AN EXAMINATION OF POLICE BRUTALITY IN THE UNITED STATES: LIVING AND
WORKING IN A STATE OF FEAR

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Abstract

AN EXAMINATION OF POLICE BRUTALITY IN THE UNITED STATES: WORKING AND LIVING IN A STATE OF FEAR

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For this research paper, police brutality and the use of excessive force against minorities, specifically Black males, were examined. Connections were made between current social issues and historical events. A review of the historical treatment of the Black population in the United States was included to provide context for the contentious relationship of Black males, (who are often perceived as hostile and aggressive), with law enforcement officials. Throughout American history, Blacks have been valued less than other groups in society and viewed as nuisances to social order. Additionally, police officers are often assigned to neighborhoods that they do not live in or are not familiar with in terms of the cultural behaviors and functionality of the ethnic group. Police officers might respond to Blacks with preconceived negative notions. As a direct result of fear and unfamiliarity with social constructs, police officers might react to Black males and the environment in which they live with the use of increased assertiveness and force when compared to what is normally used in other communities. Finally, data is provided which correlates negative health effects with continuous racism against Black males. Serious health issues are associated with the impact of racism and contribute to premature death among Blacks males.

Chapter One: Introduction

In the summer of 2014 a young, unarmed, Black male named Freddie Gray was shot and killed by a White police officer. This event sparked national outrage over police brutality against minorities in the United States and gave birth to the "Black Lives Matters" movement (Embrick, 2015). While Freddie Gray was not the first shooting victim in the United States by a law enforcement agent, it was the catalyst that caused many Americans to begin questioning the repeated killings of unarmed young Black males. Many questioned if the unarmed shootings of Black males were representative of the symptomatic results of continued historical institutionalized racist practices and the marginalization of a group by others in American society.

Some believe there is a long-held belief of superiority by the dominant group in society that has led to the devaluation of Blacks lives, (specifically males), and therefore, serves as a legitimizer of law enforcement actions (Embrick, 2015). If institutionalized systemic racism or the belief of White superiority is not the primary reason behind the turbulent relationship between police officers and Black males, there is a need to search for the cause. It seemed that excessive force was used more often by police officers when encountering Black males when compared to other groups. To gain insight and understanding of the perceived excessive and aggressive encounters with law enforcement officials among Black males, there is a need to examine not just historical foundations, but also White Privilege, police training practices, the state of mind of law enforcement officials during points of contact, and physiological factors which may affect the behaviors of members of law enforcement during a situation in which Black males are viewed as threats of criminality.

Statement of the Problem

Police brutality toward Blacks, (males in particular), continues to exist following the Civil Rights era. If there is understanding as to the reason(s) why such actions among law enforcement officials persist, there is hope for a future without the continuation of this behavior.

Definition of Terms

Police Brutality**:** The process of a law enforcement official(s) using force beyond the scope of what is deemed reasonable or necessary to apprehend a suspect (Alpert & Smith, 1995).

Disenfranchised minority population**:**   Whereas the dominant population of a culture deprives the minority population(s) of the same culture of power and marginalizes the group based on racial, ethnic, cultural, physical, psychological, and social differences which has been generated from a legacy of systematic institutional racism and discrimination (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002; Painter, 2007; Parham et al., 1999 as cited in Lockett, 2013).

White Privilege**:**   Unearned privileges that a dominant group holds in society, or, when referencing White Americans, White privilege. (Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt (2005) as cited in Stewart, T. L., Latu, I. M., Branscombe, N. R., Phillips, N. L. and Ted Denney, H. (2012).

Racial Bullying: Racial Bullying is a distinctive set of aggressive and/or hostile actions characterized by a power imbalance and with the intention to harm based upon one's perceived status as a marginalized group within a population (Olweus, 1993 as cited in Schumann, L., Craig, W. & Rosu, A., 2013).

Jim Crow: The anti-black laws and racial caste system which operated primarily, but not Exclusively, in southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s (Jim Crow Museum, 2016).

