THE REVERSE RACISM EFFECT

Racial Aspects of Police Shootings

Reducing Both Bias and Counter Bias

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T he long-standing question of whether police are racially biased in their use of force was reignited by the events in Ferguson, MO, in August 2014, and the na-tional "discussion" (sometimes manifesting in protests, including violent protests) continues. Lois James, Stephen M. James, and Bryan J. Vila (2016, this issue) have added valuable information to the accumulating literature on implicit bias, which enhances our understanding of how bias might manifest in police decisions to use force. This research in-dicates that officers may be *undervigilant* with racial/ethnic minorities, and these findings—linked by the authors to "counter bias"—are contrary to the laboratory research that has shown individuals, including law enforcement subjects, are *overvigilant* with racial/ethnic minorities, especially African Americans, in "shoot, don't shoot" scenarios. In this policy essay, I will review the key implicit bias concepts that can help us untangle these disparate findings and then link those concepts to interventions for police to reduce both bias and counter bias.

Implicit Bias: The Basics
Researchers have been studying bias and prejudice since the 1950s (Allport, 1979 [1954]), and they "discovered" implicit bias in the late 1980s (Devine, 1989).[1] These researchers determined that, similar to the manifestation of explicit biases, individuals with implicit biases link groups to stereotypes (groups as defined by, for instance, gender, race, sexual ori-entation, religion, and body shape) and these stereotypes impact the individual's perceptions

and behavior (Dasgupta, 2004; Kang et al., 2012).[2] Unlike explicit biases, implicit biases are not necessarily based on animus or hostility toward the group and the biases can manifest outside of conscious awareness (Blair, 2002; Devine, 1989; Dovidio, Kawakami, Smoak, and Gaertner, 2009; Rudman, 2004). These implicit biases exist even in individuals who consciously reject bias, prejudice, and stereotyping (Beattie, Cohen, and McGuire, 2013; Devine, 1989; Kang et al., 2012). This latter finding means that even well-intentioned individuals, including well-intentioned police, have biases that can impact perceptions and behavior.

The well-researched Black-crime implicit bias is most relevant here. As James et al. (2016) point out, laboratory studies that use the traditional "shoot, don't shoot" methodology show that subjects are *faster* to shoot an armed Black person than an armed White person and, in terms of errors, are *more* likely to shoot the unarmed Black person than the unarmed White person (Correll, Park, Judd, and Wittenbrink, 2002; Correll et al., 2007; Plant and Peruche, 2005; Sadler, Correll, Park, and Judd, 2012; for an overview, see Correll, Hudson, Guillermo, and Ma, 2014).[3] In contrast, James et al. found that law enforcement subjects were *slower* to shoot armed Black individuals than armed White individuals and that they were *less* likely to shoot unarmed Black suspects than unarmed White suspects.

Two processes linked to the manifestation of implicit bias can help us untangle these contrasting findings. The two processes are activation and application. Activation refers to the existence of the stereotype in an individual's head; a person sees another person from a particular group (e.g., gender group or racial group) and associates that person with a stereotype that is associated with that group. But, importantly, this activation does *not* *necessarily* impact behavior. A person could have an implicit bias activation but not *apply* that activation to behavior.

The first line of research—that supported the possibility of overvigilance with Black individuals—indicates activation *and* application occurred. In contrast, James et al. (2016) confirm *activation* of a Black-crime implicit bias (through their subject scores in the Implicit Association Test), but they show that officers did not *apply* that bias to their shooting behavior.

These two processes are linked to two sets of interventions to address implicit biases, and these interventions can help us further understand the disparate findings and the implications of them for police. First, there are ways that individuals can reduce their biases; that is, there are mechanisms that can reduce the *activation* of the stereotypes. Second, there

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2.   James et al. (2016) and I are using the term "explicit bias" differently. They use it to refer to when bias manifests in behavior. I am using it here to refer to bias that is conscious and deliberate—in contrast with implicit bias that can occur outside of conscious awareness in well-intentioned individuals. In line with my usage, both implicit bias and explicit bias can impact behavior, producing discriminatory behavior.

