

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Why Some Deaths Trigger Riots While Others Are Ignored

ONE OF MY most important learning processes about intergroup interactions early in my research into those topics was to figure out why some clearly intentional and obviously criminal deaths seem to have no collective impact on a community and why a number of other deaths create a level of anger and collective group outrage that sometimes ends in riots and protests of various kinds that can last for days, weeks, or even months in a given setting or community.

That was an important area where I was significantly puzzled when I started this journey of exploration and learning. In one of my earlier drafts of the book, I wrote with a slightly critical tone about the fact that a particular neighborhood might overlook dozens or even hundreds of murders and then that same neighborhood or community would explode into anger and people would trigger demonstrations and various levels of riots and protests when some specific murders occurred.

I pointed out in that early draft of the book that every life and every death was important. I actually wrote at that time that it was illogical to have some deaths in a community trigger riots while many more deaths that happen all the time in that setting are simply ignored by the community where they occur.

I did not understand, at that point, the highly symbolic nature of the specific deaths that have directly triggered the riots. I felt at a philosophical and ethical level that all deaths were equal and I wrote that all externally inflicted deaths —

every murder — deserved people being angry that someone had killed another person.

I still do believe that all deaths involving murder do deserve people collectively being angry and I still believe that we should act in various ways to significantly reduce the overall numbers of intentionally inflicted deaths, but I now understand that for some situations, all deaths are not equal.

All Deaths Are Not Equal

We recently had a shooting in Oakland where a subway policeman shot and killed an unarmed Black teenager. That killing triggered several days of riots, created some damage, and generated some angry protests from people about the local police.

It was clear that those Oakland riots that temporarily shut down that city were not about the basic fact that another person had died from being shot by someone else in that city. Those riots basically functionally catalyzed and unleashed existing streams and existing undercurrents of serious intergroup anger that exists today at significant levels in Oakland.

Oakland is a poor community with high levels of unemployment. The crime levels are high in Oakland and the schools are in trouble. There is a long history of intergroup anger in Oakland.

Unemployment levels are particularly high — and they are highest with the Black and Hispanic residents of Oakland.

When an unarmed Black youth was shot on the subway in Oakland by a White policeman, that was seen as a tipping point event. People in that city who had simmering levels of anger about a wide range of intergroup issues had that simmering and seething anger erupt into open anger and then — for some people — rage, riots, and even very targeted violence after that shooting happened.

The recent public demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri, followed a similar pattern. An unarmed Black youth was shot and killed by a White policeman. Weeks of demonstrations and riots followed that shooting.

The nationally broadcast television images that we all saw of a linked wall of fully armed and well-armored White policemen in Ferguson confronting another equally connected and linked wall of protesting Black people on the streets of Ferguson sent a clear and very visual message to the entire world about the status of intergroup issues and the state of intergroup interactions in Ferguson.

The Visual Impact Showed Ferguson Clearly Divided by Race

The visual impact that we saw in the media of the conflict issues in Ferguson could not have been more divided by race. The White policeman with major weaponry on those streets clearly were prepared to damage some “Them” — and the African American people who were demonstrating on those streets were equally ready to express the collective anger of their group on those streets against their own targeted and defined category of “Them.”

The Ferguson situation clearly surfaced and boiled over and created major protests for that community because serious intergroup anger was already simmering in that setting and because angry people in Ferguson were obviously ready to be unleashed by a triggering intergroup event.

That anger was easy to understand.

Subsequent review by outside parties of the overall, long standing police department behaviors that have existed as the functional reality in that city showed a clear and consistent pattern of racial discrimination, selective and prejudicial arrests, disproportionate incarcerations, and intentional and often crippling financial penalties for black residents of that city — and those highly discriminatory behaviors were all done by an overwhelmingly White police force that had clearly targeted the Black residents of that city prior to that shooting. The anger that spilled over at that specific shooting had deep roots and those

roots were seeded by very negative and extremely prejudicial prior intergroup behaviors that had gone on for years.

Both Oakland and Ferguson had major demonstrations that unleashed deep levels of existing community anger as the result of those precipitating events.

