Intergroup Bias in Virtual Reality: Understanding the Public Support for Violent Policing

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Background:

Highly publicized incidents of police violence regularly trigger outrage across the United States and many other parts of the world. Yet little is known about whether and in what ways such incidents change the way people think about police and their claim to legitimate authority. Indeed, despite widely publicized revelations of police brutality directed primarily at minority groups, it seems that large sections of the public continue to support the police. In the face of extraordinarily high-profile events in Ferguson and Baton Rouge, to name but a few, a large majority of Americans still show strong support for police even as public interest in cases of brutality continues to rise (Gallup 2014).

The Project:

This research project aims to empirically address this apparent paradox. It will harness the power of virtual reality technology to understand the ways in which ordinary people make sense of police brutality in the United States, and possibly elsewhere, and how such dynamics are animated by intergroup bias and blame. This technology will allow us to experimentally manipulate the identities of the individuals involved (police officer and suspect) in a fictional use of force incident while at the same time holding all other aspects of the encounter constant.

First, virtual reality (VR) technology will be used to investigate the effects of intergroup bias in the context of police violence. When police violence is directed towards members of an outgroup, do people find it more acceptable and indeed less morally troubling? Drawing on Heider (1958) and Pettigrew (1979), we will manipulate both the police officer and suspect's ethnicity to determine if the assignment of blame and culpability shift as characteristics of the actors change. A small body of existing research suggests that these ideas translate well in policing contexts. Kahn and colleagues (2016), for example, have shown that the more racially stereotypical a white suspect is perceived to be, the less blameworthy participants found him/her, and the less likely s/he was to be subject to police use-of-force. The exact opposite held true for black suspects (Goff et al. 2014), with more racially stereotypical black suspects found to be more blameworthy, casually responsible, and "appropriate" targets of police use-of-force.

This project will extend and expand this literature. We aim to investigate whether outgroup individuals are held to be more blameworthy and less deserving of empathy if they suffer police violence, and whether police violence towards outgroup individuals is considered more

appropriate on this basis. We propose that such processes are, in part, one reason why the public continue to support the police in spite of revelations of minority-directed brutality. Understanding them better may open up avenues for reform currently blocked by the inertia generated by public willingness to support problematic and even illegal police activity.

Second, we will examine the effects VR has on intergroup bias. Compared with traditional two-dimensional images (i.e. video), does bias attenuate or intensify as the realism and interactivity increases by the switch to VR? It is possible that by realistically depicting an incident of police violence, inserting the participant in the scene, and allowing them to move around it, VR will heighten outgroup empathy and which may serve to override or mitigate otherwise entrenched intergroup biases. Conversely, VR could trigger social identity cues by making them more visceral, prompting greater identification with one's ingroup and animus towards the outgroup, and further entrenching intergroup biases and legitimizing immoral behaviour. This aspect of the project may have important policy implications in terms of police training, which is increasingly using VR and related techniques to teach officers when it is, and is not, appropriate to use force.

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