

Racial Bias Exists. Can We Train Cops to Deal With It?

The Oscar Grant shooting calls into question police training for critical incidents.

By Micky Duxbury

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There have been well more than one million Internet viewings of the videos showing the killing of Oscar Grant. The grainy and often chaotic videos show Grant sitting on the BART platform with his arms above his head. Then he is on his knees with his arms outstretched, looking as though he is trying to protect himself. Several officers pull him face down on the platform, and after what appears to be a struggle, Officer Johannes Mehserle steps back, pulls a gun, and shoots Grant in the back.

President Obama has described the incident between Henry Louis Gates and the Cambridge police as a "teachable moment." Across both the country and the political spectrum, the role that racism, rage, and racial bias might have played in that incident has been dissected and analyzed. In the Bay Area, we have a "teachable hour" when it comes to the New Year's Day killing of Grant. That hour could be used to look at whether police training adequately addresses the possibility that police officers' perception of danger can be influenced by racial bias.

The Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training is mandated to train for critical incidents and the use of lethal force. The commission was established by the California Legislature in 1959 to set minimum selection and training standards for state law enforcement. Every police officer in California, including BART police, receives his or her training from a curriculum developed by the commission.

"All BART officers are trained for critical incidents and the situation with Oscar Grant was one of those," said Sergeant John M. Sandoval, a spokesperson for the BART Police Department's Personnel and Training Section. "But each incident is unique. The officer's reactions will be different when the adrenaline is going and whether he is a new or seasoned officer. You don't know how you are going to react, and we cannot train for every possible incident. ... Each critical incident that an officer has helps him deal better with the next one." And yet the cumulative effects of Mehserle learning from other critical incidents obviously did not save Oscar Grant.

When asked if Mehserle's training addressed how racial bias might influence the way that officers react in crisis situations, Sandoval said that the training does not get into that degree of specificity. All BART officers do evidently view a video on racial profiling, said Sandoval, who offered to arrange a viewing of the video. But that opportunity was rescinded after BART spokesperson Linton Johnson wrote via e-mail that "the opportunity to review training videos is no longer available." Johnson then referred all inquiries to BART's outside legal counsel, attorney Dale Allen.

Allen was asked if BART's police training addressed the possibility that responses to critical incidents might be influenced by racial bias. After conferring with the BART board, Allen returned with a polite "no comment."

Training in when to use lethal force didn't seem to make Officer Mehserle pause before firing that fatal shot. Would a different kind of training have made it less likely that an unarmed man lying face down would be shot in the back?

Officer Mehserle is said to have received much of his basic police training at the Napa Police Academy. Although director Damien Sandoval would not confirm or deny that Mehserle attended the academy, he said he is not sure that any curriculum could get at the extent to which attitudes about race might play a role in incidents involving lethal force. "Our training covers the use of lethal force and racial profiling, but do we try to assess what is going on in the



This video displays the exact moment at which Oscar Grant was shot by officer Johannes Mehserle.

mind of an individual officer?" Sandoval said. "All people receive lessons about race; bias cuts across racial lines. How do you get underneath one person's life's experiences to look at their possible behavior under stress?"

If police academy curricula don't address that issue, who does?. Sandoval said that many BART police officers attend the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, where training seeks to strengthen ethical decision making. Training program director Sunny Lee-Goodman said the problem with racial bias is getting people to acknowledge it. "It comes down to providing a safe enough environment to have a nondefensive discussion without fear of repercussions or litigation," Lee-Goodman said. "No one wants to be accused of being a racist, so we find ways to get officers to look at their bias without the fear of being labeled. By the time you get to a critical incident, if you have not thought this through, it might be too late."

Matters related to racial profiling are complex, notes East Palo Alto Police Chief Ronald Davis, an expert on the topic. "Most officers are trying to do the right things for the right reasons, but may be unaware of their biases," said Davis, who formerly worked at the Oakland Police Department. "All officers — white, black, or Latino — can be influenced by bias because the greatest creator of bias is experience. If all officers do is stop black males in baggy pants, some of whom are dealing drugs, what is going to happen to that officer? The more you get officers to engage with diverse communities in nonenforcement, nonadversarial relationships, the more officers can start judging people by their behavior and not by their racial profile."

