Chapter 2

A Telephone Game

How Racial Bias Affects 911 Calls

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INTRODUCTION

On Monday, June 3, 2019, Oregon State Senate passed a bill that would allow individuals who are victims of racially biased emergency calls to sue those who make these calls with discriminatory intentions (Lockhart, 2019). The initiative comes almost a year after Janelle Bynum, a member of the Oregon House of Representatives, had someone call 911 on her as she campaigned in her district. The bill would allow victims to sue the callers for as much as $250, so long as they can prove that the call was made with the intention to discriminate. This type of bill, which is likely to be adopted by other states as well, is a response to many recent instances in which White civilians have called 911 on minorities for reasons that remain unclear.

When we think about race relations in the United States from the perspective of community law enforcement, one thing is certain: there seems to be a deep, nearly intractable conflict over whether many acts of law enforcement are justified or necessary, especially when they involve Black victims. Recent social and political movements such as "Black Lives Matter" attest to this.

Scholars have documented the many ways in which race can affect law enforcement—most of which focus on racial disparities in treatment. Minorities are more likely to be stopped by police officers (Fagan & Davies, 2000) and to be victims of verbal abuse and extreme use of force from the police (Mastrofski, Reisig, & McCluskey, 2002; Jacobs & O'Brien, 1998). Minorities also are less likely to receive help in a timely manner from police officers (Anderson, 1990). Furthermore, the disparity between police treatment of minority and majority groups is not only documented but also widely acknowledged by both majority and minority members (Gabbidon & Higgins, 2009). An aspect that remains more unclear, however, is how majority

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group members can influence interactions between law enforcement entities and minority group members.

In this chapter, we focus on race relations between racial majority group members (Whites living in the United States) and minorities who are often the targets of community law enforcement (Blacks living in the United States). We draw on research indicating that racial bias can affect interpersonal interactions, and we propose that racial bias expressed during one-on-one encounters has the potential to create systems of racial bias, especially when the one-on-one interactions are high stakes (e.g., between a caller and a 911 dispatcher).

More specifically, we focus our discussion on the influence of racial bias in the case of 911 emergency calls, in which multiple agents interact with each other and transmit information that can have important consequences for the person suspected of committing a crime. We propose that racial bias is spread through multiple channels, starting with the individual and moving toward entities with more influence and power (such as police officers and policymakers). We focus on the context of community enforcement of racial bias whereby civilians make use of law enforcement because they experience intergroup contact as threatening.

We walk through each stage of the process, from when a 911 call is made to when police officers show up at the scene—and examine how bias affects communication and decision-making, ultimately determining the outcome of the call, an outcome which, historically, has had tragic consequences for the Black American community.

STAGE I: THE CALLER AND THREAT

Being able to call 911 at any time during the day or night is undoubtedly reassuring for individuals who might find themselves in emergency situations. But what is it that makes someone call 911? When is it socially acceptable to call, and how do we establish what a real emergency is? Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are unclear.

While fraudulent calls are penalized with fees and even possible jail time, such punishments only apply to egregious cases, where it is clear that the caller was far from being in an emergency situation (Brouhard, 2018). The rather relaxed nature of how these laws are enforced is emphasized in the guidelines provided for calling 911. Indeed, the United States Emergency Assistance website states that "if you're not sure whether the situation is a true emergency, officials recommend calling 911 and letting the call-taker determine whether you need emergency help," thus legitimizing almost any type of call (National 911 Program, n.d.). For Whites, societal norms against

appearing prejudiced typically deter them from acting out in explicitly prejudicial ways against minorities (Plant, Devine, & Brazy, 2003). However, 911 calls are anonymous, taking these concerns off the table.

The combination of a low bar for perceived threat and anonymity might lead Whites to make calls that are perceived to be made for no other reason than racial discrimination. One recent example of such a call that gained widespread attention from the media is that of "Barbeque Becky," a White woman who called the police to report a Black family for having a barbeque in an area that she believed was not suitable for charcoal grills. In this case, the transcript of the phone call between the woman and the dispatchers has been made public: "I'd like to report that someone is illegally using a charcoal grill in a non-designated area in Lake Merritt Park near Cleveland Cascade. I'd like it dealt with immediately so that coals don't burn more children and we have to pay more taxes" (Handson, 2018). Clearly the Black family reported on was not perceived as a real threat, as the woman's explanation for calling does not seem to describe an actual imminent danger. Thus, public outcry ensued, with accusations of racial bias on behalf of the caller.

