COMMENTARY

The critical role of team processes and team reflexivity in the emergence and prevention of racialized police violence

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In this commentary, my objective is to expand the perspective presented by Dhanani et al. (2022) by highlighting a key challenge associated with law enforcement and police patrols: Police officers have to adapt to unexpected, complex, and highly dynamic contexts not just individually but also as a team. I therefore believe that it is essential to invoke theoretical perspectives that consider the so-called action team context in policing and its implications for racial bias and resulting police violence. Additionally, interventions designed to prevent racialized police violence must take into account specific team processes potentially affecting unwanted and dangerous on-the-job behavior. In the following, I first define action teams in complex environments and point to relevant team processes (i.e., communication and decision making) in this context. Second, I propose simulation-based training and team reflexivity (TR) as useful team-based interventions that target communication and team decision making, and thus may present useful evidence-based and practical tools to address and reduce racialized police violence.

Action teams in complex environments

There is an often-quoted adage that has been used to describe the work in healthcare teams, firefighting teams, cockpit crews, in the military, and in the police: "It's hours of boredom mixed with moments of stark terror." This statement captures the essence of work in action teams (also called critical teams), which can be defined as teams that consist of two or more individuals that operate in a high-risk context to solve ambiguous problems (Sundstrom et al., 1990). Action teams are often formed ad hoc, which means that their team composition is not stable over time but formed for a specific operation or problem, after which these teams dissolve. A key characteristic of action teams is that they need to be able to switch from an almost inactive mode to full response in an instant and that any mistake can potentially be fatal (Klein et al., 2006). Thus, time and finality are critical factors in their work, that is, teams such as military units, surgical teams, and police teams cannot postpone their work or redo it at a later point in time (Ishak & Ballard, 2012).

Researchers have pointed out different phases in action teams, namely transition and action phases. While transition phases are time periods that are marked by planning, evaluation, and preparation for goal accomplishment, action phases are time periods marked by acts that directly affect goal accomplishment (Marks et al., 2001). For example, in the transition phase, police teams perform highly routinized and predictable work such as planning their routes, discussing objectives, and preparing their gear. Action phases usually start when the teams are confronted with a sudden-onset, high stakes event such as recognizing and approaching a potential suspect. Research has shown that action team members show elevated stress levels when they switch from

transition to action phases (e.g., Hunziker et al., 2011). At the same time, team leaders tend to engage in more direct forms of leadership to efficiently coordinate roles and responsibilities (Tschan et al., 2006). Although directive leadership is necessary to provide structure, it can also induce conformity pressures, as team members may find it difficult to question the decisions and actions of those in power even if they are wrong (Weiss et al., 2014).

Police teams may face similar challenges as they move from transition to action within split seconds such as when they suddenly face a potential suspect. Although racial bias may first emerge at the individual level, complex task demands, increased stress levels, directive orders from authorities, conformity pressure, and fear to speak up to those in power may perpetuate it at the team level. These team-level processes were likely core contributors to many of the reported deadly police shootings discussed by Dhanani et al. (e.g., Amadou Diallo, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor). For example, in the case of Amadou Diallo, the police officers were all collectively (but mistakenly) convinced that Diallo had a gun and subsequently shot him 41 times. In the case of George Floyd, one police officer was kneeling on Floyd's neck for over 8 minutes with several other officers bystanding or attacking Floyd as well. Both cases illuminate the importance of (failed) team processes such as failure to jointly double check and reassess the situation, failure to speak up to those in charge and to intervene, and a resulting deadly fixation on shooting an unarmed and innocent person. Although there is an increasing focus on team processes and decision making in police teams (e.g., Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2013), we currently lack a systematic understanding of how different processes at different phases of teamwork (i.e., action and transition) may contribute to racialized police violence.

Team-based training interventions

We argue that team-based training interventions can address these challenges, improve team adaptation to critical events, and use the team context as a resource to prevent racialized police violence. Research has shown that TR interventions can promote the team's conscious reflection on objectives, strategies, and processes (Schippers et al., 2014). We suggest three options to integrate TR interventions in policing: (a) after a critical simulated event, (b) after real team performance episodes, and (c) during real team performance episodes.