Stereotype threat phenomenon: Group or social identity in which negative stereotypes exist which may be applied under certain situational circumstances (Najdowski, Bottoms, & Goff, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to address the issue of police brutality upon Black males in the United States and to seek information and understanding which provides insight as to why this problem continues to exist following the Civil Rights era. If indeed the proposed statement is accurate that Black males are routinely subjected to police brutality and excessive force more than other groups in the United States, there must be an explanation.   If there is an explanation, then a solution can be devised to bring about change for future generations.

Delimitations

The research material provided in this paper was collected January 6, 2017 through May 6, 2017. The research source utilized in obtaining this information was from the data base of the library at University of Wisconsin-Parkside. The terms searched were "police brutality," "excessive force," "racial profiling", "Blacks", "racism," and "race relationships in the United States."

Method of Approach

This topic was researched after a possible resurgence of police brutality on Black males in the United States and the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement as reported in the media. First, information was gathered regarding the history of race relations in the United States. Then, literature was obtained that addressed sociological and psychological implications and explanations of aggressive behavior towards minorities (specifically Black males). Finally, police behavior and Black males' behavior when encountering police officers was researched to

gain a better understanding as to why Blacks males may face violent and even deadly consequences by law enforcement officials when both groups intersect. In Chapter 2 of this paper a literature review has been included. In Chapter 3 of this paper, recommendations for further study and conclusions are provided.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Police Brutality

There is no doubt that Blacks males, more so than any of their other societal counterparts, are more often met with more excessive force encounters by police officers. Black males are 21 times more likely than White males to be shot and killed by police at a rate of 31.17 deaths per million as compared to 1.47 deaths per million for White males (Milner, George, & Allison, 2016).

Accusations of institutionalized racism and the need for systematic control of the Black population are believed to be the reasons why excessive force is utilized more often among this population of citizens (Embrick, 2015). If these reasons are not correct, there must be other extenuating circumstances or explanations that account for or contribute to the reason why excessive force and occasional lethal actions are taken against Black males more so than any other group in the United States. A historical overview of race relations in the United States can perhaps shed light on why these two deeply rooted beliefs are held among Black citizens.

Race Relations in the United States

According to Embrick, (2015) beginning with the inception of slavery through the years following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's, some White Americans have held a long-standing belief of the need to provide racial regulation of minorities. In particular, Black males were a concern. Embrick (2015), suggested that the desire to control and showcase minorities as inferior served as an affirmation of White supremacy. Embrick (2015) made the analogy that what was once the regulatory responsibility of the slave overseers, night riders, and racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan in keeping minorities in order and under social

control, has now fallen into the hands of the criminal justice department system in the United

States (Embrick, 2015).

Embrick, (2015) claimed that racial bullying, brutalization, and the public display of the

degradation of Black men are still used to marginalize this group. From the days of slavery and

the years following the Emancipation Proclamation, (the law that ended slavery of people who

were of African descent), Black males have remained the consistent targets of White supremacy

in the United States. During the Jim Crow era, Blacks, again particularly males, were routinely

snatched from their homes in the middle of the night and were lynched without any

consequences to the aggressors. Embrick (2015) suggested that today's legally-condoned

brutality comes directly from institutionalized racist foundations which were built to prevent

Blacks and other minorities from progressing academically, socially, or economically. Embrick

(2015) surmised that the criminal justice system in the United States, which is comprised of both

the federal and local government law enforcement agencies, actively and systematically,

participated in the role of enforcing social constraints against minorities. Embrick, (2015) noted

that there have been unending reports of injustices faced by Blacks from police forces across the

nation.

Embrick (2015) described that there are two populations that exist in the nation, one of

White privilege and the other a less-valued and disenfranchised minority population. Embrick,

(2015) seemed to validate this notion by offering the results of the 1968 "Kerner Report", (the

findings of a National Advisory Commission), commissioned by then President Lyndon B.

