoretical oversimplification, systemic complexity, and reform skepticism combine to hinder students' ability to internalize justice principles fully.

Idealized Instruction vs. Messy Realities of Policing. Students frequently emphasized the difficulty of reconciling classroom lessons with real-world police practice, noting that theories often fail to capture the operational complexity of police work. JON1 shared, "Ang daming sinasabi sa books or lectures, pero sa actual, iba 'yung implementation… minsan parang hindi na clear kung talagang para sa justice ba 'yung changes o para lang sa image" ("Books and lectures say many things, but in actual practice, implementation is different… sometimes it is unclear if changes promote justice or just improve public image"). This tension reflects students' frustration when neat, classroom frameworks collide with the unpredictable, emotionally charged contexts of actual policing. CAU2 similarly

noted that what they learn "kulang kapag hindi mo nakikita sa actual scenario" ("feels incomplete without seeing it in an actual scenario"). These reflections suggest that students recognize a substantial gap between theoretical expectations and operational realities, creating confusion about how justice principles should function in practice.

Complexity and Interconnectedness of the System. Students also expressed difficulty understanding how the different components of the justice system—police, courts, and corrections—interact in practice. JON2 described this complexity using a powerful metaphor: "Ang criminal justice system parang maze—lahat magkakabit. Pag binago mo ang isang parte, damay agad 'yung iba" ("The criminal justice system is like a maze—everything is interconnected. When you change one part, the others are affected"). ROX3 added that it becomes "nakakalito kasi magkakabit lahat… minsan 'di mo alam kung reforms ba ay tunay na para sa justice o para lang sa image" ("confusing because everything is interconnected… sometimes you cannot tell if reforms are truly for justice or just for image"). Students reported that this interconnectedness makes learning challenging because textbooks often present components separately, whereas real-world functioning is fluid, dynamic, and shaped by political, institutional, and social pressures. Such narratives reflect a system that is far more intricate and unpredictable than academic instruction typically portrays.

Perceived Inconsistency and Ineffectiveness of Reforms. Several students noted that reforms taught in class appear disconnected from how institutions actually operate. CAU1 mentioned that reforms "minsan maganda lang sa papel, pero iba 'pag sa totoong buhay" ("sometimes look good on paper but work differently in real life"), highlighting a perceived mismatch between reform rhetoric and implementation. ANG2 echoed this sentiment, saying that even well-designed reforms may not translate into improved practice due to institutional resistance or conflicting priorities. Students expressed skepticism about whether reforms truly address systemic problems or serve political or public relations purposes. This perceived inconsistency makes it challenging for students to internalize theoretical models of justice, as their real-world observations suggest that reforms often fail to achieve their intended outcomes.

Across these subthemes, students consistently highlighted a troubling disconnect between classroom learning and the functioning of the justice system. They perceive theoretical instruction as idealized, oversimplified, and insufficiently grounded in operational realities. Their insights closely align with McCold and Wachtel's (2003) argument that experiential learning is essential for bridging the gap between theory and practice in criminal justice education. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) similarly posits that deep learning occurs when students observe, reflect, and engage in real-world contexts—experiences that many students in this study reported were limited or absent. The disconnect students describe is not merely academic; it affects their confidence in the system, their understanding of reform, and their preparedness to enter professional practice.

Discussion

Findings across campuses reveal four interlocking challenges students face in learning about police use of force and criminal justice reforms: (1) unclear legal standards and confusing concepts, (2) the emotional and moral toll of justice education, (3) eroding trust amid weak accountability signals, and (4) the disconnect between classroom instruction and real-world practice. Together, these themes show that the difficulties students encounter are not purely cognitive. Instead, they emerge from deeper processes of translation, containment, credibility, and contextualization. Students struggle to translate abstract legal doctrines into operational judgment, to contain the emotional and ethical dissonance provoked by discussions of violence and injustice, to make sense of accountability in a system perceived as inconsistent, and to contextualize theoretical instruction within the complexities of real policing scenarios.

These findings also illustrate that criminology education is shaped by how students interpret legal ambiguity, navigate moral contradictions, and internalize systemic issues. The learning process extends beyond memorizing rules of engagement; it involves meaning-making in environments where political influences, public narratives, and institutional inconsistencies shape understanding. Students' reflections show that their engagement with justice concepts is deeply affected by media portrayals, shifting reforms, and uneven enforcement practices. As a result, their academic learning becomes intertwined with affective, ethical, and sociopolitical dimensions, confirming that the study of policing is both intellectually and emotionally demanding.

The convergence of these four themes suggests that criminology programs must critically examine how legal concepts are taught and how students' interpretive and reflective capacities are supported. The themes point to a need for pedagogical strategies that help students make sense of complex legal standards, process moral ambiguity, build trust in fair accountability processes, and connect theoretical frameworks to the realities they will eventually face in the field. These implications offer important insight into how future curricula and policy frameworks may be strengthened.

Conclusions

This study demonstrated that criminology students experience substantial challenges in understanding police use of force and criminal justice reforms, shaped by four primary conditions: unclear legal standards, emotional and cognitive strain, weakened trust stemming from perceived gaps in accountability, and a persistent disconnect between classroom learning and professional reality. These challenges reveal that learning about justice is a deeply interpretive, emotional, and ethical process in which students navigate technical ambiguity, moral dilemmas, systemic inequities, and institutional contradictions. As future members of the justice system, their ability to interpret, apply, and ethically evaluate police use of force is shaped not only by instructional content but also by the sociopolitical context in which learning takes place.

Research Article

Given these findings, several recommendations emerge. First, criminology curricula must clarify legal doctrine by de-jargonizing key concepts such as reasonableness, necessity, and proportionality, and linking them to structured case scenarios. Second, experiential and simulation-based learning—such as scenario analyses, role-plays, video reviews, and structured after-action debriefs—should be embedded to strengthen applied judgment and de-escalation capability. Third, programs should integrate modules on procedural justice, documentation, and accountability workflows to reinforce transparency and fairness in practice. Fourth, wellness and reflective practice spaces must be included to help students process emotional strain and moral conflict without reducing academic rigor. By adopting these reforms, criminology programs can cultivate future justice practitioners who are not only technically capable but also ethically grounded, emotionally resilient, and equipped to exercise fair, proportionate, and accountable policing.

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