Contextual Factors That Shape Threat Experiences

As hinted at above, the context in which intergroup encounters occur might be particularly important in determining if and how much threat majority group members experience. In the "Barbecue Becky" case, objectively speaking, the context does not seem to suggest a particularly threatening environment. However, there are also cases where the situation is more ambiguous with regards to threat; the caller is not sure whether the suspect is dangerous but proceeds to make the call nonetheless. Imagine, for instance, that a White civilian sees a Black man jumping over a fence—what is it about the man that makes the civilian believe they might be a burglar, and in particular, how does race influence how this person interprets the actions of the Black man? To answer this question, we can turn to social psychological research on how individuals interpret ambiguous situations and how racial bias affects perception of these situations. In one of the earliest examinations of the effects of ambiguity on race-based decision-making, Duncan (1976) showed that White subjects observing an ambiguous act rated it as more aggressive when the perpetrator was Black compared to when the perpetrator was White. Furthermore, studies have shown that this effect can occur regardless of the perceiver's own race (Sagar & Schofield, 1980). Such findings suggest that threat can be easily elicited in these contexts and that individuals' "default" is to interpret ambiguous situations involving racial minorities as threatening. This tendency likely stems either from individuals' exposure to racial

stereotypes in their own environment (Weisbuch, Pauker, & Ambady, 2009) or from previous experiences of contact (Graf, Paolini, & Rubin, 2014). With regards to stereotypes, a vast amount of literature has shown that people tend to hold strong associations between race and aggression (Devine & Elliot, 1995) and are quick to categorize others based on race (Brewer, 1988). In threatening contexts, this might prompt them to call 911 faster when the person they suspect of committing a crime is Black compared to when he or she is White.

Stereotypes and intergroup contact feed off of each other in that negative contact perpetuates stereotypes, which may in turn lead to repeated negative intergroup contact. Indeed, Paolini and colleagues (2010) found that negative intergroup contact makes categories more salient and leads majority group members to mention minority group members' ethnicities more often and earlier in their interactions. Once racial categories become salient, stereotypes are more easily activated and, therefore, the likelihood of experiencing threat increases (Dovidio, Evans, & Tyler, 1986). We propose that, as a result, the likelihood of making an emergency call also increases. Thus, each individual's unique prior experiences and cognitive mechanisms make them more or less prone to feel threatened and ultimately make this call.

Types and Frequency of Contact

The frequency of contact is also likely to play a role in whether the person makes the call or not. Indeed, studies have shown that frequent positive contact with the out-group is not weighed as heavily as occasional instances of negative contact (Graf, Paolini, & Rubin, 2014). Therefore, it is plausible that even a few prior negative intergroup interactions could override many other positive ones and ultimately lead individuals to expect potential interactions with out-group members to be negative as well, which could ultimately make them more likely to engage emergency services under ambiguously threatening circumstances. Similarly, a variety of external factors can affect the nature of intergroup interactions and thus ultimately influence civilians' decisions to call emergency services. For instance, in communities where there is active intergroup conflict, threat may be perceived as almost inevitable in the context of intergroup interactions (e.g., intractable ethnonational conflicts; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). Other contextual factors can also affect the degree to which individuals experience threat. For instance, one study found that White individuals were more likely to see a Black target as a threat when they saw the individual in ambient darkness, compared to when they saw the individual in a well-lit room (Schaller, Park, & Mueller, 2003). Thus, the literature on intergroup interactions highlights multiple factors that could determine whether majority group members experience these interactions as

threatening. Thus, it is becoming clear that almost all such interactions have the potential to elicit feelings of threat.

