

African American Male Perceptions of Police in the Era of YouTube

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By

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This book is dedicated to all individuals impacted by the relationship between African Americans and the police. Conversations regarding the relationship between two diverse groups are often complicated and uncomfortable; however, awkward dialogue leads to change. Discussions are necessary to understand the perceptions of African Americans and the police. There is hope that the challenges surrounding the relationship between African Americans and the police will be an issue of the past.

The book is also dedicated to my mom and dad for instilling principles of faith, service, and leadership in my life, as well as to my brother, Richard, for his continuous encouragement. Lastly, special thanks must go to my husband, Avery, and my son, Baszol, for traveling to every residency weekend with me. Avery, your patience did not go unnoticed. Baszol, I hope to inspire you to strive for academic and personal success.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the following qualitative phenomenological study is to address how African American males describe their perceptions of police officers in light of viewing recordings displaying interactions between African Americans and the police on YouTube. The theoretical framework of the qualitative research focuses on critical race theory. Accordingly, the research applies snowball sampling, conducting interviews with African American males over the age of 18, who viewed YouTube recordings showing interactions between African Americans and the police. The following themes are identified in the data analysis process utilizing NVivo: (a) African Americans males are emotional after viewing recordings showing interactions between African Americans and the police; (b) African American males respect the police; (c) African American males have the “Talk” with their families; (d) African Americans males are subject to the influence of labelling; (e) African American males contend that fear is a factor in the relationship between African Americans and the police; (f) police officers should know the community they serve; (g) the role of history complicates the relationship between African Americans and the police; (h) African American males are uncertain of procedural justice; (i) African American males assert that recordings on YouTube highlight the perceived relationship between African Americans and the police; (j) African American males contend that police officers need more training; and (k) African American males affirm that there are good police officers and bad police officers. The study shows that, while emotional, YouTube recordings aid in assessing the relationship between African Americans and the police. The study also notes respect for law enforcement, acknowledging that there are good and bad police officers; however, it shows the importance of the ‘Talk’ in the African American family as there is a fear factor when interacting with police officers. The research provides a blueprint for police officers, policymakers, and communities to investigate further and improve the relationship between African Americans and the police.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The relationship between African Americans and the police is not a new phenomenon under analysis. Research on this relationship has indicated a dysfunctional rapport for decades (e.g., Arnett, 2015; Carter & Corra, 2016; Crichlow & Fulcher, 2017; Jones, 2018; Petersen & Ward, 2015). Historically, the relationship between African Americans and policing is deeply rooted in American history. For example, slave patrols originated in South Carolina to ensure slaves continued responsibilities such as tending to crops or household duties like cooking and cleaning (Aymer, 2016; Durr, 2015; Sewell, Horsford, Coleman, & Watkins, 2016).

During slavery and the civil rights era, African Americans suffered physical and psychological harm, and experienced sexual assaults at the hands of the dominant culture (Aymer, 2016; Durr, 2015). The brutal tactics of slave patrols evolved in the post-slavery era into entities such as state militias and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Relentlessly, police used tactical methods, such as police guard dogs and water hoses, to control protests during the Jim Crow era (Petersen & Ward, 2015; Sewell et al., 2016). The historical framework of the relationship between African Americans and the police has been aligned with recent deaths of African American males. Husbands, fathers, and sons like Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Jordan Dunn have been linked to racial injustices like lynching disguised in the form of excessive use of force (Aymer, 2016; Durr, 2015; Everbach, Clark, & Nisbett, 2018; Passavant, 2015; Sewell et al., 2016; Whitehead, 2016).

Current literature parallels the lynching of an African American male from a tree to the killing of an unprotected African American male by a police officer (Von Drehle, 2015). Police are killing African American males at an alarming rate. As Bor, Venkataramani, Williams, and Tsai (2018) point out, “Black Americans are nearly three times more likely than are White Americans to be killed by police—accounting for more than 40%

of victims of all police killings nationwide—and five times more likely than are White Americans to be killed unarmed” (p. 302).

