

# Every police officer is not ‘the police’

BY DANIEL POLLACK, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 10/03/18 02:30 PM EDT\_  
THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS ARE THEIR OWN AND NOT THE VIEW OF  
*THE HILL*



© Getty Images

No one likes to hear someone say, “You’re stereotyping.” Yet the fact is, we recognize the faces of our own race more precisely than the faces of other races. This phenomenon, known as the “cross-race effect” or the “other-race effect,” applies across races. There may be unconscious facets of stereotyping involved, but whatever its sociological and psychological origins, it is an aspect of living in a multiracial, multiethnic environment such as America.

When a police officer describes a suspect or person of interest and uses skin color, height, gender, or some other distinguishing mark as an identifying characteristic, it is meant to be a neutral identifier. The officer is trying his or her

best to accurately describe the person. We expect police officers to be particularly skilled at paying attention to details — it’s a necessary part of criminal investigations, after all, and officers have been trained to have such prowess.

Generalizations are an inevitable aspect of daily decision-making. We simply do not have the time and tools to engage in an individualized analysis prior to every judgment. Notwithstanding the need to generalize at times, there is a danger to its overuse. This occurs especially when we generalize from examples which, in fact, are not representative of the concept in question. This happens when the other examples to which we refer

have differences that are glossed over or exhibit important nuances that remain veiled. In either case, the generalization winds up being partisan. A simple example is to definitively deduce that “all Democrats are liberal,” or “all Republicans are conservative.” Many other, similar examples can tempt us to generalize.

Recent studies have been conducted regarding the public’s attitudes toward police officers in America. To what extent have our present-day general perceptions of individual police officers been colored by the recent deaths of black Americans, many of them young, as a result of encounters with police? Are such incidents isolated, or are they indications of general police bias? However those perceptions came to be, we need to break the cycle of hasty generalization. To do so, we must first become aware of our thinking and language. Do the facts really support our conclusions? Are there questions or aspects of our thinking that really don’t have answers, but that we have unwittingly fill in with our desired “answers”?

There are at least 765,000 sworn police officers in the United States, according to the latest Bureau of Justice Statistics available (2008), but possibly as many as 1.1 million law enforcement personnel, depending on how you count. Categorically labeling all police officers in any one particular way is inaccurate. Assuredly, each police officer is a member of a police department, a team, a group, but each officer is as complex and unique as any human being.

The bottom line is this: We want all police officers to see each person in their community as the individual he or she is. But do we, in turn, offer the same respect to those police officers when thinking or talking about them? More often than not, many people do not. And it’s dangerous to use the phrase “the police” in the plural, in a sweeping, cavalier fashion.

Each person killed by a police officer had a name. We know from news accounts some of these names: Tamir Rice, Cameron Tillman, VonDerrit Myers Jr., Laquan McDonald, Carey Smith-Viramontes, Jeffrey Holden, Qusean Whitten, Miguel Benton, Dillon McGee, Levi Weaver, Karen Cifuentes, Sergio Ramos, Roshad McIntosh, Diana Showman.

In like manner, each police officer is not simply an anonymous cop; he or she has a name. Recently, in Brookhaven, Mississippi, two officers became the latest to be killed while on duty. Their names: Cpl. Zack Moak and Patrolman James White.

***Daniel Pollack*** is an attorney and professor at Yeshiva University’s School of Social Work, New York City. Contact: [dpollack@yu.edu](mailto:dpollack@yu.edu)