Physiological State Appraisal

In some instances, the threat that individuals experience in these ambiguous situations has been associated with a corresponding physiological pattern. For instance, Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, and Kowai-Bell (2001) found that participants who had little prior intergroup contact exhibited more physiological markers of threat in intergroup interactions compared to participants who had more intergroup contact. In a similar vein, Phelps and colleagues (2000) have shown that variability in amygdala activation in White subjects was associated with implicit negative attitudes in reaction to seeing a Black face compared to a White face. Importantly, the region that was activated, the left-superior amygdala, is also known to become activated when viewing faces with fearful expressions, suggesting that negative attitudes toward the out-group are associated with a physiological threat response when encountering members of that out-group (Phelps et al., 2000). Going back to our previous example, imagine once again that you see someone climbing a fence into someone's yard. You might suddenly feel your heart starting to beat faster and perhaps your palms starting to sweat, and noticing these physiological responses might lead you to interpret the situation as threatening. Physiological signals can mean a number of things, and a threat appraisal is likely in this situation (see, for instance, Tomaka, Blascovich, Kelsey, & Leitten, 1993). Thus, a variety of mechanisms could be at play when civilians decide to make the call to emergency services, some of which are drawn from stereotype knowledge, prior intergroup contact, or even appraisal of one's physiological state.

Further Remarks

Given the lack of constraints placed on 911 callers (no requirement of perceived threat and anonymous reporting), civilians may see little to no risk in calling 911 when they find themselves in a potentially threatening situation. It is this lack of accountability that led the Oregon State Senate to pass the bill discussed in the introduction to this chapter; they wanted to encourage civilians to be more thoughtful when making these types of calls. However, the bill does come with the caveat that the victim must be able to prove that the call was motivated by racial bias. Thus, this type of intervention might be useful only in those cases in which it is clear that the call was racially motivated. However, considering the findings we reviewed above, it is possible that in many of these situations, the reason behind the call can be explained

by factors more complex than explicit racial bias, and additional research on this topic is needed in order to understand more concretely what these factors are.

Furthermore, bills such as this one could also be threatening to callers who believe that they should have a right to call 911 whenever they believe there is imminent danger. To this end this bill might backfire, resulting in even more negative intergroup contact, similar to how messages that promote diversity in organizations are threatening to White individuals (Dover, Major, & Kaiser, 2016). Although to our knowledge there is no empirical work looking at threat generated by such bills, it is likely that the effects could be similar. In fact, soon after the bill was passed, it received criticism for its potential to make "communities less safe" (Lockhart, 2019).

In discussing community enforcement, the caller's perspective represents the first stage in a rather complicated process. Once the caller gets through to the emergency service dispatcher, the interaction that follows between the two opens up even more room for bias. Indeed, community law enforcement can be seen as a literal game of telephone, in which misunderstandings can have grave consequences. In the following, we turn to the interaction between the caller and the dispatcher.

STAGE II: THE DISPATCHER

When someone calls 911, the first person they get in touch with is the emergency services dispatcher. The dispatcher's responsibility is to collect information about the emergency that the caller is making a report about and to dispatch the appropriate first responders. In this way, the dispatcher becomes responsible for the indirect communication between civilians and first responders. Empirical work has not investigated this specific population so far, but it is likely that at least in some of these cases the dispatcher plays a crucial role in determining the outcome of the initial phone call. Whether and how the dispatcher communicates what they were told on the phone has the potential to influence the outcome of the encounter between the first responders and the presumed perpetrator. Failing to communicate information accurately can have tragic consequences, as it did in the case of Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old who was playing with a pellet gun when two police officers shot and killed him (Shooting of Tamir Rice, n.d.). In this case, although Tamir's death could also have been prevented with more care from the police officers, another important factor in the shooting was the fact that the officers had not received complete, accurate information from the dispatcher. The caller mentioned that the gun did not look real and that the suspect looked "juvenile," but what the officers received was an abridged version of this

information, namely, that there is a Black male who "keeps pulling a gun out of his pants and pointing it at people" (Flynn, 2016). Thus, when the officers arrived at the location of the presumed crime, their perception of Tamir and his actions was already biased toward thinking that he was threatening other people's lives. In this case the dispatcher was suspended for eight days for a mistake that could have legitimately saved the twelve-year-old's life. Even in cases where the dispatcher accurately communicates what they are told on the phone, there is a thin line between calls that constitute actual emergencies and calls that stem from racial bias, and the dispatcher has to follow protocol and send first responders regardless of whether they question the caller's reasons (Herron, 2018).