Subsequently, the current state of the relationship between African Americans and law enforcement has prompted minorities to be suspicious of procedural justice (Crichlow & Fulcher, 2017; Hall, Hall & Perry, 2016; Jetelina, Bishopp, Gonzalez, Jennings, & Piquero, 2017; Kochel, 2017; Mastrofski, Jonathan-Zamir, Moyal, & Willis, 2016). The lack of procedural justice disturbs African Americans’ mental health as they are consciously aware of racial disparities in the criminal justice system and remain in constant fear of becoming a victim of police brutality. In a recent study, researchers found a correlation between African Americans’ exposure to killings involving unarmed African American males and the impact on their mental health (Bor et al., 2018). However, White respondents were not impacted by police killings of unarmed African American men (Bor et al., 2018).

The reality of watching an African American male being subjected to unreasonable use of force by police prompts conversations in African American households. African American families have long understood the rules of engagement when interacting with police officers. African American households have “the talk” with African American teenagers about the undesired realities of being African American. The “talk,” also known as racial socialization, is a conversation where parents prepare their children for situations where they are not welcomed or appreciated solely based on their skin pigment (Diaquoi, 2017; Whitaker & Snell, 2016). The objective of the “talk” is not to teach hate, separation, or disrespect for authority.

Its objective, rather, involves teaching children to avoid stereotypical perceptions of unlawful conduct (Diaquoi, 2017; Whitaker & Snell, 2016). To avoid the perception of criminal conduct, African American parents teach their children verbal and nonverbal communication skills when interacting with police officers. These parents hope their sons will have nondeadly interactions with police officers if they make a conscious effort to maintain eye contact, adopt a low vocal tone, and avoid sudden movements (Whitaker & Snell, 2016). The dialogue of survival in the African American household is a mainstream conversation on social media.

Social media outlets showing recordings of police use of force toward African Americans has sparked national conversations (Baker & Bacharach, 2017; Everbach et al., 2018; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015; Jones, 2018; Sethuraju, Sole, Oliver, & Prew, 2017). More specifically, video recordings showing the deaths of unarmed African American males are not an isolated occurrence (Moore et al., 2016; Patterson & Swan, 2016;

Whitehead, 2016). Social media sites such as YouTube have become a campground for videos showing police brutality toward African American males. This study aims to examine interactions between African Americans and the police through individualized perceptions of African American males after viewing such recordings on YouTube.

Need for the Study

The topic's relevance is noted in the media as police shootings of unarmed African American males are currently under scrutiny (Everbach et al., 2018; Jones, 2018; Richardson, Vil, & Cooper, 2016). Moreover, interactions between African Americans and the police have been debated in sports as professional athletes are taking the knee to bring attention to the matter (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Dunham & Petersen, 2017; Stratmoen, Lawless, & Saucier, 2019). Findings from the research will aid in exploring perceptions of citizen interactions with police officers (Cao, 2015; Terpstra & Kort, 2016; Wolfe & Nix, 2017). The topic will significantly contribute to research literature within the field of criminal justice as African Americans' distrust of police officers is further debated (Rogers & Coliandris, 2015). Documented cases of police shootings of unarmed African Americans incite a new era of civil rights (Bylander, 2015; Raschig, 2017). The current literature has drawn a nexus between civil unrest and deaths of African American males when interacting with police officers (Hutto & Green, 2016; Maskovsky, 2017; Rembert, Watson, & Hill, 2016; Yimgang, Wang, Paik, Hager, & Black, 2017).

Civil unrest continues to plague communities. For example, the death of Michael Brown sparked unrest in Ferguson, Missouri—particularly after images of Brown's body lying in the street surfaced on social media outlets (Auston, 2017; Staggers-Hakim, 2016). Events following deaths of unarmed Black males have led to protests questioning the value of African Americans' lives.

