

BIASES AND STEREOTYPES IN POLICE DECISION-MAKING  
DO THEY EXIST?

By  
Christine Orrey  
Hayward Police Department

May 2010

COMMAND COLLEGE CLASS 46

The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

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## BIASES AND STERETYPES IN POLICE DECISION-MAKING DO THEY EXIST?

It was almost midnight when veteran police officer Kimberly Smith decided to stop for a cup of coffee to get through the last of her report writing. As she pulled her cruiser into the convenience store parking lot, she heard the familiar voice of the store's owner yelling, "Stop! Somebody stop that guy!" Officer Smith saw the owner running after a heavily dressed black man who just exited the store. As she hastily parked and got out of her patrol car, she saw the man running toward her with a shiny metal object in his right hand and a small plastic bag in his left. Her heart raced as she realized that she had just encountered an armed robbery. The man glanced back toward the store owner and hadn't seen her yet when she confronted him at gunpoint.

Instead of heeding her order to stop, the man continued toward her and raised his right hand, seemingly pointing the metal object directly at her. Fearing that she was about to be shot, Officer Smith fired twice into the man's chest, ending his threat to her life. The devastating aftermath revealed that the man had simply spotted his bus and did not want to be late to his night construction job. He had just stopped into the convenience store for an energy drink and, in his rush to not miss his bus, had left the store without his change. The convenience store owner was chasing the man to give him his change. The metal object in the man's hand was his cell phone and the plastic bag held his energy drink.

Was the officer wrong? Was her decision to shoot the man based upon racial prejudice or was this simply an unfortunate tragedy? While this incident was fictional, communities all over the country struggle with similar mistake-of-fact shootings time after time. Police advocates and critics spend endless hours debating the source of such shootings. Fortunately, researchers are

investing time and effort into understanding the degree to which police officers' split-second decisions are based upon processes of the subconscious mind, as opposed to deliberate bias. The work of such research is providing greater clarity as to the various factors at play, as well as what can be done to create more favorable outcomes.

### Are The Police Biased?

Mention police and bias in the same sentence and you are likely to elicit strong feelings from a myriad of people. The issue of prejudice, especially racial prejudice, is a hot button issue for law enforcement agencies as well as the communities they serve. Most police officers will adamantly declare, and wholeheartedly believe, that bias has no role in their decisions. Yet, countless studies show we all have unconscious attitudes and beliefs, even if we are not fully aware of them.

Psychologists at Harvard, the University of Virginia and the University of Washington created "Project Implicit" to study unconscious bias. (Project Implicit, 2002-2008) Their work has clearly and repeatedly shown that biases exist deep within our psyche, whether we acknowledge them or not. (Tolerance) For those interested in assessing their own possible bias, their Implicit Association Test is a means by which anyone might consider their own perspectives (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>). Certainly, our unconscious attitudes and beliefs can affect our decision-making in police work.

According to college professor and author Jean Moule, we can mitigate bias in routine decisions made with the luxury of time (Moule, 2009), but split-second decisions are a different matter. Critical incident decision making in law enforcement is highly scrutinized because of the level of risk and potential outcomes involved. Decisions made during high-speed pursuits, the arrests of violently resisting suspects, and deadly force situations all have the potential for tragic

outcomes; all of these decisions are made with input from the subconscious mind. Add to this level of scrutiny the actual and perceived biases that play into such decisions and it is clear that law enforcement has a responsibility to mitigate bias whenever possible.