Johnson, who stated that the greatest problem in the twentieth century would be the continued

race divide between the Black population and the White population. According to Embrick

(2015), the recent killings of Blacks by law enforcement officials nationwide without justifiable

cause demonstrated the lack of regard for the lives of Blacks in the United States, which is rooted in historical racism and marginalization of Blacks.   Embrick (2015) suggested that White Privilege is, perhaps, the leading cause of racial inequality in the U.S. (Embrick, 2015).

White Privilege

It might be worthwhile to examine the means through which intergroup biases are perpetuated and the devices by which they might be reduced. Social psychologists and diversity training practitioners might shed some light on this issue in our society. (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006; Molina & Wittig, 2006; Nagda, Tropp, & Paluck, 2006; Stephan & Vogt, 2004 as cited in Schumann, Craig, and Rosu, 2013).   In a country where the majority group is born with the privilege of superiority, it is often difficult to view a disenfranchised and disadvantaged life faced by minorities. Carter and Correa (2016) suggested that unfavorable feelings toward Blacks and other minorities are learned from members of the environment who are closely connected in early childhood. Often White Americans blame or justify the brutal acts of excessive force on the individual receiving the brutality (Embrick, 2015).

In 2014, the PEW Research Center conducted a nationwide survey and found that minorities believed that race relations were worse than the previous seven years. In that same survey, White respondents believed race relations had gotten better. More findings in the same survey suggested that Blacks were leery of the justification of police shootings involving Blacks more often than White Americans. Additionally, according to Embrick, (2015) Blacks reported that race was believed to be the key factor in shootings involving Black Males and police officers, while White Americans believed that an investigation would be fair in determining if the actions of the police officers who shot Black suspects were justifiable or judicially improper.

In 2015, CNN conducted a poll in which minorities were asked how they viewed the criminal justice system in the United States; unsurprisingly 69% of the Blacks polled stated that they believed that White Americans were treated better than Blacks. However, only 42% of Whites who were polled agreed that White Americans were treated better than Blacks (Embrick, 2015). Smith & Holmes (2003) maintained that police and minority tensions are the systemic results of racial and social divide in American culture.

Excessive Force

Smith & Holmes (2003) observed the belief by many that minorities were not equal to the dominant group when encountering excessive force used by law enforcement officers.   In the United States, there is a lack of trust of law enforcement officials among Blacks due to perceived beliefs by this group that Black lives, particularly males, are of less value in society and are readily dispensable (Smith & Holmes, 2003). These two factors alone contributed to the group's belief of marginalized existence in society. In addition, there also exists a long-held belief that the dominant group has a preoccupation with population control/racial order (maintaining control over the behavior of minorities) (Smith & Holmes, 2003). The direct acts of trying to maintain social and behavioral control of minorities may be a partial explanation as to why there are many incidents of brutality and deaths of Black males by police officers (Crump, Safir, Morris, & Abdual-Jabbar, 2015).

Police Perceptions

The use of police force can be deemed appropriate and justifiable if it is necessary to accomplish police duties (Smith, & Holmes, 2003). The standard rule for using a firearm is that an officer must be in the position of protecting his own life or the life of someone else (Crump, Safir, Morris, & Abdual-Jabbar, 2015). Acts of unnecessary physical force are considered to be

police officer misconduct and are categorized as acts of police brutality from the judicial

perspective (Crump et al., 2015; Smith, & Holmes, 2003).

Most often when a police officer shoots a suspect, there is a weapon visible which

validates an officer's belief that he is in imminent danger. However, when deadly physical force

has been exerted by law enforcement agents who have shot unarmed Black males, police officers

have reported feeling threatened or experiencing a sense of fear as the reason for discharging his

or her weapon (Crump et al., 2015). On the other hand, Terrill and Reisig (2003), asserted that

individuals were viewed based upon their behavior. Those who were stopped, detained, or

arrested by law officers and were combative or under the influence of alcohol or drugs were

perceived as negative and, therefore, in need of control. These individuals often faced punitive

actions from officers (Terrill & Reisig, 2003).

