

CHAPTER 1



The Nature of Police Brutality

Belief in equal justice stands as a preeminent political tenet of American society. Yet abiding skepticism exists among many racial and ethnic minorities. Their mistrust is hardly surprising, given a history of differential treatment in the system of criminal justice, a problem especially apparent in police conduct. Scholars have long scrutinized police reactions to racial and ethnic minorities, offering ample evidence of minority disadvantage at the hands of police (e.g., Sellin 1930; Myrdal 1944; Westley 1953, 1970; Holmes 2000; Chambliss 2001). These investigations call into question various police strategies of coercive control, perhaps none more so than police brutality. Its utilization epitomizes the tensions between police and minorities that exist in America today (NAACP 1995).

Consider the events that unfolded in March 1991. Americans were transfixed by an amateur video showing Los Angeles police officers beating Rodney King, an African American citizen. The images seemed unambiguous. Most Americans were shocked by what they saw. Still, differences of opinion separated blacks and whites (Skolnick and Fyfe 1993; Flanagan and Vaughn 1996; Weitzer and Tuch 2006). The vast majority of blacks thought the police needlessly pummeled a citizen even as he lay helplessly on the ground. An appreciably greater share of whites believed the police acted properly to subdue an unruly, potentially dangerous black man. Their differences subsequently came to a head with the acquittal of four Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers by a nearly all-white jury in Simi Valley, where the officers were tried on state charges after a controversial change of venue from Los Angeles. A devastating riot ensued as blacks took to the streets to express their outrage at the verdicts. Undoubtedly they saw confirmation of an unjust criminal justice system in the officers' acquittal, whereas whites witnessed evidence of black criminality in the race riots. In the end, over 2,000 injuries, more than fifty deaths, and an

estimated billion dollars of property damage were incurred (Useem 1997). This highly publicized case rekindled a long-standing, often fierce national debate about whether race is a factor in police brutality (Locke 1996).

Police-minority tensions are hardly new—during the 1960s, police-citizen interactions precipitated many of the race riots that plagued urban America. In response to the social unrest, President Lyndon B. Johnson issued an executive order to establish the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968), better known as the Kerner Commission. The Kerner Commission was charged with investigating the disorders and making recommendations for averting future problems. The final report depicted a divided America, concluding that various long-term problems—unemployment, socially disorganized neighborhoods, lack of educational opportunities, poor health and sanitation conditions, and crime—were endemic to the ghettos of America's large cities. Ultimately the commission attributed the difficulties that blacks confronted to historical patterns of white racism and acknowledged that blacks see the police as oppressors protecting the interests of the white community. At the time, the great majority of police officers were white, and many were highly prejudiced, lending credence to blacks' beliefs. It is hardly surprising that many of the ghetto riots were triggered by confrontations between the police and citizens.

Police administrators did not help matters. They responded defensively to community concerns, asserting that citizens' complaints signified the impending breakdown of law and order (Locke 1996). Their defensiveness persists. Although LAPD Chief Daryl Gates condemned the beating of Rodney King, he explained it away as an aberration, despite clear evidence that police brutality was rampant in the LAPD (Skolnick and Fyfe 1993). In the eyes of many police administrators, police brutality is the exception, the collateral damage arising from the difficult challenges faced by police in urban areas. Yet African American and Hispanic citizens believe that it occurs more commonly (see Flanagan and Vaughn 1996; Weitzer and Tuch 2006), which fuels their mistrust and hostility toward the police.

While waxing and waning in intensity, the national dialogue is reengaged periodically as incidents of police brutality involving minority citizens surface. In 1979, a group of Dade County (Miami) police officers killed insurance agent Arthur McDuffie following a vehicle chase. Initially officers claimed that McDuffie's injuries were the result of falling off his motorcycle, but a subsequent investigation and coroner's report concluded that he was beaten to death after stopping (Kappeler, Sluder, and Alpert 1998). Following the acquittals of four officers, a three-day race riot ensued, resulting in eighteen deaths, hundreds of injuries, and tens of millions of dollars in property damage. McDuffie's family eventually received a \$1.1 million settlement (*Washington Post* 1981).