### Blink – Thin-slicing in Policing

Malcolm Gladwell illustrated dozens of examples in his 2005 best seller *Blink – The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Gladwell, 2005). In his exploration of the negative aspects of what he calls “thin-slicing” – the ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience – Gladwell raises the fundamental questions of racial equality by looking at studies and experiments that show how embedded racial stereotypes affect our perceptions of others. (Gladwell, 2005) An entire chapter of *Blink* examines the 1999 death of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed West African immigrant who was shot and killed by four New York City police officers. The shooting stirred an intense public response. Some said it was a tragic accident and an “inevitable by-product of the fact that police officers sometimes have to make life-or-death decisions in conditions of uncertainty.” Others saw it as a clear case of racism. (Gladwell, 2005)

While jurors in the officers' trial agreed with the first explanation and acquitted them of murder charges, Gladwell didn't accept either explanation. He said there was no indication the officers were racist or out to “get” Diallo, but Gladwell was unwilling to write it off as a simple accident, either. Instead, he believed the officers “made a series of critical misjudgments, beginning with the assumption that a man getting a breath of fresh air outside his own home was a potential criminal.” (Gladwell, 2005) Is it possible the four NYPD police officers mistook innocent curiosity and fear for suspicion and danger? If so, why?

Gladwell first looked to studies on autism to explain what may have gone wrong in the Diallo case, since persons with autism have difficulty interpreting nonverbal cues such as gestures and facial expressions. Gladwell then discussed the rare experiences of shooting someone by examining David Klinger's book *Into the Kill Zone*. Klinger explains the phenomenon of tunnel vision, extreme visual clarity, the sense that time is slowing down and other perceptual distortions. (Klinger, 2004) Gladwell also looked to Retired Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman's book *On Killing*, especially where Grossman describes the optimal state of arousal – the range in which stress improves performance – as when our heart rate is between 115 and 145 beats per minute. But many, under pressure, get too aroused and their bodies begin to shut down various functions that are sources of information. According to Grossman, complex motor skills suffer, cognitive processes breakdown, and vision becomes more restricted. (Grossman, 1998) Gladwell concluded that people go into a state of temporary autism – “mind-blind” - when overly aroused. (Gladwell, 2005)

Gladwell's *Blink* makes a compelling case that the subconscious mind plays a key role in split-second decision-making, as well as the notion that rapid cognition – the split-second and subconscious thought-processes having the greatest influence over quick decisions - can be both positive and negative. Gladwell also asserts training can minimize the negative impacts of stress. This is not a new concept to the police profession. Police professionals have long known the value of realistic training as a key component of success in stressful situations.

Gerd Gigerenzer, the director of the Center for Adaptive Behavior and Cognition at the Max Plank Institute for Human Development in Berlin, Germany concurs with much of Gladwell's premise of subconscious influences impacting behavior. Contrary to Gladwell's intentional avoidance of the titles "intuition" or "gut feelings" as premises to decision-making,

though, Gigerenzer focuses on gut feelings in his book *Gut Feelings – The Intelligence of the Unconscious*. He summarizes gut feelings as the result of our unconscious mental processes. (Gigerenzer, 2007) Gigerenzer refers to widespread accounts of people having a set of beliefs and desires that are the cause of their behavior. In this model, genetics and environment play very complex and interactive roles in human behavior. A key part of genetics is the “evolved brain,” which Gigerenzer states “supplies us with capacities that have developed over millennia but are largely ignored by standard texts on decision making.” (Gigerenzer, 2007)

Arie Kruglanski, a social psychologist at the University of Maryland, devotes an entire chapter of his book *Social Psychology – Handbook of Basic Principles* to what he terms “automatic thought” - subconscious, uncontrolled processes, both in thought and action. (Kruglanski, 2007) Kruglanski explains that much of everyday life is “guided by psychological processes that are unintended and unobservable.” (Kruglanski, 2007) These processes influence our judgment and decisions, attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices, interpersonal interactions and overall “motives and goal states that guide action.” Automatic thought are the cognitive processes that occur “without effort, control, awareness, or intention.” (Kruglanski, 2007)