According to Najdowski et al. (2015), there is a vast amount of research that shows the

dangerous effects of unfavorable perceptions about Blacks. Included in these negative views

regarding Blacks are the assumptions that members of this group are violent and are inherently

criminal deviants, which accounts for the racial differences in judicial system outcomes when

comparing them to other groups in the United States (Najdowski et al., 2015). Additionally,

stereotyping Blacks as hostile and aggressive, according to psychological research, can

subconsciously affect the way people view, make judgements, and perceive information about

the group on a conscious level (Najdowski et al., 2015). This subconscious connection between

Blacks and criminality may have an impact on how and why law enforcement officials respond

and interact when facing possible criminal encounters with Blacks (Najdowski et al., 2015).

James, James, & Vila (2016), suggested that Black male suspects who were shot by police

officers were likely shot because of threat perception failure (misinterpretation of facts) and not because of their race.

Blacks Perceptions

Another possible explanation as to how and why police brutality continues to exist can be derived from looking at the Black experience in society. It is important to consider the possibility that Blacks may encounter this negative stereotype bias from police officers and react in a manner which aligns with perceived stereotypes held on a subconscious and conscious level, (Najdowski et al., 2015). As a result of feeling anxious and exhibiting self-preservation behaviors due to the perceived stereotype threat, Blacks might respond in a manner that law enforcement officials deem as deceptive, thereby increasing the chances of innocent Blacks being viewed as exhibiting guilty behavior by police officers (Najdowski, et al., 2015).

In a study conducted by Najdowski et al., (2015), 49 Blacks and 184 White Americans were surveyed regarding the degree to which they were bothered by the possibility of being perceived unjustly by law enforcement officials. Additionally, gender was evaluated to determine its relatedness to stereotype threat. The survey respondents indicated that Black men, to a larger degree, were more likely to express concerns of racial stereotyping by law enforcement officials as compared to Black women, White males, and White females (Najdowski et al., 2015). Additionally, of the participants surveyed, only Black males were concerned that police officers would view them unjustly and stereotype them as criminals (Najdowski et al., 2015).

Perceptions of Those at Low Socio-Economic Levels

Another possible explanation as to how and why police brutality continues to be an issue can be derived from looking at the Black experience in society. Terrill and Reisig (2003) suggested that, from a sociological perspective, police are more forceful toward individuals who are poor, young, and not members of the dominant group. Based on an observation study conducted (Terrill and Reisig, 2003), it was concluded that police officials were more likely to use greater levels of force when in neighborhoods of prominent economic disadvantage and where the majority of residents were minorities.   Smith and Holmes (2003) suggested that police brutality is indicative of the social structure divide among race and social class in the United States. Additionally, Terrill and Reisig (2003) suggested that when officers were in lower income neighborhoods, there was a greater level of perceived danger which could be interpreted by law enforcement as a decreased level of officer safety.

Law Enforcement Culture

From a psychological stand point, Terrill and Reisig (2003) maintained that based upon personality type, police officers' actions will be different when deciding to impose force. An officer's decision to become forceful is aligned with his or her contextual knowledge, and genetic personality characteristics (Terrill & Reisig, 2003). Furthermore, when examining the structure of law enforcement agencies and their mission, Terrill and Reisig (2003) pointed out that the culture of the organization represented the attitude and behavior of its employees. Moreover, they suggested that officers' behavior reflected administrative authority, operating policy, disciplinary action, and reward systems (Terrill & Reisig, 2003).

When the informal culture of police agencies were viewed, Terrill and Reisig (2003) asserted that officers were often more concerned with protecting each other from both internal

and external criticism than operating based on procedural and/or ethical standards. This protection, often referred to as "The Good Old Boy Network", allowed for cover up of incidents of excessive force and individualized policy interpretations (Terrill & Reisig, 2003). Smith & Holmes (2003) stated that job protection and a unified code of silence had been typical in law enforcement agencies. Smith and Holmes (2003) suggested these factors contributed to the lack of trust of police officials among Blacks.