In 1997, another high-profile incident shocked America and again revived the specter of police racism. Abner Louima, a married father of two, was viciously sodomized with a wooden handle in a Bronx precinct house restroom following a questionable arrest. His injuries were nearly fatal. Yet the case came to light only because an emergency room nurse informed Louima's family and the authorities (Alfieri 1999). The fallout from this horrific incident included a thirty-year prison sentence for the main perpetrator and the largest civil settlement (\$8.75 million) against police in New York City history (Hays 2001).

More recently, in October 2005, news crews covering the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina videotaped four police officers in New Orleans beating a sixty-four-year-old retired schoolteacher, Robert Davis (Foster 2005). The video shows a police officer repeatedly punching Davis in the head before the group dragged him to the ground, where one kneeed and punched him. A fifth officer ordered one of the camera crews to stop taping. When a news producer held up his credentials, the officer is seen grabbing him, slamming him into a parked car, and punching him in the stomach, all the while yelling profanities at him. Three police officers were indicted for their part in these events (Associated Press 2006). The incident has prompted a federal investigation, and the victim's attorney has stated that a civil suit is forthcoming. One could hardly be surprised if the familiar pattern—increased racial tensions, an undermining of the legitimacy of the police, and a drain on government resources as a result of a civil suit—plays out again in New Orleans.

African Americans are not the only victims in such high-profile cases. Consider twenty-three-year-old Joe Campos Torres, who was arrested by Houston police one night in May 1977 for disorderly conduct (*Time* 1978). Aside from possibly being drunk, Torres appeared unharmed when officers took him from the club where he was arrested. Several hours after his arrest, Torres arrived at the jail so badly beaten that intake officers refused to process him and instead instructed the arresting officers to take him to a local hospital. Six police officers then drove Torres a short distance to an area behind a warehouse next to Buffalo Bayou. Two officers later testified that they watched as Torres was pushed off a dock into the bayou by an officer, who said, "Let's see if the wetback can swim" (Curry 1978). Torres's body was found several days later. In a state trial, two officers were found guilty of negligent homicide and received suspended sentences (*Time* 1978). Later a federal trial resulted in guilty verdicts on federal civil rights violations for three officers.

Recently an immigration rally in Los Angeles ended when police officers, in response to a small group of provocateurs, decided to sweep the entire park and disperse a peaceful crowd of approximately 6,000 largely Hispanic demonstrators, including many women and children, with batons

and foam-rubber projectiles (Archibold 2007; McGreevy and Winton 2007). The order by police to disperse was only given in English to a predominantly Spanish-speaking crowd. Videos show police in riot gear forcefully clearing the park of agitators, peaceful demonstrators, bystanders, and journalists alike. Numerous allegations of police misconduct have been filed and are under investigation. Irrespective of their final outcome, such cases provide ample evidence that police brutality remains a critical problem for minority communities today.

Such incidents remain deeply rooted in the racial and ethnic inequalities that exist in American society. Undoubtedly many Americans find it comforting to believe that the economic and social plight of minorities has improved since the 1960s. In reality, the racial divide depicted by the Kerner Commission not only endures, but it may be widening. Transformations in the American economy, for example, from goods-producing to service-producing industries, have resulted in an increased concentration of poor black and Hispanics in socially disorganized urban neighborhoods (Wilson 1987). Poor black residents of the inner city may have become even more isolated socially and spatially because of the exodus of relatively affluent blacks from inner-city neighborhoods. What remains are hypersegregated ghettos, which have “assumed even greater importance as an institutional tool for isolating the by-products of racial oppression: crime, drugs, violence, illiteracy, poverty, despair, and their growing social and economic costs” (Massey and Denton 1993, 217). Similarly disadvantaged barrios exist, particularly in cities near the U.S.-Mexico border, where many poor immigrants from Mexico relocate (see Alba and Nee 2003). At the same time, many poor whites in urban America also experience such disadvantages (Massey 2005), just as many relatively affluent minority citizens dodge them. But the afflictions of poverty, including various forms of discrimination, are without doubt borne disproportionately by racial and ethnic minorities.