The failure to criminally charge police for unjustifiable deaths of African Americans fueled the intensification of such protests (Crichlow & Fulcher, 2017; Hargons et al., 2017). Previous research has noted African Americans' general perceptions of police officers as one of caution, suspicion, and lack of confidence in procedural justice (Bates, Antrobus, Bennett, & Martin, 2015; Brunson & Gau, 2015; Cao, 2015; Rembert et al. 2016). Scholars have noted public perceptions of fatal police shootings captured on body cameras (Culhane, Boman, & Schweitzer, 2016; Desmond, Papachristos, & Kirk, 2016). However, we do not know how African American males perceive interactions between African Americans

and police after viewing video recordings capturing human interactions between African Americans and the police.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative phenomenological study addresses the research question presented and seeks to understand how African American males perceive social dyads between African Americans and the police in the era of YouTube. YouTube has become a central hub for viewing recordings showing interactions between African Americans and the police. Viewers resort to YouTube as it provides an opportunity to observe human interactions captured by recordings (Legewie & Nassauer, 2018). YouTube is a video-sharing site that allows individuals to upload, view, and comment on videos (Lange, 2017). It provides an alternative approach to live television, resulting in instant feedback and permanency of video recordings (Lange, 2017). While billions of individuals visit the platform to view trending video recordings, such videos are not assessed for truthfulness or creditability (Lange, 2017). Ultimately, YouTube provides an arena for participants of the study to view recordings showing interactions between African Americans and the police and to consider the current state of the relationship.

Rationale

Employing a phenomenological methodology allows for gathering accounts of participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). *African American Male Perceptions of the Relationship between African Americans and the Police in the Era of YouTube* utilizes a qualitative methodology to study the theoretical foundations of African American males' perception of interactions between African Americans and the police. A qualitative approach is appropriate for understanding and appreciating non-numerical meanings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Understanding the lived experiences of African American males is necessary to recognize how they perceive exchanges between African Americans and the police (Gill, 2016; Peck, 2015; Rengifo & Pater, 2017).

The study allows the realities of an under-represented population to challenge narratives presented by the dominant culture and the media. The research will spark conversations comparing individualized perceptions presented by participants to misconceptions concerning African Americans. The research intends to show that Black lives matter, and all lives matter (Austin, Cardwell, Kennedy, & Spencer, 2016; Méndez, 2016; Powell,

2016). The relationship between the police and African Americans is not a Black issue, but a human issue. Lastly, the study will shed light on how technological advancements such as video recordings on social media provide a technique for assessing perceptions.

Significance of the Study

Historically, interactions between African Americans and the police resulted in deadly outcomes. Simple encounters between two diverse groups have been muddled by stereotypes impressed by the dominant culture (Kahn, Lee, Renauer, Henning, & Stewart, 2017). Video recordings uploaded to YouTube are forcing African American males to confront their perceptions of contact with the police. African American males are re-evaluating how to interact with police (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017).

These perceptions of African American males will challenge ideologies associated with cultural neuroscience. Cultural neuroscience is how the brain connects race with fear or uncertainty when interacting with eclectic cultures (Malinowska, 2016; Moya, Henderson, Lewis, & Lewis, 2015). Research contends there is a nexus between deaths of unarmed African American males and societal labeling associated with African American males.

Through the lens of critical race theory, the study will advance scientific knowledge. Critical race theory is appropriate to allow the unrepresented group of African American males to speak their truths regarding interactions between African Americans and the police (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). The realities of African American males may only be accounted for by understanding their experiences. Through counter storytelling, they will present an alternative perspective acknowledging how contact with police influences their lives and their peers.

Research Question

The following research question addresses how African American males over the age of 18 perceive social dyads between African Americans and the police. Accordingly, the following research question will be addressed:

RQ: How do African American males describe their perceptions of police officers in light of viewing recordings displaying interactions between African Americans and the police?

Definition of Terms

African American. An American identifying with African pedigree or ancestry (African American, 2019).