There are very high levels of unemployment in both of those communities. Minority people are significantly less likely to have jobs in both settings. Minority people are significantly less likely to graduate from high school in both of those cities. Minority people are significantly more likely to be arrested and then fined at unaffordable levels for what were often very minor traffic and drug possession offences in both of those settings.

We Also All Have Instincts to Feel Stress When We Are Situational Minorities

The frustration levels for many of the local people were extremely high.

Low-income people who had jobs in Ferguson were often unable to drive to their jobs because intentionally discriminatory traffic arrests had created financial situations that functionally deprived them of their licenses to drive.

The minority resident of that city knew those realities for what they were. They understood those realities because the minority residents of that city lived those realities every single day.

Most of the White residents of Ferguson did not know that those very negative police behaviors existed — and that ignorance existed for the White residents because those police behaviors were not directed against them.

That lack of visibility for prejudicial police behavior is a common reality in a number of settings because it is very hard for people who do not have those discriminatory behaviors directed at themselves to see those behaviors where they are focused on other people.

The people who have those levels of arrest discrimination find them to be very visible behavior patterns. People who are unemployed feel their own levels of intergroup stress.

Unemployment is not the only trigger for persistent levels of intergroup stress. People from the Black community across the country who do have jobs often have those jobs in settings where they are personally in a situational minority status.

Having a job as a minority employee where the other people in the work setting are from another group can set up all of the day-to-day stress points that are triggered in each of us by being the only “Us” in any setting full of “Them.”

That point is discussed in the next chapter of this book and much more fully in the book *Primal Pathways*. It can be stressful for any of us to be employed in settings where everyone around us is from another race or another ethnicity.

We feel instinctive stress when that happens — so even being employed can create its own ongoing levels of unhappiness and discomfort.

All of those factors combined to create the Ferguson and Oakland street demonstrations and protests.

When people live in a setting where intergroup discrimination exists or is perceived to exist — and when people have personally experienced any levels of negative and discriminatory intergroup actions by other people at any point in their own lives — then that total situation creates a context for turning negative incidents in a setting into inflammatory instinct package triggers.

Each negative incident that actually happens in those settings can trigger old stress points, old negative memories, and each new incident that occurs can situationally resurrect, reenergize, and reactivate the impact and the memory of the prior negative events.

It Is Far too Easy to Build a Reservoir of Negative InterGroup Interactions

It is possible and far too easy to build an individual and group reservoir of negative interaction memories and history on those settings.

Interactions with police that happen over time in those settings tend to feed and foster that set of potential issues.

Policemen, I know from multiple sources — including my own direct experience — can be brusque in their interactions with people they encounter. That attitude doesn't mean that the policemen are racist or even prejudicial. It might mean that some policemen simply need better social skills.

Both sets of issues exist for police — racism and bad manners.

Some police officers actually are racist and those police officers can do clearly racist things. Others are just brusque, directive, and rude.

I personally had a couple of encounters with extremely authoritarian police officers earlier in my life in ways where I felt that the behavior of the police officer was cold and angry, disrespectful, bullying, and even clearly, at a fairly personal level, hostile.

I do not fit many standard stereotypes of minority status in the U.S., but I have personally felt that direct level of negative police interaction a couple of times in both this country and in a couple of foreign settings. Those kinds of hostile encounters with police in foreign settings made me particularly uncomfortable and very much situationally concerned.

I was actually a bit alarmed in one of the foreign settings when I run up against a clearly hostile policeman, because I knew clearly that I did not have the American legal system with me onsite in that setting to protect me if I actually needed protection relative to those armed policemen.

That was a sobering and slightly frightening realization for me. I did believe that in that particular situation, if I actually ended up being arrested, I could call on the American Embassy. I tended to have some fairly good governmental

connections at those points in my life that would probably have triggered Embassy support for me fairly quickly.

But that need for that level of support from our Embassy wasn't an experience I wanted to have or a risk that I wanted to take. I found that sense of being threatened by a powerful police figure in an aggressive and disturbing way in that setting to be a very negative and sobering experience and one that I would not like to repeat.

In the U.S., in those instances where I was personally treated badly by a police officer, it made me a little angry to be disrespected. I didn't feel like the treatment was racist. I did believe it to be jerk-like, insulting, and anger provoking behavior.