Many years ago, when emergency dispatch systems were first put into effect, it was the dispatchers' responsibility to filter out which calls needed to be prioritized and which did not (International Academies of Emergency Dispatch, n.d.). This, unfortunately, did not provide for a fair and unbiased system, considering that the dispatch system typically sends off first responders to approximately 240 million calls each year. Starting with the 1980s, a protocol was put into effect to standardize dispatchers' communication with callers. Today, most dispatch systems follow the protocol of the International Academies of Emergency Dispatch (IAED) and while this helps eliminate some forms of individual bias that could affect the caller (e.g., not sending help because the dispatcher does not believe the caller), it also makes it more difficult to filter out calls that are not urgent, or rather, calls that might not qualify as emergencies at all. The information that the dispatchers have to ask for before sending a first responder to the scene is very limited and includes the location of the emergency, the phone number the person is calling from, the nature of the emergency, and a physical description of the person suspected of committing a crime (National 911 Program, n.d.).

Dispatchers are instructed to follow this specific script and not doing so can result in negative consequences (e.g., being sued; The Law Office of WT Johnson, 2018). Therefore, when they receive a call from someone describing a Black individual as dangerous, the dispatchers cannot question the validity of the reason behind that call (Izen, 2019). It becomes even clearer, then, why so many of these calls are problematic for the dispatch system. Without assessing the validity of the call, first responders receive and react to information that they cannot and, by protocol, should not be questioning.

Importantly, in the case of police emergencies, the dispatcher also has to ask whether a gun is involved (Summit County Communications, n.d.). This question might open up more opportunity for bias by prompting the caller to think about the presence of a weapon when they otherwise would not. Studies have shown that, in deciding whether an ambiguous object is a gun, individuals are more likely to perceive the object as a gun when the person holding

it is Black compared to when they are White (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004). It might be the case that people are more likely to believe and subsequently tell the dispatcher that a Black suspect is armed even when they might not be. In a similar vein, other studies have shown that simply asking specific questions can change individuals' behaviors, which might apply to this context as well (Williams, Block, & Fitzsimons, 2006). For instance, Schuman and Scott (1987) showed that participants were more likely to rate an item as important when the category was offered in the response options compared to when the question answer was a free-response. In this context, it is possible that the caller may not have noticed an object resembling a gun when making the call, but being asked about it, in this threatening context, might have biased them toward identifying something that looks like a gun and subsequently reporting it. In a similar vein, if the caller can easily remember other instances in which they witnessed Black individuals being violent or possessing guns, the availability of this information could affect how they perceive the events they are currently witnessing (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).

Thus, although the interaction between callers and dispatchers is scripted, the threatening nature of a potential emergency, paired with psychological processes such as perceptual biases, can further influence how the information is transmitted and interpreted into the next stage of the process, namely, the stage at which first responders intervene.

STAGE III: THE FIRST RESPONDERS

First responders have the most important task of all agents involved in the process of community enforcement. They have to make quick assessments as to whether the suspect is indeed about to commit a crime. Because these encounters have often ended with the death of the suspect, we are prompted to ask: what factors contribute to a first responder's decision to shoot a suspect? In the following, we outline what we believe are the two main factors, namely, the information that they receive from the dispatcher and the attitudes with which they enter the interaction.

Trying to remain unbiased in these situations is a crucial matter, and a problematic one at that. Police officers have been accused of allowing racial bias to influence their decisions in such encounters, which led to the emergence of sociopolitical movements such as "Black Lives Matter" (https://blacklivesmatter.com). Indeed, studies have shown that minority group members, and Black Americans in particular, are significantly more likely to view the police negatively and to report being unlawfully stopped by police officers (Nadal, Davidoff, Allicock, Serpe, & Erazo, 2017).