*Social Psychology* indicates that there is a vast, complicated and generally unknown interplay between automatic processes (subconscious) and controlled processes (conscious). Examples provided include reading (automatic for literate adults) verses the simple act of picking up a book (subject to intentional control). (Kruglanski, 2007) The game of basketball, however, brings about a complicated interaction between conscious and subconscious functions. Many of the actions are automatic (dribbling, scanning the court) while others are conscious (implementing a certain play or strategy). Countless factors influence this interplay and contribute to how we access the different systems. For example, controlled processes may

become automatic with repetition. (Kruglanski, 2007) This is well-established in many fields: law enforcement, athletics, dance, etc. Law enforcement trainers and athletic coaches alike refer to “muscle memory” – our body’s ability to perform a motion automatically and without conscious effort after we have practiced the movement for many repetitions. (Michigan, 2004)

One conclusion in *Social Psychology* significant to law enforcement is that “knowledge that has been used frequently has a chronic readiness to be used.” (Kruglanski, 2007) This means the more familiar we are with something, the more ingrained in our subconscious it becomes. The more we are exposed to certain information or experiences, the more we draw upon such information and experiences in our subconscious processes. The parallel to law enforcement is obvious. We must continue to expend a great deal of effort to provide our officers with the training and experiences they need to successfully and professionally accomplish their tasks, and we should look at the type of training and experiences we want to ingrain into their subconscious minds. While we often think of reality-based scenario training in this regard, the concepts can and should be expanded into much broader areas.

### Types of Biases

When looking at stereotypes and prejudices, one often thinks of racial biases, especially in the context of police-community relations. Studies to be addressed here support the theory that racial biases do negatively affect police decision-making, especially during critical incidents in which split-second decisions must be made. Yet, racial biases are not the only type of stereotyping and prejudice that occurs in society, and are not the only type of stereotyping and prejudice that could potentially affect law enforcement behaviors. Ageism, sexism, racism, homophobia and other negative prejudices could very well factor into the equation as well.

While ageism is a broad social phenomenon with many effects upon the police profession, it does not carry the same weight in the study of split-second decision-making by police officers because of the infrequency of critical incidents involving the elderly. Studies of implicit ageism, though, draw parallels to police rapid cognition. Researchers claim that “one of the most insidious aspects of ageism is that it can operate without conscious awareness, control or intention to harm.” (Kruglanski, 2007)

Similarly, unconscious attitudes and beliefs about gender do not necessarily play a significant role in the study of rapid cognition by police officers, as there are very few examples of mistake-of-fact shootings or similar critical incidents that have gone awry involving females. There are, however, gender implications for the police profession as a whole; and for the theories and studies of unconscious stereotypes. The subconscious mind often comes into play when we form first impressions. A compelling example of this is explained in *Blink*. About 35 years ago, orchestras in the United States began doing blind auditions – hiding musicians behind screens for auditions so that the committees choosing the musicians could no longer see the musicians but could only hear them. Prior to such auditions, orchestras were male dominated. Since the use of the audition screens, the number of women in the top U.S. orchestras increased fivefold. This clearly indicates that the raters' feelings about women as a group were influencing their ability to evaluate their music. (Gladwell, 2005) Police officers use first impressions in many different ways, and not just related to gender or race. How well do these first impressions serve us? When might they negatively affect our judgment?

Research repeatedly supports the contention that unconscious beliefs and attitudes have a direct correlation to rapid cognition. It is very likely that The New York City Police Officers who shot and killed Amadou Diallo did not consciously think, “Here’s a black guy, he must be

armed and up to no good.” However, studies suggest that such racial biases not only exist, but could very well cause someone to “jump faster” to the conclusion that a black man is armed than they may do so with a white man.

