



# Physiological Implications for Implicit Threat Evaluations of the Police

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## Background & Introduction

### Do civilians view police officers as threats?

- While prior research has assessed the role of perceived threat in police officers' decision to employ lethal force, relatively less research has considered how civilians might perceive the police as threats and how this might influence police-civilian interactions.
- Previous work in our lab shows that, under certain circumstances, civilians do rapidly evaluate police as threats, and these evaluations hold downstream consequences (Olivett & March, 2017).
- In the current study we address the implications of these evaluations for defensive physiology. Specifically, we used the startle eyeblink paradigm, which indexes threat vs. non-threat physiological responses in facial muscles (March et al., 2017). Larger induced eyeblinks correspond with greater threat vs. non-threat responses to paired image stimuli.

## Methods



### Presentation of Images

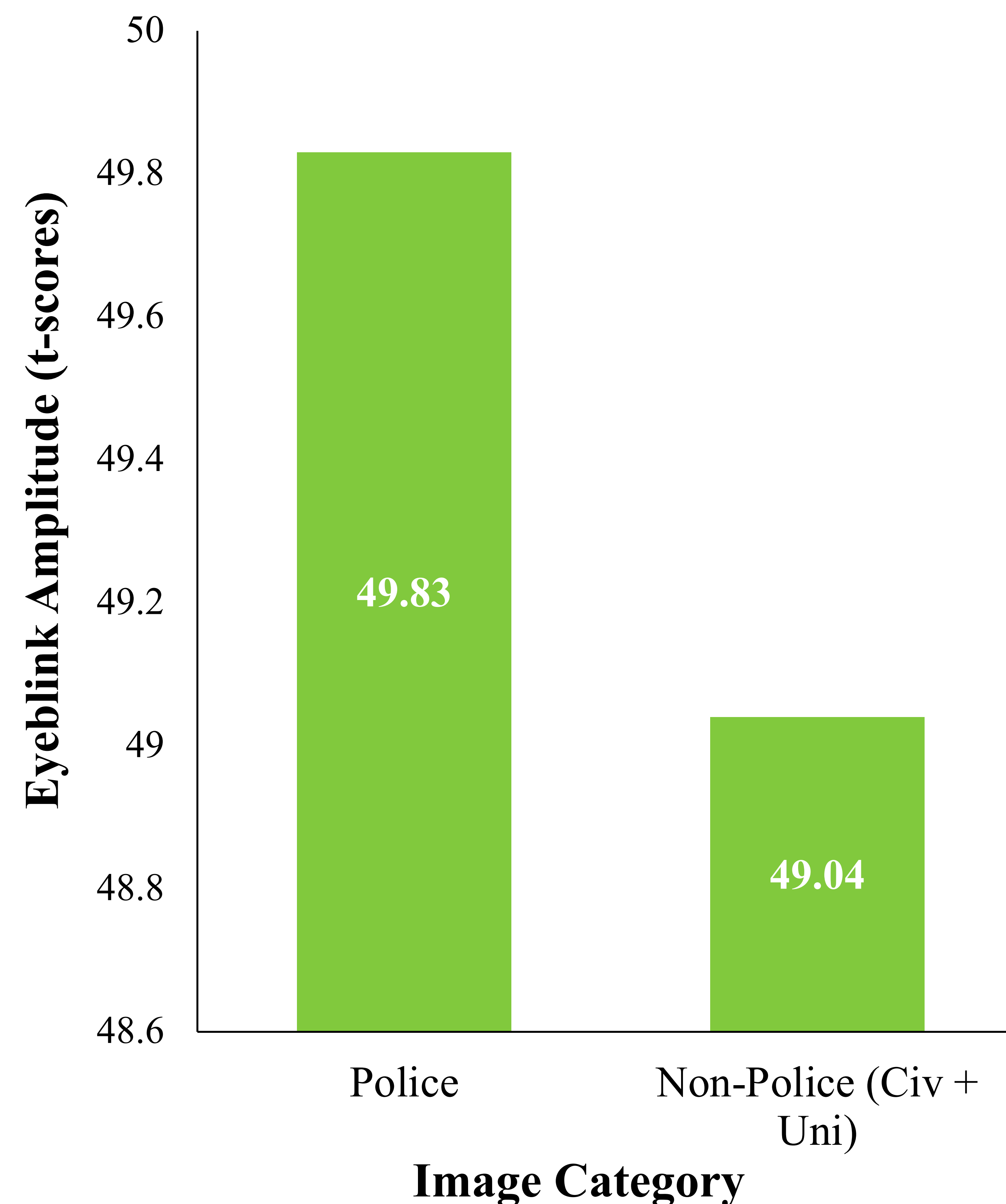
- **Fixation Cross** (1 second)
- **Police Officer** (2-4 seconds) or
- **Civilian** (2-4 seconds) or
- **Other Uniformed Officer** (2-4 seconds) [Firefighters, Postal Workers]

- 90 Randomized image trials: 30 civilian, 30 police, 30 other uniformed officers
- 100 dB noise played concurrently with image for 27 total images (9 times per image category)
- 8-12 second interval break between trials (blank screen)



## Results

### Effect of Image Type on Eyeblink Amplitude



**Main Effect:**  $F(1,144) = 4.33, p = .0150$

**Pol vs. Non-Pol:**  $F(1,145) = 6.58, p = .0113$

## Discussion

### Police images evoked greater defensive physiological responses compared to non-police images.

- That is, when noise probes were paired with police images, defensive contraction of muscles surrounding the eye were greater than when probes were paired with non-police images.
- These defensive physiological responses to police might imply implications for defensive behavior (e.g., fight, flight, or freeze) when civilians encounter police.
- Accordingly, this work may inform discourse regarding the way civilians behave in the moments prior to fatal police encounters (i.e., resisting arrest, fleeing from officers, etc.).

### Questions to Consider

- Given that potentiated startle eyeblinks are defensive responses to police images, how might they generalize to real-life civilian behaviors when encountering police?
- Could improving police-civilian relations lead to less threat perception of police officers?



## References

Olivett, V. J., & March, D. S. (2021). White civilians' implicit danger evaluation of police officers underlies explicit perception of police. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-021-00343-9>

March, D. S., Gaertner, L., & Olson, M. A. (2017). In Harm's Way: On Preferential Response to Threatening Stimuli. *Personality & social psychology bulletin*, 43(11), 1519-1529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217722558>