I knew, however, that I had the American legal system behind me and I believed that if that negative treatment by an officer had extended to actual damage, I would have had a support system of laws and cultural expectations to both protect me and maybe penalize the police officer in some way if he had actually physically harmed me.

I realized later in thinking about those two situations that if I personally had that same brusque, hostile, and threatening treatment experience in this country from a policeman, but if I personally would have been Hispanic or Asian or Black or American Indian, I would probably have felt very much like the way I had felt, myself, in that foreign country when that treatment happened to me — taking the treatment personally as a reflection of some anger against me and my group, but without any sense of background comfort that I would be able to pull in the functional equivalent of the local Ambassador to that country to be an ally with clout and with the ability to get me out of that trouble and danger.

That was a very sobering realization. That sense of being isolated in the face of angry police behavior is not a problem or a context that most White people in this country either face or understand.

Bad Experiences Happen to Minority Americans Frequently

Those experiences and those kinds of encounters happen to minority Americans all the time. Some of those unpleasant encounters are explicitly racist. Some are not.

Not every interaction with police has those kinds of undertones of overt racism or intergroup anger — but some interactions do have that context and that tone. Sometimes very explicitly.

Each of those negative experiences that do happen for a minority American creates real negative reinforcement at a personal level and each of those negative experiences creates a story that the damaged and disrespected person is highly likely to tell after the fact to other people from that person's group.

Those stories of individual and situation specific negative treatment create an accumulated set of stories. That full set of negative intergroup stories takes on its own collective momentum and builds their own context for people to think about interactions with the police.

It is easy to construe or suspect that racism might be involved in some of the negative interactions with law enforcement people because too often racism is involved.

A number of studies have been done that show clear patterns of racial profiling in arresting people and in sentencing people for various crimes.

France, I now know from looking at those issues in other settings, has similar intergroup incarceration patterns. Romania has also similar patterns.

Immigrants make up less than 20 percent of the total French population and more than 60 percent of the people in jail. The gypsies of the Czech Republic make up less than 3 percent of the population and they are now more than 40 percent of the people in jail in that country.

A British citizen with African ancestors is more than six times more likely to go to jail than a British citizen with only English ancestors.

The patterns of sending people who have minority status in any setting to jail is true in our country and it has echoes in other countries where that kind of data is collected.

We Have More People in Jail Than Any Country in the World

We Americans actually lead the world in our prison rates. We have more people in jail than any country in the world by a wide margin. Minority Americans are much more likely to go to jail than White Americans. Currently, more than 10 percent of African American males in their 30s are actually in jail today.

Nearly 6 percent of Hispanic Americans adult males are in jail.

Less than 2 percent of White American males are in jail.

Two percent is actually a big number. Even our 2 percent number is much higher than the incarceration rate in Canada, for example. We are seven times more likely to send someone to jail than Canada — and we are much more likely to send our minority population to prison. Six percent and 10 percent of the population in jail for each of those groups seem inconceivable to the point of being unbelievable. But we need to believe them because those numbers are sadly and grimly true.

In our country, we know that African American males are six times more likely to be arrested than White males and more than 2.5 times more likely to be incarcerated than a Hispanic male. At current trends, one out of three adult Black males in our country will go to prison over a lifetime. One-in-six Hispanic males will be imprisoned. Only 1-of-17 White males will be imprisoned.

Several studies have shown disproportionate arrest rates for minority Americans. Ferguson clearly had high disproportionate arrest levels, but Ferguson was not an exception.

One study in Maryland showed that 70 percent of the drivers who were stopped and searched by the highway police on a particular stretch of highway were Black — but Blacks only made up 17.5 percent of the drivers on that road.

Another study — in Volusia County, Florida — more than 70 percent of the drivers who were stopped on the interstate highway by police were minority — either Hispanic or Black. But only 5 percent of the total drivers on that road were either Hispanic or Black.

That evidence base of discriminatory police activity, coupled with the personal experiences of those individual people who have, in fact, personally been insulted, denigrated, demeaned, or damaged in some situation by a clearly racist law enforcement officer, creates a powerful context and subtext for intergroup anger that can easily create intergroup explosions when there is any kind of shooting death in any setting involving a White policeman and an unarmed minority male.