Black Lives Matter. A social awareness crusade stemming from the acquittal of George Zimmerman for his role in the demise of African American teenager Trayvon Martin (Kramer, Remster, & Charles, 2017; Moody-Ramirez & Cole, 2018; Smith, 2017).

Police. An organization granted governmental power to maintain general order (Police, 2019).

Perception. A method in which an individual uses the environment to frame representations of events to shape one's life (Johnson, 2018).

YouTube. A social media website where videos are uploaded and viewed by billions domestically and internationally (Arthurs, Drakopoulou, & Gandini, 2018; Lange, 2017).

Research Design

The research incorporated a non-probability sampling design. Non-probability sampling design includes non-randomization, the researcher's choice of population, and accessibility to participants (Setia, 2017). Snowball sampling is utilized in the study. Snowball sampling is a sampling method in which participants are chosen based on referrals (Beins, 2017; Crouse & Lowe, 2018). Snowball sampling is appropriate to gain substantial information on sensitive issues regarding social injustice (Crouse & Lowe, 2018).

Assumptions and Limitations

The ontological assumption for the study was that each participant presented his unique perception of reality. The study recognized that each perception given was accepted as truthful as there is no sole realism (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Accordingly, the qualitative study's primary assumption was that participants of the study provided insight into the perceptions of the relationship between African Americans and the police based on their viewing of YouTube recordings showing interactions between the two groups, as well as their own lived experiences. There was an assumption that all participants in the study answered all interview questions truthfully.

General Methodological Assumptions

The methodological assumption for the study is implemented through the utilization of semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews. These were deemed appropriate for comprehending African American males' perceptions of the interactions between African Americans and the police. Due to the nature and sensitivity of the subject matter, a phenomenological interview generated a trustworthy environment in which participants could share their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The assumption was that the data collected represent the opinion, beliefs, or perceptions of African American males concerning the current state of the relationship between African Americans and the police.

Theoretical Assumptions

Critical race theory is a suitable academic platform upon which to highlight the plight of less dominant groups rooted in the legal system (Bracey, 2015; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017; Reece, 2019; Samuels, 2015). In recent years, the issues plaguing African Americans are evident in interactions between African Americans and the police. This study's theoretical assumption was that African American males' perceptions of the relationship between African Americans and the police were founded on lived personal experiences, interactions, and viewed YouTube recordings. The study provided an opportunity to capture a phenomenon assessed by African American male participants (Creswell, 2013).

Topic-Specific Assumptions

The current literature has scrutinized elements impacting the relationship between African Americans and the police. Existing research confirms there is a breakdown in the relationship between the two groups. The topic assumption for this qualitative phenomenological study is that understanding African American males' lived experience concerning police perception is significant to the study of criminal justice.

Limitations

The qualitative phenomenological study aims to assess perceptions of the relationship between African Americans and the police in the era of YouTube from participants until no new phenomenon is noted or saturation is achieved. However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of the

study. First, the study involves snowball sampling. A limitation of snowball sampling is the possibility of restricting data. Accordingly, it is imperative to select a large sample size to gain a broader scope of perspectives on the subject matter (Beins, 2017; Crouse & Lowe, 2018). While the study includes a sample size of 10, a larger sample size would allow more diverse viewpoints.

Second, a limitation of the study is the lack of diverse age demographic. Results from the inclusion criteria indicate that no participants are over the age of 60. Not having participants from this age group limits the diversity of perceptions. Accordingly, it would be essential for future studies to include participants over the age of 60 who may attest to the evolution of the historical relationship between African Americans and the police.

Design Flaw Limitations

Design flaw limitations must be addressed as a disadvantage in the study. Accordingly, a design flaw in this study is its sample size. Due to the sample size, findings should not be generalized. However, the sample size here allowed for saturation and the generalization of themes.