In short, one side of America’s economic and social chasm is inhabited disproportionately by whites, the dominant majority for whom the American Dream continually holds out the promise of opportunity. They do not routinely confront crime and social disorder in their comfortable suburban neighborhoods. The other side of the divide is populated disproportionately by impoverished racial/ethnic minorities for whom the American Dream offers little, for whom life is often a struggle merely to subsist. The disadvantages of their neighborhoods may spawn crime and social disorder (e.g., Skogan 1990; Sampson and Wilson 1995; Phillips 2002). In the middle of the two social worlds stand the police, the agents of social control officially charged with protecting all citizens equally.

Popular belief among the dominant group holds that the police do, in fact, uniformly enforce criminal laws that represent a consensus about the dangers confronted by the public and do not succumb to racial en-

mity in their treatment of citizens (see Weitzer and Tuch 2006). If the police exert greater coercion over some segments of society, it is only an objective response to real dangers posed by those parts of the community. Police brutality is an unfortunate corollary of the dangerous job of protecting society from its worst citizens, an anomaly attributable to characteristics of certain police officers and police departments. In many respects, this viewpoint parallels that of police administrators. Although more critical and nuanced, much of the scholarly work on police brutality also reflects this thinking. Black and Hispanic citizens see matters quite differently, however, expressing considerably greater skepticism about police practices (Weitzer and Tuch 2006). Those living in impoverished neighborhoods may be deeply cynical about the criminal justice system and hostile toward the police (e.g., Anderson 1999). Moreover, some scholars dispute the assessment that minority and dominant citizens are treated alike, arguing instead that the police protect the interests of the dominant group, by whatever means necessary, from the criminal threat allegedly posed by the disadvantaged (e.g., Jacobs and O'Brien 1998). In this view the police systematically and deliberately employ violence against impoverished minority citizens, knowing that white citizens are unlikely to interfere with efforts to control populations stereotyped as inherently criminogenic.

So which position is correct? Somewhat surprisingly, given the seemingly obvious significance of the issue, little empirical research has been accorded police brutality compared to matters such as the correlations between race and crime (Locke 1996). Undoubtedly the clandestine quality of police brutality makes research difficult. Still, criminologists seem more attuned to the dominant white community's concern with minority street crime. What little systematic research is available suggests that our society, particularly minority communities, has good reason for concern about police brutality (see Holmes 2000). But many more questions remain unanswered than answered. Is police brutality a matter of individual prejudice on the part of some police officers? Is it a problem of interpersonal antagonism between black citizens and the police? Is it an issue of the formal or informal organization of policing? Is it a reflection of whites' interest in maintaining the status quo? Or could there be causes of police brutality that have yet to be explored fully?

We examine this critical but little understood issue here, offering a distinctive and potentially controversial answer. Our line of reasoning stresses that police brutality is a grim symptom of intractable intergroup dynamics involving racial and ethnic minority citizens and the police officers who patrol their neighborhoods. The behavior of the police may implicitly represent dominant interests insofar as they enforce laws established to protect society as currently structured, but the police are far

more attuned to the problems and dangers they personally confront in the course of their work in impoverished minority neighborhoods. In the eyes of minority citizens, the police symbolize an oppressive society. What is more, many minority citizens perceive the police as a real danger in their day-to-day lives. We delve into these intergroup dynamics with an eye toward what, if anything, can be done to heal the tensions between the police and minority communities.

What Is Police Brutality?