3.   An exception is the finding by Correll et al. (2007) that officers did not make bias errors. It is relevant to the discussion that follows regarding the power of high-quality, use-of-force training.

are ways that individuals can manage their biases; that is, even if activation occurs, people can still thwart the *application* of bias to behavior.

Two key mechanisms for reducing the *activation* of biases are the "contact theory" and "exposure to counter-stereotypes." According to the first, positive contact with people who are different from us can reduce both explicit and implicit biases (Allport, 1979 [1954]; Peruche and Plant, 2006; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Tausch and Hewstone, 2010). Another way to reduce biases is exposure to counter-stereotypes. Pursuant to this concept, if a person has a link between a stereotype and a group, exposure to individuals from that group who are the *opposite* of that stereotype will reduce the strength of it (Blair, Ma, and Lenton, 2001; Dasgupta and Rivera, 2008; Karpinski and Hilton, 2001).

We can reduce the *application* of our stereotypes to behavior by implementing "controlled responses." That is, if we recognize our biases (i.e., recognize activation) and are motivated, we can choose to implement bias-free behavior (Bennett, 2010; Devine, Forscher, Austin, and Cox, 2012; Hernandez, Haidet, Gill, and Teal, 2013; Kang et al., 2012; for an overview, see Staats, 2013). James et al. (2016) use the concept of "controlled responses" to explain why the subject-officers' race-crime implicit bias was not applied to their behavior. The "counter bias" identified by James et al. reflects not just control but "overcontrol"; these officers did not just restrain the overvigilance that might naturally be produced by their Black-crime implicit bias, they went too far, arguably putting themselves in danger, because of their fear of the consequences of using force against a Black individual.

Implications for Police Practice

The two lines of research on the racial aspects of police use of force—one indicating the potential for overvigilance with Black individuals and the other indicating the potential for undervigilance with Black individuals—have implications for police practice and training. We need to reduce both bias and counter bias.

I will start with the latter by agreeing with James et al. (2016) that reducing the "counter bias" that they identified means that we give officers the confidence that they will not suffer dire consequences for their reasonable use of force against racial/ethnic minorities. I will also agree with the authors that this is not simple and easy. It requires, first and foremost, enhancing the trust and confidence in police on the part of the diverse communities that they serve. Mending the breach involves continued positive interactions with, and outreach to, the diverse communities. The building of trust and confidence starts with every interaction between a police officer and a community member on the streets of the jurisdiction. These interactions need to reflect the elements of procedural justice: dignity and respect, transparency, voice, and neutrality (Tyler, 1990, 2004). Beyond the focus on improving these important everyday encounters, many agencies have programs, units, or policies that serve to enhance the relationship between the agencies and the communities they serve. Examples include Coffee with a Cop, Shop with a Cop, community police academies, liaisons with specific communities, advisory councils, police-sponsored movie

nights, or block parties, to name just a few. Additionally, agencies need to adopt models of policing that support fair and just policing and the perceptions of it. Lum and Nagin (2015) articulated a "7-point blueprint for the 21st century" by arguing that police need to prioritize *both* (a) crime prevention and (b) promoting police legitimacy. For instance, Lum and Nagin cautioned against "zero tolerance"; aggressive, deterrence-focused stop and frisk; and broken windows "as it is commonly practiced" (p. 3).[4] They advocated replacing these tactics with others that can both reduce crime and improve police legitimacy. These include many well-known police strategies and perspectives, including, but certainly not limited to, crime-prevention efforts that "focus on high-risk places and people, and use problem-solving approaches tailored to specific circumstances" (Lum and Nagin, 2015: 2); community policing; training and policies that promote de-escalation; alternatives to arrest; and policing in the vein of the guardian, not the warrior (Stoughten, 2015).