Community policing is an admirable goal, but it takes extra time and money when counties are struggling. What to do in the meantime about officers with conscious or unconscious racial biases? "We have methods we can use to screen out the obvious racist," Davis said. "The bigger problem is the screening of the larger percentage of officers that might have implicit bias that they are not even aware of."

That is precisely what the latest research in racial stereotyping and criminality shows. Jennifer Eberhardt is a professor of social psychology at Stanford University and is the founder of the Policing Racial Bias Project. The project's goal is to develop partnerships between social psychologists and law enforcement in order to share information and generate new research on the influence of racial bias in policing. Eberhardt and her colleagues argue that the association of black Americans with criminality leads to significant changes — not simply in how we feel, think, and behave, but in how we actually see. "Starting in the 1970s, research showed that black males were viewed as more threatening and dangerous. And over the last five years, we have been examining what that means in the context of policing."

In one of Eberhardt's studies, participants were exposed to black or white faces shown so rapidly that they could not be detected. Then subjects were shown partially degraded objects that were slowly brought into focus. Some were crime objects like guns and knives and some were not relevant to crime at all. "What we found is that if the participants were subliminally exposed to black male faces, that exposure led them to detect the crime objects sooner," Eberhardt said. "Exposure to white faces actually *inhibited* their detection of crime objects. Blacks were significantly more likely to be seen as criminals and whites were not only seen in a neutral way, but were seen as *less* criminal."

Eberhardt pointed to Joshua Correll's work at the University of Chicago as having additional ramifications for police training. "Correll's subjects are looking at scenes with either black or white people popping up. Some of them have weapons and some do not, and the subjects have to respond with a shoot button. What they found is that subjects were faster to shoot when they saw a black person with a gun than when they saw a white person with a gun. They were also much more likely to make an error by shooting a black person without a gun than they were if it was a white person without a gun."

Lorie Fridell, an associate professor of criminology at the University of South Florida, is one of the developers of a new project called Racially Biased Policing Training, funded by the Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. "We train recruits to see when their policing is based on stereotypes, and they learn that impartial policing makes them safer and more effective, as well as more just," Fridell said. "Anytime you hire human beings, and police are human beings, you are going to run into implicit bias. By characterizing this problem as not just about bad people, but about well-meaning people that are human like the rest of us, it changes the nature of the discussion."

Chief Davis is glad to see the application of Eberhardt's research in new police training. "When bias attaches criminality to one group, it raises fears and can lead to officers being over-reactive," he said. "No one would deny that

we live in a society where racism still exists, and police departments, like all organizations, are reflective of our society. Either we work harder to keep biases in check or we will keep having disparate outcomes, and minority communities will keep losing trust and confidence."

When asked what gives her hope for the future in the face of pervasive racial bias, Eberhardt, who is African American, had this to say: "I became involved with law enforcement to try to change the dialogue about the role of race and policing. The dominant impression of someone that is racially biased is that they are bad people who are motivated to act in bad ways. But research has shown us that racial bias is much more pervasive than that. The fact is that we are all socialized to associate blackness with danger and crime. So we have to deal with that — all of us — not just people that have anti-black attitudes. We are all victims of this and we need to work together to develop solutions."

Police are just like the rest of us. They have grown up in a society that has a long and troubled history with racism, so they have developed stereotypic biases — biases that have been proven to cut across racial lines. Research shows that when police are trained to be aware of those biases, they are able to make changes so that their policing can become more fair and equitable. There is hope in this new approach to police training, but it will be years before it is used nationwide, and more research is needed before it can be incorporated into training for critical incidents, especially those involving lethal force.

The discrepancy between that hope and the reality of police shootings of people of color is a chasm of such magnitude that it defies description. "The disparity between how some police treat young black men was evident on the videotapes of Oscar Grant's killing," said Jakadi Imani, executive director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. "Make no mistake about it, if a bunch of black police had a few white young men on a BART platform, and one of them then was killed like this, you would have seen immediate arrests and you would have seen the police chief of BART fired. Many folks might want to believe that we live in a post-racial era when, in fact, we do not. The life of young black men has to mean something more than what it does — not just to the police, but to the whole society."