Machismo and the Gates incident

By Joan Vennochi
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THE ARREST of Henry Louis Gates Jr. by a Cambridge police officer is playing out along racial lines. But it’s also about power and machismo - on both sides.

Gates, a noted Harvard scholar who is African-American, was busted for a bad attitude. That isn’t grounds for a mug shot. But, black or white, sometimes it leads to one.

Earlier this year, a Wellesley businesswoman was arrested after a run-in with a state trooper at Logan International Airport. The trooper asked Margaret Greer, a 57-year-old portfolio manager, to move her Mercedes because it was obstructing a bus lane. She refused and sped off, hitting him with her car’s side mirror. Greer was charged with assault and battery with a dangerous weapon. She ultimately apologized and agreed to perform 200 hours of community service to resolve the charges.

Then there was the case of Randi Goldklank, the now ex-general manager of Channel 7, who went on an alcohol-and-prescription-drug-fueled tirade at Logan. As she was taken into custody, threatened to call a news crew and put the arresting trooper on TV and “ruin his life.” She, too, apologized.

In the Gates incident, there was no physical contact, drugs, or alcohol. All Gates did was allegedly shout at a police officer.

Gates was in his own home when a Cambridge police officer responded to a call about a possible break-in at that address. The professor had just returned home from filming a documentary in China. His front door was stuck shut and his taxi driver helped him pry it open. Then, Sergeant James Crowley appeared at his door and demanded to see identification. Gates provided it, although some facts about how and when are in dispute.

The police report states that Gates was arrested after exhibiting “loud and tumultuous behavior, in a public place, directed at a uniformed police officer who was investigating a report of a crime in progress.” Gates disputes some
information provided in the police report, but does acknowledge that he responded with anger.

In anger, Gates brought up race, according to the police report. When Crowley told him he was investigating a report of a break-in, the professor said, “Why, because I’m a black man in America?”

The report also states, “Gates then turned to me and told me that I had no idea who I was ‘messing’ with and that I had not heard the last of it.”

If a white person displays an attitude like that, it is OK to call him arrogant. If a black person is called arrogant, it is considered code for “uppity” and an invitation to be labeled as a racist. So let’s just say that according to the police report, Gates sounds like what he is: a renowned Harvard academic who is used to deferential treatment. In this case, he didn’t get it, he didn’t like it, and he let it show.

Crowley didn’t like what he heard. He arrested Gates on a disorderly conduct charge, which has since been dropped.

Human beings of all races have a tendency to react as Gates did, especially when they are tired, frustrated, and privileged. Police officers usually don’t like it. The question is whether this police officer responded more harshly because of skin color.

The answer isn’t obvious, but both men could use some sensitivity training. Gates shouldn’t have yelled at the police officer; still, what he did was irritating, not criminal. Once the officer determined Gates did live in the house, he should have left, no matter what the professor was shouting.

Harvey Silverglate, a criminal defense lawyer, civil liberties defender, and Harvard Law School graduate, believes Gates’s arrest should be investigated, but not only because of its racial implications: Was Gates arrested and held as a way to teach him a lesson? If so, asks Silverglate, “Is this acceptable, regardless of whether the citizen is white or black?”

In an ideal world, no. When it happens to a black man, racism may be the easy explanation, but that doesn’t make it the only explanation. Life and power in 21st-century America are more complicated than that.

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