Many citizens define police brutality broadly to include a range of abusive police practices, such as the use of profanity, racial slurs, and unnecessary searches, not entailing the use of physical force (NAACP 1995; Locke 1996). Racial and ethnic minorities in particular perceive any degrading, restricting, or harassing practice as objectionable, and a number of studies indicate that the police disproportionately employ such practices against them. Observational studies of the police have provided evidence of the use of abusive language, including racial slurs (Westley 1970; Skolnick 1975; Anderson 1990). Research also suggests that minority males are disproportionately subjected to field interrogations and are more likely to be frisked or searched once they have been identified as suspects (Piliavin and Briar 1964; Black and Reiss 1967; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1970; Bogomolny 1976; Chambliss 1994). In a study of one city, a substantial proportion of black police officers, who are clearly knowledgeable about the relevant legal standards, said they personally had been stopped, questioned, or searched because of racial profiling (Barlow and Barlow 2002). Recently several states have confronted legal challenges to the inappropriate use of race in police stops, and observational data suggest that police searches often do violate constitutional principles of search and seizure (Gould and Mastrofski 2004).

Clearly such abuses may entail costs to the legitimacy of law enforcement in the eyes of minority citizens. While the theory of police brutality proposed here has relevance to each of these forms of police misconduct, we focus on excessive force, for several reasons. It is clearly at the heart of minority concern about police misconduct (Locke 1996; NAACP 1995; Reiss 1968). Moreover, other forms of misconduct do not rise to the legal standard defining police brutality. While citizens may apply that term loosely to various forms of police misconduct, from the standpoint of the law the use of excessive force most clearly defines police brutality (Locke 1996). Whereas other abusive practices constitute relatively minor infractions that carry little risk, excessive force potentially carries severe sanctions for offending officers. Thus the use of excessive force poses a conundrum that we seek to resolve: Why would the police employ exces-

sive force when they are empowered by law to use the force necessary to accomplish a legitimate police duty?

Modern democracies employ domestic police agencies to control internal wrongdoers and maintain social order, and the legitimate use of force to protect citizens and officers from the dangerous people in their midst constitutes the essence of the police role (Bittner 1970). Even the use of deadly force by the police, which disproportionately involves minority victims (Brown and Langan 2001), is nearly always deemed legally justified (e.g., Fyfe 1980). At the same time, the reality that the police limit individual freedom requires that their authority be clearly circumscribed in democratic societies (Kania and Mackey 1977). Accordingly, the use of force by the police may be proper or excessive, depending on whether it is necessary to accomplish a legitimate police duty. Force that occurs “under color of authority, without lawful necessity” constitutes excessive force or police brutality (Locke 1996, 130).

Police officers receive extensive training regarding the proper use of force, as the employment of excessive force may entail severe criminal sanctions for police officers and substantial civil penalties for police departments. Despite the efforts of police departments to recruit and train professional officers who operate within the limits of legal standards, police officers periodically step well outside the bounds of the law. The quasi-military structure of policing, including the deployment of personal weapons arsenals and extensive training in the use of force, undoubtedly sets the stage for such transgressions (Chambliss 2001). What is more, within the subculture of policing, extra-legal force is considered a normal, essential instrument of control for handling those individuals perceived as threatening or who are otherwise discredited (Hunt 1985; Skolnick and Fyfe 1993; Van Maanen 1974; Westley 1970). The extra-legal quality of police brutality makes it expedient for situations in which legal responses are judged inappropriate or insufficient. Excessive force may be employed when no probable cause for arrest exists, or any time “justice” calls for informal sanctions in addition to formal ones. But can such observations about the customariness of the behavior explain why police officers periodically risk incurring harsh punishments by engaging in it?

How Can Police Brutality Be Explained?

The traditional approach to explaining police brutality comprises a set of propositions about (1) sociological or situational, (2) psychological or individual, and (3) organizational factors (Freidrich 1980; Worden 1996). The first approach suggests that situational exigencies, related to characteristics such as the race, gender, and demeanor of citizens, determine the use of excessive force. Emphasis is placed on the social dynamics of police-citizen

encounters and the situational cues that officers use to decide how to handle an incident. The second approach identifies the characteristics of officers, such as racial identity, degree of prejudice, and personality attributes, which may predict the use of excessive force. In this view, individual variations among officers produce different responses to similar situations. The third approach maintains that organizational properties of police departments, such as administrative controls and the subculture of policing, determine the degree to which excessive force is employed. The focus is on formal and informal aspects of police organization that may influence officers' street-level behavior.