Further, Smith and Holmes, (2003), maintained that informal policing practices allowed for excessive force as part of control tactics for dealing with citizens who were viewed as antagonists or rebellious against police officers' authority. These types of individuals were characterized as potential threats to an officer's safety. Police officers often viewed their job duties in the mindset of "Us verses the bad guys", which perpetuated the use of excessive force. Loyalty commitments among the members of the police force required that officers kept silent when fellow officers acted inappropriately (Smith & Holmes, 2003).

Police Training

During law enforcement training, police cadets encounter simulated deadly situations and training on using deadly force (Broom'e, 2011). Repeated training is designed to desensitize the cadet from psychologically resisting the use of deadly force in a real-life setting (Broom'e, 2011). This quasi-military, combat style of training is used to promote the favorable outcome of an officer in the event of a real-life deadly-force encounter (Broom'e, 2011). However, the training process cannot include the actuality of real-life consequences involved in mortally wounding a suspect, (Broom'e, 2011).

Link to Physical Ailments in African American Males

According to Tutashinda (2012), Black males have the highest mortality rate and some of the highest percentage levels of serious and ongoing disease in the United States. The constant need to watch their backs due to the fear of police, being portrayed as amoral by the media, and being poor, in addition to other social and societal disadvantages leaves them more susceptible to death, disease, and sickness (Tutashinda, 2012). Blacks between the ages of 18 through 35 are at the greatest risk of homicide, the most potent health threat among this group. Young African American males are at 15 times greater risk of being killed than White young males (Tutashinda, 2012).

Furthermore, the anxiety and stressors of daily living, such as encountering police harassment, incarceration, and neighborhood violence, all play critical roles in igniting triggers that cause disease and prolonged illness, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and cancer (Tutashinda, 2012). Thirty-six percent of all deaths among Blacks are due to some type of heart disease. While Black women have a higher incident of heart disease (47.35 %) compared to Black men (44.8 %), the death rate for men is 33.2 % higher than Black women (Tutashinda, 2012). Additionally, Tutashinda (2012) attributed increased levels of mental illness and suicide among Black men to the effects of emotional trauma experienced in society.

Possible Solutions

Police brutality and excessive force continues to affect our whole society, but most specifically, Blacks. However, this behavior can be curtailed. Correll, Park, Judd, Wittenbrink, Sadler, and Keesee (2007) suggested that proper police training that includes stopping and thinking verses suddenly reacting when in elevated circumstances of danger could decrease the use of excessive force when encountering suspects.

Moreover, research was provided that indicated that when unarmed Blacks were shot during various police encounters, officers reported feeling threatened. There is a perception of elevated feelings of danger in low economic and disenfranchised neighborhoods- even when a suspect's behavior gives no reason for concern. This indicates the increased need for community police training. Gaining the understanding of various groups' behaviors and actions can possibly decrease anxiety when encountering individuals who are different from themselves. Additionally, community police training can lead to better relationships with community members and can possibly reduce instances of threat perception errors (Correll, et al., 2007).

Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on research findings of Terrill and Reisig, (2003) law enforcement agents are part of an institutional culture and therefore abide and act accordingly to what is permissible administratively within the confines of their employment institutions. This suggests that excessive force and police brutality continues to exist because it is tolerated by officials who are in command of the officers. While the focus has long been on police officers, perhaps what is needed is a closer examination of the administrative figures that set the tone of the work environment and enforces work rules. Perhaps the reasons why police brutality continues may be linked to law enforcement officers adhering to and abiding by unspoken rules that reward or punish employees based upon his acceptance or rejection of police culture. More research is needed on the administrative structure, culture, and work rules within the work place of law enforcement officials.

The consequences of police brutality, injustices, and other inequalities experienced by minorities, specifically Blacks in the Unites States, can be viewed as bullying. Research suggests that discrimination and disenfranchisement can be linked to not only physical harm, but mental harm as well. The link between poor health among Black men and boys (Tutashinda, 2012) and living in fear of being treated unfairly must be further researched. If we can identify the causes of continued police mistreatment of Black males, we can possibly bring a stop to decades of aggression against Black males.

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