Supporting this theory was a study published online and in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* in 2003. The article, *Targets of discrimination: Effects of race on responses to weapons holders*, describes desktop virtual reality simulations at the University of Washington, where researchers had undergraduate students in the role of plainclothes police officers. They were presented with flash images of unarmed citizens, fellow police officers or armed criminals and had to make a split-second decision whether or not to use deadly force. The allotted decision time was within 900, then 800, milliseconds (less than one second). The subjects in the images were each dressed alike in casual clothing, and were either white males or black males. The study found that blacks were incorrectly shot more often than whites. (Greenwald, 2003)

While this finding involved untrained college students, studies of Project Implicit’s IAT findings have indicated that such unconscious bias applies to all people. (Washington, 2009) Additionally, Florida State University researchers replicated this study using only police officers, and found the officers were more likely to mistakenly shoot at an unarmed black suspect than at an unarmed white suspect. Additionally, when the suspects were armed, the officers were slightly more likely to mistakenly not shoot a white suspect than a black one. (Fairhurst, 2005)

These studies indicate that racial stereotypes influence a police officer's reactions in the face of a possible threat in two possible ways: (1) the race of a possibly armed person can affect the officer's ability to discriminate between a weapon from a harmless object, and (2) the race of the possibly armed person can affect the officer’s bias that the subject is armed. The authors theorize that this two-effect conclusion makes it more difficult to reduce what they call “false

alarm errors,” but they also state that the time pressures of the situations bring into play cognitive processes that are automatic and difficult to control. (Greenwald, 2003) The critical question is this: How can we positively influence the subconscious processes that affect split-second decision-making?

Current thinking on prejudice and stereotype reduction argue that “prejudice-free responses require perceivers to be aware of their bias; to be motivated to change their responses because of personal values, feelings of guilt, compunction, or self-insight.” (Dasgupta, 2001) Researchers Nilanjana Dasgupta and Anthony Greenwald constructed an experiment in which participants were tested on their implicit attitudes toward whites and blacks. Participants were then exposed to favorable members of the black community (Denzel Washington and Martin Luther King Jr., for example), and then retested on their implicit attitudes. Their attitudes upon retest were more favorable than before their exposure to favorable blacks. This study was replicated for biases against older persons, wherein being exposed to favorable older persons (Walter Cronkite and Mother Teresa, for example), improved their implicit attitudes toward older people. (Dasgupta, 2001)

Drawing a parallel to law enforcement, one could come to the conclusion that exposing police officers to favorable members of social groups who may otherwise receive negative bias could lessen the bias that police officers might have against that social group. In police terms, favorable would mean less suspicious or threatening. Recruiting and hiring police officers whose experiences and background include such favorable exposure to a wide spectrum of people is another way to reduce negative biases. These strategies could theoretically lessen the chances of biases negatively affecting rapid cognition and split-second decision-making. Being aware that these biases live in the subconscious mind could be the key to unlocking the ability to control

them. The information fed to our conscious mind through conscious thoughts and experiences are accessed by the subconscious mind in milliseconds. Police officers need to understand and confront their stereotypes and prejudices, and need positive exposure to diverse social groups to mitigate any negative attitudes and beliefs buried in our subconscious minds.

### The Executive's Role

Police executives clearly need more concrete solutions to this complex issue. The Florida State researchers who replicated the University of Washington study of unconscious race bias in shoot-don't shoot situations took their research a step further. They determined that, after extensive training with the same computer program that determined unconscious bias, in which the race of the suspect was unrelated to the presence of a weapon, the officers were able to eliminate bias. (Peruche, 2005) Perhaps a regimen of repeated exposure to similar training protocols would enhance the chances of more appropriate responses from police officers in similar circumstances on a broader scale.

Unfortunately, this experiment appears to stand alone in the study of mitigating police bias. Specific answers are few and far between, but answers come more readily when questions are asked. It is incumbent upon police departments, state and national departments of justice, and research organizations at universities and at the Police Executive Research Forum to push beyond racial profiling work to engage in studies to demonstrate how the police profession can reduce, mitigate or even eliminate biases in police decision-making. The shooting death of Amadou Diallo is a tragic reminder that police officers are human and subject to the limitations of human processes. These reminders should serve to motivate us to a deeper understanding of the subconscious mind and the tremendous role it plays in our thoughts and actions.

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