Elements of the various explanations are found in William A. Westley's (1953, 1970) seminal work on police violence. Drawing on observations and interviews conducted during the period 1949–1950, he examined a police department located in a medium-size industrial city with a large slum area and a large black population. Police behavior in the community reflected officers' concerns, grounded in informal organizational norms, about the maintenance of authority and respect. The police believed that blacks are naturally prone to criminality, and that they pose a particular threat to police authority. Thus situations calling for extra-legal violence frequently involved blacks being perceived as disrespectful of the police. Not only were blacks being particular targets of illegitimate violence, but also the police felt impunity from sanctions because blacks lacked political power.

Subsequent research has relied on a variety of data sources to investigate how situational, individual, and organizational variables relate to police brutality. An important source of systematic data for research on these relationships is observational studies of police officers on patrol. In response to the urban disorder of the 1960s, data for the President's Commission on Law Enforcement were collected in Boston, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., by observers who accompanied police officers on patrol in high-crime precincts (Black and Reiss 1967). A decade later, the Police Services Study (PSS), conducted by researchers at Indiana University and the University of North Carolina, observed police officers in twenty-four jurisdictions located in the metropolitan areas of Rochester, New York, St. Louis, Missouri, and Tampa-St. Petersburg, Florida. Multivariate studies of these observational data sets, which include variables pertaining to the various explanations of police brutality, provide somewhat mixed findings in regard to the influence of race (cf. Freidrich 1980; Smith 1986; Worden 1996). Still, it is noteworthy that more methodologically sophisticated recent studies indicate a link between race and the incidence of excessive force (Smith 1986; Worden 1996). In general, studies using these observational data sets buttress the situational explanation of police brutality insofar as black and antagonistic citizens were more likely to be the targets of improper force, whereas the individual

and organizational explanations receive little support. Moreover, Smith (1986) found that the use of coercive authority was related to individual racial identity in interaction with neighborhood racial neighborhood composition; the police were most likely to use coercive authority against black suspects in neighborhoods that were primarily black.¹

Further evidence that minorities are disproportionately the victims of excessive force comes from investigations sponsored by government agencies (e.g., Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department 1991; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1970, 2000; Rampart Independent Review Panel 2000) and private organizations (e.g., NAACP 1995). Such commissions typically conduct interviews, review agency records, and hold hearings. Their conclusions uniformly emphasize that police misconduct predominantly affects members of minority communities. Taken together, these investigations provide a wealth of descriptive evidence concerning police misconduct, even though the data collection procedures do not involve rigorous methodological approaches that allow for reliable conclusions from any single inquiry. Such investigations regularly recommend organizational changes to rectify the problem of police brutality, revealing a deep-seated faith that changing police department policies and practices can alter the dynamics of police-minority relations (e.g., NAACP 1995).

Undoubtedly, methodological problems confound efforts to study the clandestine behavior of the police. Still, taken together, the findings of various empirical studies support the argument that racial/ethnic minorities are victimized disproportionately by police brutality. Even though research offers the most systematic support for the situational perspective compared to individual or organizational explanations of police brutality, the organizational approach remains especially significant with respect to policy proposals to reduce police brutality. Typically, calls for organizational reform focus on changing police personnel or increasing oversight of officers and agencies. Such recommendations reflect the unwavering belief that police organization affects officers' situational responses and individual predispositions. Presumably, with sufficient training and supervision, police officers can control their behavior, even in the most incendiary circumstances.

An alternative to the traditional theoretical approach, derived from the conflict theory of law, argues that crime control is an instrument used by powerful groups to regulate threats to their interests, thereby maintaining existing social arrangements. In this view, the police function to control the "dangerous classes" of immigrants, racial minorities, and the poor (e.g., Turk 1969). The structural characteristics of society, manifested via the formal and informal organization of police departments, produce a propensity for the misuse of force against minorities (Chambliss 2001). Police-minority tensions stem, inevitably, from the enduring

racial/ethnic divisions in American society that cannot be addressed simply by altering the organization of policing (Smith and Holmes 2003).