TR after a critical simulated event

Simulation-based training refers to a synthetic practice environment (e.g., via a computer program or role-play) that allows learners to engage in experiential learning in a risk-free environment (Salas et al., 2009). Commonly, simulation-based trainings have a training and a feedback component designed to enhance relevant competencies such as task performance and team processes (e.g., coordination, communication; Kolbe et al., 2013). Typically, after a team has managed a critical event, a thorough expert-led debriefing takes place in which key team processes and outcomes are discussed and critical videotaped teamwork episode are reviewed (e.g., "What was your plan with this strategy?"; "How did his/her behavior affect you?"). Learners are encouraged to derive explanations for their own behavior, which are then contrasted with alternative action possibilities and perspectives from fellow team members to encourage individual and team learning (e.g., Kolbe et al., 2013; Weiss et al., 2017). Such trainings are widespread within many high-reliability organizations (e.g., aviation, healthcare) and receive growing recognition in police education. For example, in a recent study, Phelps et al. (2018) evaluated the use of body-worn cameras to encourage reflection and learning during simulated operative training sessions for police students. They found that this intervention led to more reflection after the critical training incident and allowed police students to identify their own mistakes and the reasons for them more frequently. Simulation-based trainings and TR inventions have also been shown to increase upward and cross-hierarchical communication in teams. For example, a study by Weiss et al. (2017)

showed that interventions designed to enhance assertive communication in healthcare teams significantly increased the likelihood that nurses spoke up to physicians and, thus, improved overall team performance. We recommend using simulation-based trainings and subsequent TR debriefings to address and prevent maladaptive communication patterns within police teams. Surfacing when and why racial bias occurs and how it affects team decisions in simulated crisis situations is particularly relevant in this regard. Such trainings should take place on a regular basis, not just within police education but within the occupational practice.

TR after real performance episodes

It is also possible to include TR interventions into everyday policing practice by using team-led, after-event reviews (AERs). For example, cockpit crews engage in AERs after every flight. During such an AER, teams reflect on how they coordinated their actions, how they communicated with each other, and what strategies they might pursue in the future. Research has demonstrated that AERs can improve subsequent team performance even if team members work in a different subsequent team constellation (Weiss et al., 2017). This is because AERs enable team members to jointly reflect on positive and negative contributions to the team and to identify causes for successes and failures. One communication strategy that might be beneficial in this context is the advocacy–inquiry technique that originated from aviation and is increasingly used in other high-reliability contexts such as healthcare (Pian-Smith et al., 2009). Here an advocacy ("I saw that you violently attacked the suspect. It was already clear that the suspect was unarmed. I learned that we should try de-escalating first in such situations.") is paired with an inquiry ("Can you please clarify your view?"). This technique may seem beneficial within police teams as it provides a tool for voicing opinions in the face of hierarchical barriers.

TR during real team performance episodes

It is also possible to implement TR as teams are still engaged in the task. Researchers have pointed out that in-action debriefings, in which teams may take as little as 10 seconds to reflect on their strategies, are positively related to team performance. For example, Schmutz et al. (2018) showed that to the extent that medical emergency teams took little breaks while treating a patient to gather opinions, make informed team decisions, and coordinate tasks, their performance increased. This relationship was even stronger for larger teams. Though it might seem counterintuitive to halt teamwork in the face of intense time pressure, it provides teams with an opportunity to reassess the situation, potentially change their strategy, and reorganize their workload (Ishak & Ballard, 2012). One might argue that in contrast to medical teams, police teams do not only have to operate under time pressure but also face potentially life-threatening encounters with a suspect. In this context, in-action TR could be implemented before a suspect is approached and or coded language may be used to enable communication and potential reassessment with team members during an attack. We encourage more research in simulation-based contexts in order to develop helpful and suitable in-action TR interventions in policing.

Conclusion

Racialized police violence is a key societal challenge necessitating more attention and expertise from I-O psychology. Adopting an action team perspective, this commentary highlights the, thus far, neglected importance of team processes (e.g., pertaining to communication and coordination) in complex environments. I discuss group-level processes (e.g., conformity pressures, groupthink, failure to speak up) as potential contributors to racialized police violence, which need to be systematically investigated by future research. To help guide current practice in policing, I propose team-based interventions such as simulation-based training and TR and propose different options

and techniques that can be adapted by police teams. Such interventions can aid in surfacing and changing maladaptive team processes and, thus, help prevent racialized police violence.

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