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Study Finds Holding Eye Contact Is Critical When Police Confront Hysterical Citizens

New Research Relies On Footage From TV Show 'COPS'

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Holding eye contact, or "gaze," with hysterical citizens is one of the most effective methods police officers can use to calm them down, according to new research conducted by the University of New Hampshire that relies on footage of the FOX TV show "COPS."

The study by Mardi Kidwell, assistant professor of communication, "Calm Down!": the role of gaze in the interactional management of hysteria by the police," was published recently in Discourse Studies.

According to Kidwell's research, regulating gaze is central to face-to-face interaction. For police officers, it's an important factor in gaining compliance from and calming hysterical citizens.

"A great deal of police work involves encountering people who are in crisis, people who are distraught, agitated and sometimes hysterical over the circumstances that have necessitated a police response. Moreover, as police departments nationwide transition from a more traditional model of policing, with its emphasis on catching law-breakers, to a model of community policing, with its emphasis on prevention, they have sought to adapt more humanistic, more dialogic approaches to their communications with citizens," Kidwell says.

Kidwell's research relies on police-citizen interactions obtained from the FOX TV show "COPS," now in its 19th season. She used footage from "COPS" because most research on police-citizen interaction does not rely on a real-time, in-the-moment unfolding of events. In addition, police departments are reluctant to provide footage of their police-citizen interactions.

In the "COPS" segment discussed in the study, two police officers are trying to calm down a woman whose grandson has been shot. The six-minute segment shows the officers arriving on the scene of the shooting, inspecting the victim, questioning witnesses, discussing the case with other officers and, finally, seeking to calm the victim's grandmother, who herself has been shot at.

The officers are forced to use increasingly stronger verbal tactics – called directives – to get the woman to look at them as they try to calm her down. The woman repeatedly looks at the officers and then looks away, and continues to be hysterical. Finally, one officer gently touches the woman's face and turns it toward him, forcing her to look at him. Eventually, the officers are able to keep eye contact with her long enough so as to calm her down, help her

regain a normal breathing pattern and compose herself so she can drive to the hospital to see her grandson.

Kidwell has found that officers treat citizens' (usually suspects') refusal to gaze at them as resistance, and they will continue to pursue the citizens' gaze in order to gain compliance. "In situations of someone's extreme distraught-ness, refusal to gaze is associated with being 'out of it.' In other words, with being unable to attend to, or participate in, in any normal or competent way current interactional activities," she says.

Kidwell analyzed more than 35 hours of footage and hundreds of police-citizen interactions as part of her research. She found that police rely on holding gaze to calm individuals in a number of situations, including getting them to cooperate during questioning, keeping them from interfering with emergency workers, and gaining their compliance during arrests.

"There is another, perhaps less institutionally obvious responsibility that the officers are undertaking in this case. This is a responsibility that has to do with being a 'helper,' here, specifically with emotional work. This case and others that involve, for example, a small child whose parents have been arrested and a woman who has been abused by her husband, demonstrate that police responsibilities also include simply soothing people who are in crisis and trying to ameliorate their emotional suffering," Kidwell says.