Several scholars, notably Allen E. Liska and his colleagues, have developed the structural-level threat hypothesis to test empirically the argument of conflict theory. The threat hypothesis stipulates that “the greater the number of acts and people threatening to the interests of the powerful, the greater the level of deviance and crime control” (Liska 1992, 18). Popular stereotypes conflate race/ethnicity and violent criminality (Quillian and Pager 2001), and the public attributes urban violence primarily to racial and ethnic minorities (Chiricos, Welch, and Gertz 2004). The presence or mere perception of a large minority population is sufficient to heighten whites’ fear of crime (Chiricos, Hogan, and Gertz 1997; Liska, Lawrence, and Sanchirico 1982). Public authorities believe that racially and culturally dissimilar minority groups threaten the social order (Turk 1969), and a relatively large minority population may be seen as posing a substantial problem of social control (Liska and Yu 1992). Thus the dominant white citizenry and local authorities may marshal their political power to forge public policy that assuages their concerns about crime.

Tests of the threat hypothesis that focus on policing have used aggregate-level data to examine how the percent of nonwhite and economic inequality affect the allocation of police resources (e.g., Jackson and Carroll 1981; Kent and Jacobs 2005; Holmes, Smith, Freng, and Muñoz 2008), arrests (e.g., Liska and Chamlin 1984; Liska, Chamlin, and Reed 1985), and homicides by the police (Jacobs and O’Brien 1998; Liska and Yu 1992; Smith 2003; Sorensen, Marquart, and Brock 1993). In addition, our previous work tests the threat hypothesis using civil rights criminal complaints alleging police brutality that were investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and reported to the Civil Rights Division of the U. S. Department of Justice (DOJ). A DOJ (1991) analysis of the data revealed no discernible pattern in police brutality complaints in cities with an average of two or more complaints annually during the period 1985–1990. Extending the DOJ data to include sociodemographic characteristics of cities and organizational characteristics of police departments, our research included all cities of 150,000-plus population. One study found that the percent of black, the percent of Hispanic (in the Southwest), and majority/minority income inequality in cities were related positively to civil rights criminal complaints (Holmes 2000).² A subsequent reanalysis of those data, in a study that added organizational variables, showed virtually the same effects for the percent of racial/ethnic minority variables and revealed stronger support for the threat hypothesis than for the organizational approach (Smith and Holmes 2003). These studies validate and extend the findings of earlier investigations of police brutality by demonstrating a broad pattern of civil

rights criminal complaints in large cities with relatively large racial/ethnic minority populations.

Findings from tests of the threat hypothesis generally support its predictions, but they also reveal complexities in the relationships between measures of threat and measures of crime control by the police. For example, a study of race-specific arrest rates showed that the percent of nonwhites was related negatively to nonwhite arrest rates (Liska and Chamlin 1984). The researchers concluded that intraracial crimes increase as the percent of nonwhite in the population increases, and that the police and minority victims alike see such crimes as personal or family matters in which formal intervention is not required. Such crimes pose no threat to dominant group members or police officers. In contrast, consistent support for the threat hypothesis comes from studies of homicides by the police and police brutality criminal complaints.

The most plausible explanation of these divergent findings is that threat has multiple dimensions, involving the interests of both dominant group members and the police. Following the conflict theory of law, work on the threat hypothesis emphasizes that mechanisms of coercive control are mobilized to protect the dominant classes of society. Resource allocations to policing and police department policies may reflect perceived threats to dominant interests, but police officers on the street are hardly automatons blindly following dominant group imperatives. Minority attitudes and actions in particular may be perceived as directly threatening a police officer's well-being or challenging an officer's authority (Chevigny 1969; Skolnick 1975; Westley 1970). Moreover, police behavior is characterized by a high degree of discretion and a low degree of visibility and thus may be open to extra-legal influences (e.g., Smith and Visher 1981). In light of these considerations, it makes sense that salient threats perceived directly by the police should be more important than distal threats to or political pressures from the dominant group in predicting their street-level responses to racial/ethnic minorities—the disproportionate rate of minority victimization in instances of police violence may reflect reactions to situations in which officers personally perceive minority threat (Holmes 2000; Liska and Yu 1992).

