

A Plea for Bystander Intervention

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I would be remiss if I did not begin by admitting my sheer delight to see organizational scientists (e.g., Hall, Hall, & Perry, 2016; Ruggs et al., 2016) taking a greater interest in broader societal social issues like these. In 2007, when I was the chair of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology's (SIOP's) Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs (CEMA), I devoted part of a column in *The Industrial–Organizational Psychologist* to discussing what I perceived to be a law enforcement racial injustice perpetrated against several adolescents in Louisiana known as the “Jena Six” (Avery, 2007). The issue at hand in that case was the impact of race *after* an arrest was made. The media reports of the case at that time compelled many to believe that its handling by law enforcement and the criminal justice system had been influenced adversely by the racial composition of the White plaintiff and Black defendants. Like Ruggs et al., I felt then and continue to believe that we, as industrial–organizational (I-O) psychologists, could be doing more to redress societal injustice. I also commend them on the multifaceted nature of their discussion and appreciate that they highlighted a number of ways in which our existing knowledge base is, and future research products could be, pertinent to what's happening all too often between police and the minority communities they are intended to serve and protect.

I understand and appreciate their desire to present an evenhanded assessment of our empirical inquiry as they generalized research findings from a variety of contexts to help make sense of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, as I read their essay I couldn't help but wonder whether they went far enough in compelling us to act. My own cursory literature review of two premier journals in I-O psychology (i.e., *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology*) revealed that nearly 140 articles have been published focusing on police. Adding race as a keyword reduced the number to less than 10, and none of the articles focused on racial profiling or brutality. Furthermore, I was unable to find even a single empirical article in any I-O or closely related outlet focused on the issues of racial profiling or police brutality. Clearly, some I-O psychologists have shown they have the requisite access to and relationships with key personnel within law enforcement agencies to

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conduct such research. Moreover, SIOP and its broader parent associations (American Psychological Association and Association for Psychological Science) could help to create pressures at the federal level for more rigorous empirical evaluation of these phenomena were we sufficiently motivated to do so. Therefore, the question that comes to mind is why haven't we taken action?

According to the work on bystander intervention, which describes why observers often fail to help a victim in need, one reason such inaction occurs is that the situation at hand is not recognized as an emergency (see Fischer et al., 2011, for a recent review of this literature). Consistent with this premise, I contend that a primary reason for our tardiness in tackling this issue stems from the fact that we (as a field) do not view issues disproportionately affecting minority group members to be a central concern. I realize this is a strong (and potentially polarizing) statement, and to be fair, at least a few of the articles in our literature on law enforcement focused on detecting or minimizing racioethnic bias against prospective or incumbent employees (e.g., Buckley, Jackson, Bolino, Veres, & Feild, 2007). That said, unless you or someone that you care about is believed to be at risk of being victimized by overzealous policing, the pertinence of profiling and police brutality probably isn't particularly pressing. To put it bluntly, it just isn't relevant to most I-O psychologists, which should not be surprising given that (a) we are predominantly White in composition (Avery & Hysong, 2007) and (b) social networks (i.e., those that we know and sometimes care for) tend to be racioethnically homogenous (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Borrowing the metaphor from the focal article, it is not that I-O psychologists are consciously resigned to let Baltimore burn. Rather, due to selective perception directing attention toward the things that concern us directly and away from everything else, many of us likely do not even see the flames.

Certainly, some readers may dismiss the preceding conclusion as pure cynicism. Nonetheless, a closer look at some of the existing studies that have utilized police samples illustrates what we might have learned were we truly concerned about stemming the tide of police violence against racioethnic minorities. I want to be very clear that my intention in calling attention to these studies is not to disparage the authors in any way. It is commonly professed that research is me-search, which is another way of saying that scholars tend to study the things that are personally salient and meaningful. Accordingly, it is my hope that, by pointing out some of these potential missed opportunities, readers may become more mindful of them during future research pursuits and take fuller advantage of our chances to shed greater light on why this phenomenon continues to occur and what authorities can do to stem its tide.

In one study involving police participants, Cortina, Doherty, Schmitt, Kaufman, and Smith (1992) examined the incremental validity of personality measures beyond civil service examination scores in predicting performance. To their credit, they were able to obtain a wide array of performance indicators including probation ratings that captured professionalism and fairness. What if fairness had been disentangled from other reasons for probation and included as an independent criterion? Similarly, other examinations (e.g., Dilchert, Ones, Davis, & Rostow, 2007; Sarchione, Cuttler, Muchinsky, & Nelson-Gray, 1998) have linked officer cognitive ability, personality, and life histories to counterproductive work behavior aggregates including substantiated allegations of discrimination and usage of excessive force. Again, what if these components had been disaggregated and examined on their own? Such analyses would provide some informative perspective as to how personality, background information, and cognitive ability might be used to select more equitable officers. As such, they would help to address the fact that “less is known about the ability of selection procedures to predict officers’ stereotype activation and application, prejudice, and discrimination against racial minorities” (Ruggs et al.).

Another clever study involving a police sample examined various predictors of officer accuracy in lie detection when interviewing suspects (Mann, Vrij, & Bull, 2004). Though they identified a number of cues that influence officer efficacy in this regard, the authors did not examine whether suspect race/ethnicity or officer–suspect race/ethnic similarity had any bearing. Though this certainly could have been a function of the study being set in the United Kingdom, which is more race/ethnically homogenous than the United States, it could represent a missed opportunity nonetheless. If officers are less accurate at lie detection when the suspect is a minority, this could precipitate false arrests and racial injustice.

These are but a few of the possible examples of how prior scholarship—with only minor modifications—could have provided some degree of evidence-based insight into curbing police brutality. Beyond encouraging authors to be more mindful of these prospective learning opportunities, I’d urge editors and reviewers to do so as well. In many instances, these gatekeepers help to identify ways of enhancing the potential contribution of scholarship for theory and practice. Perhaps one key to putting out the metaphorical fire depicted by Ruggs et al. is for all agents of the research enterprise (i.e., authors, reviewers, editors, and readers) to more purposefully consider how we might better assist the “firefighters” in this process by arming them with the information they need to succeed. Noted author Maya Angelou famously said: “I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better.” Let us hope the same can be said of I-O psychologists in the wake of reading that Baltimore is ablaze.

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The Criticality of a Community Perspective

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To enhance interactions between police officers and citizens, industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists will have to utilize a systems thinking approach to understand the multifaceted challenges facing Baltimore and other cities across the nation and develop holistic solutions that include the whole community. Ruggs et al. (2016) overlooked the systems view of Baltimore’s challenges by focusing solely on isolated incidents of racial bias and proposing solutions predominantly inside the police station. To develop a

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