

# A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO IMPROVING POLICE INTERACTIONS WITH BLACK CIVILIANS

SIMONE DRAKE,<sup>\*</sup> KATRINA LEE,<sup>†</sup> KEVIN PASSINO,<sup>‡</sup> & HUGO  
GONZALEZ VILLASANTI<sup>§</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup> Simone Drake is the Hazel C. Youngberg Trustees Distinguished Professor in the Department of English and holds a courtesy appointment at The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law.

<sup>†</sup> Katrina Lee is the John C. Elam/Vorys Sater Professor in Law and the Director of the Program on Dispute Resolution at The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law.

<sup>‡</sup> Kevin Passino is a professor in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at The Ohio State University.

<sup>§</sup> Hugo Gonzalez Villasanti is an Assistant Professor in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Michigan. He was formerly a postdoctoral scholar at the Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy at the College of Education and Human Ecology at The Ohio State University.

<sup>°</sup> The Authors are grateful to The Ohio State University (OSU) for the grant support provided through OSU's Seed Fund for Racial Justice for the Authors' project discussed throughout this Article. The authors thank research assistant Anthony Long for his help and Professors Sarah Cole, Judson Jeffries, and Amy Schmitz for their insights and comments.

## Abstract

*Over-use of force by law enforcement officers in the United States persists, along with a resulting state of crisis in Black communities. Massive protests in 2020–2021 calling for racial justice and for law enforcement reform have seemingly not been effective in turning the page on disproportionate use of force in interactions with Black civilians. Meanwhile, as protests and calls for legislative action and policy change continue, police training continues. Studies show that traditional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training practices produce resentment and resistance, specifically in the context of law enforcement. The Authors—scholars of law, critical race and gender studies, and engineering—have taken a multidisciplinary-team problem-solving approach to the crisis, with a focus on police training. The Authors launched a project, funded by a grant from The Ohio State University’s Seed Fund for Racial Justice, that seeks to intervene in traditional DEI training at the Columbus Division of Police. With the aim of developing an innovative software program that augments in-person police training related to DEI, the project’s methodology includes using real-life policing scenarios, software design, site visits, and engagement by students in the “Antiracist Technology” engineering course at The Ohio State University. The project reflects a collaborative focus on negotiation and critical race and gender studies.*

*The Authors seek to explore how technology can enhance in-person instructional training related to DEI and cultural competency while simultaneously reducing resistance to and resentment of DEI training. Ultimately, the goal is to use technology, together with research on structural and institutional systems of oppression, to improve relations between law enforcement and Black civilians. This Article will first describe the problem the Authors’ project seeks to address and its multidisciplinary problem-solving approach. It will then provide a critical overview of the research this project builds from and outline the project methodology. Finally, the Authors share about related research.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The persistent over-use of force by law enforcement officers against Black civilians in the United States has resulted in a state of crisis.<sup>1</sup> The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers on May 25, 2020 catalyzed calls for racial justice and for law enforcement reform, yet those calls seemingly have not been effective in turning the page on disproportionate use of force by law enforcement officers in interactions with Black civilians.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, police departments continue to engage in training ostensibly focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).<sup>3</sup> But their effectiveness is questionable, with studies showing conventional DEI training practices produce resentment and resistance.<sup>4</sup>

Against this backdrop lies an opportunity for imagining innovative social transformation through an interdisciplinary lens. A common phenomenon among Nobel Prize laureates is their tendency to be “creative polymaths,” or individuals who “purposely integrate formal and informal expertise from widely varied disciplines to yield new and useful ideas and practices.”<sup>5</sup> That observation suggests that solving complex social problems necessitates drawing on varied disciplines.

The research project discussed in this Article proceeds from the notion that interdisciplinary research offers opportunities for solving complex social problems that might not otherwise be resolved. The scholars leading the project<sup>6</sup> work in research fields including critical race and gender studies; engineering; and law—specifically, dispute resolution. This Article shares the design and initial phase of an interdisciplinary research project focused on law enforcement officer training. The project’s primary goal is the creation of a software program that assists in reducing officer use-of-force and enhancing de-escalation strategies, particularly with Black civilians. A secondary goal is

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<sup>1</sup> See *infra*, Sec. II.

<sup>2</sup> See *infra*, Sec. II.

<sup>3</sup> See *infra*, Sec. II.

<sup>4</sup> See *infra*, Sec. II.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Root-Bernstein & Michele Root-Bernstein, *Nobel Prizes Most Often Go to Researchers Who Defy Specialization—Winners Are Creative Thinkers Who Synthesize Innovations from Varied Fields and Even Hobbies*, THE CONVERSATION (Oct. 3, 2022, 8:07 AM), <https://theconversation.com/nobel-prizes-most-often-go-to-researchers-who-defy-specialization-winners-are-creative-thinkers-who-synthesize-innovations-from-varied-fields-and-even-hobbies-186193> [<https://perma.cc/XA8E-NZVM>].