Building on this argument, we contend that conflict theorists place too much emphasis on the interests of the dominant group in society without adequately recognizing the role of the police as an independent social group whose street-level behavior is influenced by the threats police personally confront. Conflict theorists sometimes acknowledge that the police are responding to personal risks when they resort to violence, asserting that the powerful groups of society ignore clandestine “dirty work” that represents their interests (e.g., Jacobs and O'Brien 1998). But this approach only superficially deals with the underlying causes of brutality, and

it downplays the reality that police officers risk severe sanctions for engaging in illegal violence, even though the larger society may tacitly approve of it. No doubt the larger society lives in willful ignorance of big-city police practices, and dominant-group citizens may be suspicious of the veracity of any revelations of police misconduct. Yet while citizens may deceive themselves by coming up with every conceivable rationalization for police misconduct, when these justifications become untenable, they may define the case as aberrant and the offending officer(s) as deserving of severe punishment. This raises a critical question: Why would the police risk using coercive strategies that primarily benefit a powerful group peripheral to the day-to-day world of policing?

Our argument takes a different tact, suggesting that police behavior ultimately represents a complex interplay involving various dimensions of intergroup relations. Police officers are hardly likely to accede to implicit dominant group demands that may contradict their personal well-being. Put simply, even though coinciding to some degree with dominant interests, the street-level behavior of police is not informed by reference to dominant values and interests nearly so much as to the exigencies of their unique position. While this line of reasoning parallels the situational approach, the social-psychological dynamics of police-minority interactions remain woefully underdeveloped in research that relies on situational explanations of police brutality. Here we undertake the task of developing a comprehensive account of the behavior.

Outline of an Alternative Theory

In developing a multifaceted social-psychological model, we begin by analyzing the properties of intergroup conflict. Relying on the seminal insights of scholars such as Georg Simmel (1908/1955) and George B. Vold (1958), we reason that humans are naturally group-involved organisms, and that group conflict is a fundamental form of human interaction. Groups are said to arise from common interests and needs that can be furthered most effectively by means of collective action. Conflict occurs when group interests encroach on one another, which produces perceived intergroup threat and solidifies ingroup cohesiveness. We demonstrate that the normative interests of minorities living in poor neighborhoods and the police who work those neighborhoods are fundamentally at odds. Yet while that argument provides an important first step toward better understanding police brutality, we question whether differing interests are sufficient or necessary to produce police brutality. The conflict approach highlights enlightened self-interest (Liska 1992), an assumption

that appears at odds with the reality that police brutality may convey severe costs that far outweigh any benefits. After all, the police control the legitimate means of violence and need not resort to extra-legal force to protect themselves when confronted with danger.

Much of our argument, while recognizing the insights of the group-conflict approach, focuses on the conundrum posed by the seemingly irrational nature of police brutality. A more general theory must consider other dimensions of intergroup relations. We take into account contemporary theory and research on three additional social-psychological factors—social identity, stereotypes, and emotions—that produce intergroup tensions and solidify group memberships.

Social identity and stereotypes involve related cognitive processes that determine how people categorize and respond to ingroup and outgroup members. These processes do not require conscious deliberation and thus facilitate rapid responses to others. Research on social identity reveals that the mere perception of ingroup membership, even when the group is designated arbitrarily, may induce ingroup favoritism and concomitant outgroup discrimination (see Brewer and Brown 1998). This effect is most pronounced when group membership is salient. Policing is an all-encompassing occupation, and race/ethnicity likewise constitutes a deep-seated basis for social identity, which suggests that a source of intergroup bias other than shared interests exists. The closely related literature on information processing reveals that people rely heavily on stereotypes when responding to others. Stereotypes comprise cognitive categorizations that simplify the world and permit rapid responses in the face of complex and demanding social environments (see Fiske 1998). Pejorative stereotypes of outgroups generally consist of anecdotal exaggerations that predispose adverse behavioral responses to outgroup members. The police stereotypically perceive minority citizens as criminal threats, whereas minority citizens stereotype the police as authoritarian and racist. Social identity and stereotyping processes may heighten intergroup tensions well beyond those produced by the existence of any actual conflicts of interest.