Delimitations

The study did not aim to interview African Americans who had direct interactions with the police. Further, it did not focus on African American women or the police as the target population. The above limitations occurred because the study focused on African American males who have viewed recordings on YouTube, showing interactions between African Americans and the police. Historically, African American males are associated with stereotypes and imagery employed by the dominant culture. Accordingly, the study provided African Americans with an opportunity to share their lived experiences in the light of such stereotypes associated with the image of African American males.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The study continues with Chapter 2. Chapter 2 examines past and current literature on factors associated with the relationship between African Americans and the police. Chapter 3 assesses the methodology of the study. It also highlights the instruments of measurement used and ethical deliberations. Chapter 4 examines the sample population and research methods as applied to data analysis. Chapter 5 presents the results of the

study and compares the findings to previous research. It then concludes with an interpretation of the findings and considerations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The chapter offers an evaluation of past and current literature necessary to understanding the current state of the relationship between African Americans and the police. The current literature presents findings on the labeling of African American men, as well as the ramifications of stop-and-frisk procedures, racial profiling, neighborhood integration, cultural neuroscience, technology, and exposure to police violence. Contemporary literature speaks to factors influencing the relationship in quantitative and qualitative ways. However, existing research has not addressed how interactions between African Americans and the police, as viewed through recordings, impact perceptions of the relationship.

Methods of Searching

Methods of searching used in this study included probing scholarly databases. More specifically, using Summon, keyword searches were conducted on the following words and phrases: *African Americans*, *critical race theory*, *use of force*, *African Americans and police*, and *phenomenology*. Searches on the keywords generated a wealth of literature from databases such as ProQuest, SAGE Journals Online, and the Criminal Justice Database (formerly ProQuest Criminal Justice). Also, scholarly peer-reviewed journals and books were reviewed.

Articles from the following journals presented a substantial amount of literature: *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, *Police Quarterly*, *Humanity & Society*, *American Sociological Review*, *Criminology & Public Policy*, and *Criminal Justice and Behavior*. Only journal articles written in the last 5 to 7 years were consulted. Articles were reviewed until consistent themes and creditability of literature were achieved.

Theoretical Orientation for the Study

The field of criminology is essential in acknowledging, exploring, and understanding relevant criminal justice issues and relationships between groups. Further, examining relationships between diverse groups is necessary in order to recognize common forms injury inflicted upon less dominant groups (Michalowski, 2016). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an appropriate method of examining the lack of power of a less dominant group embedded in the legal system. As such, it presents an academic platform upon which to confront racism and law (Bracey, 2015; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017; Reece, 2019; Samuels, 2015).

In general, CRT is a theoretical structure utilized by scholars to contest dominant awareness of race and legal issues (Bracey, 2015; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Theorists of CRT contend that racism is not an innovative phenomenon in American culture, but an ongoing part of American civilization (Hall, 2017). CRT originated with legal scholars exploring wrongdoings inflicted upon minorities in American history (Aymer, 2016; Dixon, 2018). The fact that inequality still exists demonstrates the importance of acknowledging racism within American culture (Dilshad & Raj, 2016). Accordingly, CRT challenges the concepts of race and power.

More specifically, CRT highlights the need to examine the nexus of how race complicates normalized legal ramifications (Hadden, Tolliver, Brown-Manning, & Snowden, 2016). It contends that the responsibility of injustice and inequality lays with institutions, procedural justice, and adoption of societal norms (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017; Reece, 2019). Scholars utilize CRT to recognize legal complications perplexing African Americans, as racism is still stressing the daily lives of African American males. CRT contends that hate groups do not enforce racism, but it is instead enforced through embedded regulations and policies (Dixon, 2018; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017). The residual effects of unjust laws and regulations have deadly consequences for African Americans. CRT is ideal for examining current issues burdening African Americans, and is utilized here to clarify the functions of disguised racism and to understand lived experiences associated with racism (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017). CRT is warranted in discussions of police shootings of African Americans. Through the lens of critical race theory, the study will advance scientific knowledge. Critical race theory is appropriate to allow the unrepresented group of African American males to speak their truths of interactions between African Americans and the police (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). The realities of African American males may only be accounted for by hearing their stories.