In our inner cities — with very high crime rates and with a low level of solved crimes and with a perpetually understaffed police force who often feels disliked by many of the people in the community they serve — it's easy to understand why a reservoir of bad and anger-provoking encounters might be happening and it is not hard to understand why those simmering stress points might exist.

It is also clear that the residue and the reservoir of bad feelings from all of those negative encounters can create collective trigger points for a setting that can cause episodes like the police shooting of a minority youth in that setting to generate riots, protests, group anger, and high levels of intergroup division.

Driving While Black

The full scope of those life experiences and those negative encounters simply accumulate and combine to collectively build up a reservoir of group-linked anger.

People who have been personally arrested or simply stopped by the police for DWBB — “Driving While Being Black” — are not as likely to be understanding and calm when there is an incident of some kind in a community

and when the facts of the incident point very clearly to a white police officer doing damage to an unarmed black or brown or yellow or red citizen.

The anger that those killings — like the death of a Black youth on a subway — trigger in those communities is not happening because people are being killed every day by policemen on those particular subways. The anger that emerges when someone is killed by a policeman on the subway is actually about all of the other problematic interactions that have created the aggregated ill will that is unleashed by that incident.

The last chapter of this book points out the need for us not to let those kinds of incidents and circumstances create riots and trigger intergroup damage that can undermine our basic intergroup alignment efforts that we aimed at making America better for us all.

We Need to Deal with the Facts of Each Case – and with the Underlying Anger

When those kinds of trigger events do happen, we need to deal collectively with the facts of the case — punishing wrong doers in a transparent, visible, and appropriate way when wrong has been done.

We also need to keep each of those trigger situations from creating higher levels of intergroup damage. Anger triggers anger. Anger is easily reciprocal and reciprocal anger can far too easily create its own internal and self-reinforcing acceleration factors.

Angry responses on all sides can cause people in a setting to take sides in ways that can exacerbate and escalate intergroup tensions and issues.

Riots reflect anger and riots can also directly create and exacerbate intergroup anger. We need to use calming responses to inflammatory situations — and we need to do that in ways that make it clear that real issues for the situation or the setting are not being ignored or covered up.

Cover-ups Exacerbate the Anger

Cover-ups can be highly inflammatory. The functional truth is in today's world of YouTube images, camera phones, videophones, and universal visual record keeping — many cover-ups will fail anyway because there is often visual proof of the negative trigger events.

Visual proof is a good thing to have. We need to respond with honest reactions when visual proof makes it clear that negative events have occurred. To create intergroup alignment and intergroup Peace, we need to go beyond visual proof to functional trust.

We need to focus, at this point, on building overall intergroup understanding and on creating high levels of intergroup trust.

To achieve lasting intergroup Peace in this country, we will need people from all groups to make a collective commitment to honoring and living by a set of values that can help all groups achieve the American Dream. We need to create intergroup trust in the process.

The ways we deal with each of the incidents that will occur can either support those levels of intergroup trust or damage and even destroy them.

As a nation, we need to work together to overcome our divisive instincts and bring us all together in the context of our shared values and our enlightened shared beliefs. We need our best values to bring us together as an “Us” and we need our subsequent honest and sincere actions to keep us together as an “Us.”

We Need Neuron Connectivity for All Children

At a very basic level, we need to take steps to insure that each child in this country gets the right levels of stimulation for the biological neuron connectivity in the brain in those first three years of life when every child develops the basic structure for their brain.

That process is the same for all children, regardless of race or ethnicity. For all children, brain exercise in those key months and years builds strong brains. For all children, lack of brain exercise creates brains that have less power to learn and less ability to function at the highest levels.

We need mothers, fathers, and families from all groups to know that basic brain building science for the first years of each child's life and we need all parents and families to understand the key steps that work to exercise each child's brain in those key years.

The books *Three Key Years* and *Three Essential Years* both explain those processes and those opportunities. Those books make points that should be understood by key people from every group and every community.

The children who do not get that early stimulation in those first months and years are far more likely to drop out of school and far more likely to end up in jail.

We need to send fewer people to prison. We need police departments that have earned the respect and trust of the communities they serve.

We need trigger events to trigger community dialogue rather than triggering community conflict. We need to help all children — and we need to create communities that have shared beliefs and a culture of collaboration and trust.

That can be done. It won't happen on its own.