Basic emotions such as fear and anger may play an even more fundamental role in fostering ingroup/outgroup distinctions and instigating violent behavioral responses to members of outgroups. Until relatively recently, social psychologists have given short shrift to the power of emotions, instead giving primacy to cognitive processes and assuming that emotions arise from conscious appraisals of experience (see LeDoux 1996; Zajonc 1998). It is becoming increasingly apparent that emotional responses need not rely on cognitive processes. Conversely, cognitions are always “tagged” with emotions that influence behavioral responses. The

challenging conditions of minority neighborhoods may arouse powerful emotional, as well as cognitive, responses among police and citizens alike, helping set the stage for violent encounters.

The independent but highly interrelated mental systems of emotion and cognition operate in parallel to produce intergroup behavior that seems at odds with mere self-interest. These cognitive and emotional bases of group life may elicit myriad behavioral responses, intergroup aggression representing but one manifestation. Completing the groundwork for our theory of police brutality, we examine two dominant theories of aggression—cognitive neoassociationism and social learning theory—to show how emotional and instrumental forms of aggression are influenced by intergroup dynamics (see Geen 1998). Consistent with our emphasis on the seemingly irrational quality of police brutality, research reveals that aggression often is triggered by unconscious emotional and cognitive responses to threatening stimuli. Conscious deliberation may or may not alter the course of events should immediate aggressive tendencies be tempered, depending on influences such as cognitive appraisals of emotions and beliefs about the deservedness of the target of aggression.

We culminate this theoretical overview by systematically integrating these social, emotional, and cognitive ingroup/outgroup dynamics into a model of police brutality. It identifies the social and psychological background conditions, targets, mental processes, motives, temporal sequences, and mediating factors that may interact to produce incidents of excessive force. While seemingly irrational acts of excessive force comprise the theoretical focus of the investigation, the analysis sheds light on the many less injurious forms of police misconduct directed toward minority citizens. The complexities revealed by the model also point to a key question: What are the prospects for reducing police-minority tensions via organizational change in police departments, the staple of policy recommendations to curb the problem? Our analysis suggests that excessive force involves inescapable social psychological processes that make it virtually inevitable in light of the difficult social conditions that exist in urban America. Organizational modifications may provide some laudable outcomes and are worth pursuing, but we maintain that simply altering police organizations will have relatively little palliative effect on the obdurate reciprocal antagonisms existing between police and racial/ethnic minorities. Acknowledging the mutual involvement of police and citizens in the production of the behavior implies neither blame for nor justification of it, only the recognition that complicated and unyielding influences are at work that are not resolvable through simple formulae. Real improvements in police-minority relations demand other avenues of change, ones that challenge existing social arrangements.

We conclude our work with an assessment of how meaningful change may occur, focusing on the structural roots of the problem. In so doing, we explore the broader implications of our analysis. For example, the increased spatial concentration of poor whites in urban neighborhoods raises questions about the influence of race versus class and whether the social-psychological dynamics outlined herein may operate with respect to cultural markers (e.g., speech, clothing, demeanor) more than physical ones (e.g., skin color). We consider the possibility that the increasing segregation of poor whites will make them more vulnerable to police abuses in the future. Another issue is the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of American society. We focus the analysis on the relatively large African American and Mexican-origin populations, because historically they have experienced profound discrimination and have been the primary targets of police brutality. Given America's changing racial and ethnic mosaic, we consider the implications of the theoretical model for the treatment of other minority groups at the hands of the police.