Researchers have also examined the possibility that police officers, on average, might be more prejudiced than the average person. For instance, Gatto and colleagues (2010) compared newly recruited police officers to a control population and found that police officer recruits scored higher on Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), a significant predictor of racial prejudice. The authors also found what they called a "socialization" effect, such that police officers were more likely to internalize a "prejudice norm" after being in training for one year.

While some police officers might be aware that their perceptions are biased, the literature suggests that more often than not, it is an implicit form of bias that influences their attitudes and behaviors (Correll, Hudson, Guillermo, & Ma, 2014). Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that, regardless of their own ethnicity, individuals are more likely to consider a Black person's behavior as aggressive (Duncan, 1976) and are more likely to shoot an armed target when they are Black, compared with when they are White (Mekawi & Bresin, 2015; Ma & Correll, 2011; Sagar & Schofield, 1980). Encounters between first responders and individuals who are reported as being aggressive are inherently threatening for both parties; thus, avoiding bias requires conscious cognitive control (Monteith & Voils, 2001). A vast amount of research has investigated how this form of bias affects shooting decisions by using a first-person shooter task (FPST) (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002) and varying external conditions that are likely to activate threat. For instance, Nibbeling and colleagues (2012) found that the shooter's level of fatigue and the relative distance to the target influenced the decision to shoot, such that at lower levels of physical fatigue participants were more likely to shoot a target situated at a shorter distance, while at higher levels of physical fatigue, they were more likely to shoot a target situated at a longer distance. The target's characteristics have also been found to influence decisions to shoot, such that, the more prototypical of their race the target is considered to be, the more likely individuals are to shoot them in the FPST task (Ma & Correll, 2010). Thus, a variety of factors can influence police officers' decisions to shoot, some of which are individual characteristics of the officer or the target, while others are more external, such as the environment in which the encounter takes place. Regardless, what these findings suggest is that the nature of the encounter between first responders and minority individuals who are suspected of a crime provides multiple opportunities for bias to seep in and affect the crucial decision of whether to shoot the person or not.

In turn, this process has important implications for intergroup relations in the context of law enforcement. It is important to note that most of these studies investigated implicit forms of bias, that is, bias that individuals are unaware of. Furthermore, what these studies show is that bias exists and influences decisions to shoot even in laboratory settings, in the absence of

As we have outlined above, the following stages and agents involved in this process—the dispatcher and the first responders—might also play a crucial role in determining how often they occur and how severe these incidents turn out to be. A second step in this line of research would entail analyzing these calls for factors such as accent, intonation, pitch, intensity, and volume. Studies have shown that, for instance, different accents are stereotypically associated with different social classes (Krauss & Pardo, 2006); thus, in this context, where the only means of communication occurs through the phone, such characteristics might be particularly important because they have the potential to affect decision-making. For instance, if the caller's vocal characteristics suggest that they belong to a high socioeconomic class, will the dispatcher be more likely to prioritize this call, compared to when the caller sounds like they belong to a lower socioeconomic class? Furthermore, paraverbal cues, such as shakiness of voice, could also signal how much stress or threat the caller is experiencing, and the way they interpret these emotional states might influence how they transmit this information to the first responders. Therefore, analyzing these audio recordings could also provide important insights into the kind of bias that first responders enter these encounters with.

The reason why interventions such as the recent Oregon bill are being put into place is that many of these instances of community enforcement of racial bias could be attributed to explicit discriminatory behaviors toward Black Americans and other minority groups. Nevertheless, research on this specific phenomenon is currently lacking and makes it difficult to establish exactly what this process entails and whether it is always explicit bias that drives these calls. We propose that the nature of this phenomenon, which involves multiple stages and agents, opens up the possibility for bias to carry over from one person to another, particularly when the source of threat is ambiguous and open to interpretation.

Drawing on widely known examples of community enforcement, as well as empirical evidence from the field of intergroup relations, in this chapter we have outlined some of the potential mechanisms that lie at the core of these increasingly problematic events. Our review is not exhaustive, of course, but merely attempts to set the stage for a further and deeper investigation of this phenomenon. With more empirical evidence at their disposal, both scientists and policymakers can take the appropriate steps to reduce the prevalence of these negative events and optimize the emergency line by handling less fraudulent calls and dealing with actual emergencies.

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