Empathy Building: Assessing the Effectiveness of a Virtual Reality Intervention to Improve Community-Police Relationships

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INTRODUCTION
Racial disparities do exist in policing (Kahn & Martin, 2016)
• Biased policing practices have created a culture of mistrust and division between racialized communities and the police departments tasked with protecting and serving them
Intergroup hostility can cause a significant decrease in empathy for outgroup members (Mackie et al., 2008)
• However, there exists several promising suggestions for types of specialized trainings to improve intergroup relationships
• Perspective-taking has been shown to elicit empathy and improve relationships among intergroup members (Todd & Galinsky, 2014)
• Additionally, presenting information that subverts traditional racial stereotypes has been shown to reduce racial biases (Todd & Galinsky, 2014)

We tested a virtual reality (VR) tool that utilized perspective-taking and counterstereotypical information (CSI) to 'build' empathy among a sample of community members and police officers in the same city.

HYPOTHESES
H2: Community members will display higher levels of empathy as compared to the police officers, both pre- and post-scenario.
• The participants’ self-reported scores for empathy on a VAS scale
H2: Community members will exhibit lower levels of bias than the police officers both pre- and post-scenario.
• The participants’ D scores on the Brief Implicit Association Task (BIAT)
H2: Community members will display greater self-reported negative emotions as compared to the police officers during the VR scenario.
• Participants’ negative affect score on the PANAS questionnaire

METHODS
Pre- & Post-Questionnaire:
• Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS)
• Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ)
VR Scenario:
• Depicts a community-policing interaction where police are called to the home of Antwaun, a Black community member having a mental health crisis
• 4 components: Inner & Outer Perspectives, Community & Police Backstories
In-VR Measures:
• Empathy Ratings (VAS)
• Brief Implicit Association Task (BIAT)

SAMPLE
100 participants (58 police officers, 42 community members)

DISCUSSION
The findings suggest that the VR tool successfully increases empathy and reduces racial biases in both groups.
• Outgroup empathy can be deliberately generated via perspective-taking and the presentation of counterstereotypical information
• Need to continue assessing empathy building as a mechanism to improve community-police relationships
• Future studies should include physiological measures to better understand the VR experience