In addition to measures designed to address counter bias, the law enforcement profession—like any profession—needs to reduce implicit biases in police. The implicit biases, which all humans have, can impact police decisions beyond use-of-force decisions. The *contact theory* highlights the importance of police having positive contacts with diverse community members, such as racial/ethnic minorities, homeless individuals, teenagers, Muslims, transgender individuals, and so forth (Peruche and Plant, 2006). And not only might positive contact reduce police officers' biases, but also the added bonus is that the community members are having positive contact with the police, which could reduce biases against police.

Police, like individuals in any profession, should also be educated on their implicit biases and given tools to reduce and manage them. The Fair and Impartial Policing training program, developed with support from the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, is an example of such training (Fridell, 2013; Fridell and Brown, 2015).[5]

The implications for use-of-force training—which are supported by implicit bias theory and preliminary research—are the same for both the overvigilance and undervigilance lines of research: *Agencies need to provide high-quality, scenario-based, judgment training that conditions officers to focus, not on demographics, but on indicators of threat.* This discussion returns us to the bias-reducing concept of exposure to counter-stereotypes.

In state-of-the-art, use-of-force training, officers "role play" in interaction with an individual (or with individuals) in video scenarios. In those scenarios, a person (or people) turns out to be a threat or not. The officer must determine whether the person is a threat

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4. The term "broken windows" has been variously used. Here Lum and Nagin (2015) referred to the form whereby there are large numbers of arrests for minor crimes with an eye toward preventing more serious crime. This "common practice" is not fully consistent with the original formulation (Wilson and Kelling, 1982).

5. See also fairandimpartialpolicing.com.

and, if he or she is, whether and how much force is required. Applying the bias-reducing mechanism of exposure to counter-stereotypes, the individuals who turn out to be a threat in the scenarios must be just as likely to be Black as White, just as likely to be female as male, just as likely to be old as young, and so forth.[6] The key aspiration is to condition officers to make race and other appearance factors irrelevant to the force decision.

Some laboratory studies have indicated the potential value of this exposure to counter-stereotypes. Correll and colleagues (2007) pointed to high-quality, use-of-force training when they compared police and nonpolice subjects by using their shoot, don't shoot methodology. In both groups, they found indications of bias when they looked at the speed-of-decision outcome; the police subjects, however, were much less likely to make errors and did not show racial bias in their errors. Plant and colleagues (Plant and Peruche, 2005; Plant, Peruche, and Butz, 2005) provided a more direct assessment of the potential of counter-stereotype training. They used shoot, don't shoot methods to see whether repeated exposure to counter-stereotypes would reduce the manifestation of bias. The subjects encountered opponents who were consistent with stereotypes (e.g., Black man with a gun or White man without a gun); but they were just as likely to see counter-stereotypes (e.g., White man with a gun and Black man without a gun). The researchers found that repeated exposure to shoot–don't-shoot stimuli that included counter-stereotypes reduced the biased application of force.

Another concept exists related to implicit bias that is relevant to producing the "right videos" for scenario training: the *bias-aggravating power of ambiguity*. Biases and stereotypes are most likely to impact us when we are facing ambiguous stimuli (Bertrand, Chugh, and Mullainathan, 2005; Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000). This concept can be applied to ambiguous people and ambiguous situations. Applied to people, it makes sense that we are most likely to "fill in" with stereotypes a person whom we do not know. They are a "blank slate," and so we are inclined to add information; the science shows we add information related to the stereotypes associated with their group(s). The bias-aggravating potential of ambiguous *situations* is directly related to use-of-force video scenarios. Stereotypes are least likely to impact police who are facing an unambiguous threat. For instance, the officer who enters a scene (in real life or in a video) where a person is pointing a gun at him or her is unlikely to be impacted by that person's demographics. In contrast, if the officer enters a scene where a person is engaging in ambiguous "furtive" movements, the science indicates that stereotypes about which groups are dangerous (or are not) will impact the interpretation of that ambiguous scene. The implication for training is that the strongest videos to help make demographics irrelevant to police use-of-force decisions will place stereotypical and counter-stereotypical stimuli in *ambiguous-threat situations*.