Counterstorytelling

Under the umbrella of CRT, counterstorytelling is a theoretical format applied in order to understand wrongs committed against minorities by the legal system (Mullins, 2016). CRT is appropriate to support storytelling as a conventional form of data collection (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017). Through counterstorytelling, African American males will present an alternative perspective acknowledging how the perception of interactions with the police subconsciously impacts African American males' lives. CRT includes counterstorytelling of lived experiences.

Counterstorytelling presents the lived experiences of unrepresented groups and analyzes the challenges of power in racial contexts (Mullins, 2016). Counterstorytelling welcomes the lived experiences of culturally diverse males (Hall, 2017; Harper, 2015), and invites the experiences of ethnically disadvantaged individuals. Racism in the forms of wrongs committed by the dominant culture often goes unrecognized. The dominant culture is often unaware of the challenges or stresses of minorities because it is not burdened with the same injustices. For the dominant culture, racism is camouflaged as customary practices (Mullins, 2016). CRT asserts that equality for African Americans is an ongoing process, and allows for a conversation examining race relations and law.

Equality for African Americans cannot be accomplished without discussions of racial discrimination stemming from slavery to the present day (Aymer, 2016; Gill, 2016). Acknowledging truths is a starting point for a much-needed universal conversation. The reality of African American males may only be documented through counterstorytelling.

Color-Blind Racism

A component under the CRT umbrella is color-blind racism. The concept of color-blind racism supports the idea of equality and justice, but, ultimately, denies the existence of racism in the United States (Hughes, Hunter, Vargas, Schlosser, & Malhi, 2016). Researchers suggest that color-blind beliefs influence police decision-making (Hughes et al., 2016). In a study conducted by Hughes et al. (2016), it was found that individuals with a likeness toward the police support color-blind racial philosophies. The same study noted that scholars supporting the concept of color-blind beliefs assert that there is no nexus between race and power. However, in contrast, some scholars argue that color-blind racism is disguised in subtle societal practices within the criminal justice system (Collins, 2015; Gill, 2016).

Individuals supporting color-blind racism place responsibility on less dominant groups rather than the justice system. As a case in point, color-blind racism, also known as modern racism, is often linked to African Americans' failures in an attempt to explain inequalities in criminality (Shah & Yamagami, 2015). To address racism, society must first recognize the very existence of color-blind racism (Collins, 2015). Color-blind racism suggests that the lack of success in society stems from free choice and culture, not disadvantages based on race and power (Gill, 2016). However, one may argue that color-blind racism is not a free choice if society places minorities in a bubble without considering any other aspects of individuals.

Hegemonic Masculinity

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is aligned with CRT. Hegemonic masculinity examines the power relationship between groups and controlling cultures (Gill, 2016). Society has two bipolar views of African American males, namely 'the good Black man' and 'the bad Black man' (Gill, 2016). The ideas associated with what a good African American male is are defined by society, which often associates the idea of a decent African American male to the likes of an athlete or an actor in media productions (Gill, 2016).

Comparably, the idea of the bad African American male is linked to hypersexuality and violence (Gill, 2016). The concepts of the good African American male and the bad African American male have direct consequences. Good African American males are expected to succeed socially, whereas bad African American males will not be productive in society and will be viewed with distaste (Gill, 2016). CRT is used to document the realities of racism within the dominant society (Hadden et al., 2016), and is appropriate for this study as authority figures in society often have particular views of African Americans and justify police actions when interacting with African American males. CRT will allow the researcher to scrutinize legal complications puzzling African American males in an era where police are murdering vulnerable African Americans.

Advancing Scientific Knowledge

Evidence shows that exchanges between African Americans and the police have often been fatal. Simple encounters between these two diverse groups have been burdened by fallacies and stereotypes unintentionally accepted by society. However, the amplified consciousness brought about through social organizations and political structures is compelling African