<sup>6</sup> Authors Simone Drake, Katrina Lee, Kevin Passino, and Hugo Gonzalez Villasanti.

to contribute empirical data concerning DEI education in police training, which is under-studied.<sup>7</sup>

This collaboration centers technology as a tool for grappling with a national police culture that has tendencies to lack cultural and racial sensitivity awareness and useful communication and negotiation skills.<sup>8</sup> This problem is perhaps most pronounced when police engage with Black communities, and particularly Black men and Black boys, contributing to overuse of force.<sup>9</sup> Law enforcement overuse of force with Black civilians is so widespread that researchers and public policy institutes have issued statements attesting to the adverse health outcomes of Black families and communities resulting from police overuse of force and racial bias.<sup>10</sup>

Using common scenario-based police–civilian interactions where racial and cultural sensitivity can play a critical role in outcomes, the project’s designers aim to assist law enforcement officers in learning to engage with racially marginalized civilians in a manner that is respectful and conscious of potential bias and privilege. This approach flows from the Authors’ hypothesis that technology interventions may offer a more neutral training approach that will reduce or eliminate feelings of judgment by trainees, as well as a not-

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<sup>7</sup> Wesley G. Skogan et al., *Training Police for Procedural Justice*, 11 J. EXPERIMENTAL CRIMINOLOGY 319 (2014).

<sup>8</sup> See Rob Voigt et al., *Language from Police Body Camera Footage Shows Racial Disparities in Officer Respect*, 114 PROC. OF NAT’L ACAD. OF SCI. OF U.S. OF AM. 6521, 6525–26 (2017); Rod K. Brunson, “Police Don’t Like Black People”: African-American Young Men’s Accumulated Police Experiences, 6 CRIMINOLOGY & PUB. POL’Y 71, 81–82 (2007).

<sup>9</sup> See Roland G. Fryer Jr., *An Empirical Analysis of Racial Differences in Police Use of Force*, 127 J. POL. ECON. 1210, 1253 (2019); Jocelyn R. Smith Lee & Michael A. Robinson, “That’s My Number One Fear in Life. It’s the Police”: Examining Young Black Men’s Exposures to Trauma and Loss Resulting from Police Violence and Police Killings, 45 J. BLACK PSYCH. 143, 145–46 (2019); Frank Edwards et al., *Risk of Being Killed by Police Use of Force in the United States by Age, Race–Ethnicity, and Sex*, 116 PROC. OF NAT’L ACAD. OF SCI. OF U.S. OF AM. 16793, 16794–97 (2019). See generally Magnus Lofstrom et al., *Racial Disparities in Law Enforcement Stops*, PUB. POL’Y INST. CAL. (Oct. 2021), <https://www.ppic.org/?show-pdf=true&docraptor=true&url=https://www.ppic.org/publication/racial-disparities-in-law-enforcement-stops/> [https://perma.cc/2JB6-GA7F].

<sup>10</sup> See Council on Minority Mental Health & Health Disparities, *Position Statement on Police Brutality and Black Males*, AM. PSYCHIATRIC ASS’N (2018), <https://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/About-APA/Organization-Documents-Policies/Position-Police-Brutality-and-Black-Males.pdf> [https://perma.cc/M8LE-KQN9]; Sirry Alang et al., *Police Brutality and Black Health: Setting the Agenda for Public Health Scholars*, 107 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 662, 662–63 (2017).

## A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

uncommon perspective that human-led, workplace DEI training is often deemed irrelevant and ineffective by employees.<sup>11</sup>

One primary focus of the project is increasing self-awareness about bias and privilege prior to and leading up to police encounters with individuals. The process of developing and increasing self-awareness would involve a series of technology-aided self-assessments, interactive exercises, and debrief and discussions. By using technology to bear some of the burden of training, the researchers hope to offer a neutral mode of instruction to help law enforcement officers gain knowledge that will assist them in engaging with diverse civilian populations, as well as increase awareness of ways in which their knowledge of cultural differences might have room to grow.

A focus on pre-encounter development of self-awareness concerning these issues will provide the foundation for another primary focus: enhancing negotiations skills used during encounters with civilians. Those skills include engaging in difficult conversations, building trust, using empathy, listening, perspective-taking, and gathering information and feedback.<sup>12</sup> A hope is that this research will help inform about the extent to which software training paired with in-person instruction helps make difficult conversations less personal in a way that allows officers to be reflective on the issues and how they can make things better—rather than adopting a defensive posture.

This Article proceeds as follows: Section II identifies the problem addressed, providing background about police overuse of force in Black communities and the state of current DEI and race-related police training. Section III describes the design of the software development project, including its multidisciplinary nature, an overview of the areas informing the study, and the software development methodology. Section IV summarizes and looks to present and possible future work. Section V briefly concludes.

## II. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEM

### A. *Race and Policing*

Due to the inextricable relationship between the birth of modern law enforcement during the early nineteenth century and the pre-existing slave patrols established in the eighteenth century, it is impossible to separate the concept of policing in the United States from a system—slavery—designed to

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<sup>11</sup> See Robert Livingston, *How to Promote Racial Equity in the Workplace*, HARV. BUS. REV. (Sept.–Oct. 2020), <https://hbr.org/2020/09/how-to-promote-racial-equity-in-the-workplace> [<https://perma.cc/53RP-NQEK>]; Frank Dobbin & Alexandra Kalev, *Why Diversity Programs Fail*, HARV. BUS. REV. (July–Aug. 2016), <https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail> [<https://perma.cc/WHS4-TVW6>].

<sup>12</sup> See *infra*, Sec. III.