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Jim Medina

A Warmer Shade of Blue

In 2016, Philando Castile was fatally shot by a Minnesota police officer while reaching for his identification during a traffic stop — the officer feared the black man was going for a gun, according to court records. Castile's girlfriend captured the aftermath on video, which she streamed live to millions on Facebook. The chilling footage shows her pleading, "Stay with me," until he died.

Back in the news recently with the officer's acquittal on felony manslaughter charges, the police shooting triggered national outcry. Community leaders have demanded that law enforcement agencies reform police tactics — a challenging proposition supported by UC Santa Barbara sociology professor Geoffrey Raymond. "There is a real crisis in policing," he said.

To help police develop better communication methods, Raymond and Nikki Jones, a former UCSB sociology professor now at UC Berkeley, have committed to a three-year project, "Talking Justice: Identifying Interactional Mechanisms to Improve the Quality of Police-Civilian Encounters." Their work is made possible through a $404,000 grant from the WT Grant Foundation, which focuses on reducing inequality and improving the use of evidence in policy decisions.

According to Raymond, police need to switch from a "warrior model" to a "guardian model," whereby officers emphasize establishing relationships in a community, building trust and changing authority dynamics — which, he suggested, should increase safety for officers as well as civilians.

“There’s a higher level of distrust of police officers than ever before,” Raymond said. “I think police departments are increasingly open to thinking about how they might do things differently. A very narrow and sometimes counterproductive conception of officer safety has driven police training. I think the more progressive, forward-thinking police departments are recognizing the standard model of policing no longer works.”

Based on his research with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), Raymond found that police officers are trained to use a commanding voice when directing people to follow orders, such as “sit down.” “But they can run into problems if someone counters with ‘Wait a minute, you didn’t hear why I was doing that,’” he said.

“The encounter can quickly escalate into a confrontation,” Raymond continued. “You get the officer saying, ‘Sit down, sit down, sit down,’ and you have the person saying, ‘But, but, but.’”

If a police officer gives a sequential response — “I understand you want to do something right now, but first we’re going to do this and then we’re going to do the thing you want to do” — the odds an officer won’t need to use force increase significantly, Raymond said. And the odds a civilian will cooperate with the next police instruction improve sharply.

“Really small changes give police a very different way of establishing authority through trust and cooperation,” he said, adding that police can always fall back on force if necessary. “But it’s pretty dramatic what little changes can make.”

For the past six years, Raymond has been interviewing law enforcement officers and riding along on patrols because of his interest in how people talk to each other. Much of his previous work has revolved around cooperative social environments, but he has become increasingly drawn to conflict-oriented occasions.

“I understand that most police officers are going to assume that I don’t know what their world is like,” he said. “And they are probably right in a lot of ways. So whatever recommendations I make, I want to make sure they are from a position of understanding the reality of their world. We don’t view ourselves as on the side of law enforcement or on the side of the community, but we have to understand both to make a difference.”

Raymond said his research will center on three data sources: four months of first-hand police interviews and videos; thousands of videos taken from dash-mounted cameras in patrol cars and officers' body cameras (supplied by cooperating law enforcement agencies); and a young man's video journals of police encounters with residents in his heavily-policed neighborhood.

The young man clearly has an agenda, Raymond said, but "we wanted to get as many different data sources of real-time encounters as we could get our hands on." The video journals tie in with the research focus — urban areas where there is "mistrust of police, especially among young black men."

While much attention will be paid to overcoming suspicion and mistrust, Raymond said they also plan to study positive encounters to develop a well-rounded curriculum for possible police training. Citing his past research on doctor-patient interactions, he said: "To learn how to do things well, you watch doctors who are excellent at soliciting information, have excellent bedside manners and are excellent at making patients feel comfortable. Similarly, we want to know what goes wrong in police interactions, but we also want to study officers who communicate very well."

About UC Santa Barbara

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