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6.   Importantly the same is true for those who turn out to be nonthreatening. They should be just as likely to be male as female, just as likely to be Black as White, and so forth.

The training resources described earlier exist. Many agencies use video scenarios for their use-of-force judgment training, and videos exist within those training programs that place both stereotypical and counter-stereotypical stimuli in ambiguous-threat situations. They key question facing the profession, however, is *are these resources used enough to produce the conditioning effect that implicit bias theory (and research) supports?* Research by Morrison and Garner (2011, albeit with a nonrepresentative sample) showed that fewer than half of police agencies have access to video-simulator training, and of those that do have access, the level of exposure of in-service officers to scenarios is low. Six in ten of the agencies with these resources expose their in-service officers to fewer than four scenarios annually, and one quarter exposes their in-service officers to just one scenario a year. And even those scenarios to which these officers are exposed may not have the elements referenced earlier: counter-stereotypes placed in ambiguous situations.

Implications for Research

The research collectively has shown that there are various forces that can impact whether and how race influences an officer's use of force. One force is the human Black-crime implicit bias. This could produce overvigilance on the part of officers when interacting with Black individuals in those fast-moving potentially violent situations. Another force is the potential conditioning effect of high-quality, use-of-force training wherein officers are repeatedly put through videos with both stereotypes and counter-stereotypes in ambiguous-threat situations. The interesting and important third factor is highlighted in the work of James et al. (2016). Counter bias could overcome the first factor leading to undervigilance with racial ethnic minorities, especially Blacks.[7]

In terms of research that follows from the work of James et al. (2016), we first need to confirm (or not) their claim that their laboratory scene closely reflects real-life policing decisions. They use this claim to generalize their laboratory findings to the real world. There is one key difference, however, between their laboratory situation and the real world: There are no significant consequences in the laboratory of being undervigilant with Blacks. In contrast, in the real world, the cost of undervigilance could be the injury or death of the officer. Some use-of-force simulators "shoot back." That is, officers experience pain when they incorrectly do not shoot a dangerous individual. Although this certainly does not perfectly match the power of the real-life setting, it would be interesting and informative to see whether the findings of James et al. hold up when there are consequences to the subjects for being undervigilant.

If the counter-bias findings hold up, future research could and should explore the factors that might produce overvigilant, undervigilant, or appropriate-vigilance outcomes. Whether an incident produces overvigilance, undervigilance, or neither when interacting with racial/ethnic minorities may depend on many factors such as individual officer

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7.   And, of course, theoretically, the first and third factors could counter-balance each other perfectly.

characteristics; agency characteristics including the quality and frequency of high-quality, use-of-force training; and the climate of the country or jurisdiction.

Additionally and importantly, research needs to evaluate the validity of the policy implications suggested earlier. Again, implicit bias theory and some preliminary laboratory research have indicated that scenario-based training that includes counter-stereotypes in ambiguous-threat situations will make demographics "nondiagnostic" for threat—leading the officer to focus on other clues, such as hands and behavior. This needs to be tested further, and if the effectiveness is affirmed, research needs to determine the frequency and dosage of the training that is required to produce and sustain the desired conditioning effect in officers.

The need for this advanced understanding of the racial aspects of use of force is much more than an academic exercise. Lives are at stake. Overvigilance on the part of officers can mean the unnecessary loss of the life of a community member; undervigilance could mean another tragic death of a law enforcement officer. James et al. (2016) have challenged the previously accepted "conventional wisdom" regarding how biases might impact officers' decisions to use force. It advances our understanding of the complicated, multifaceted, quick-moving, and consequential decisions that police make to use force, especially deadly force.

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