Introspection: An Expository Analysis of Police Brutality Against Unarmed Black Men

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INTRODUCTION

With this sociological analysis endeavor, I am fervently interested in the social phenomenon of police brutality against unarmed Black men and the role that *Critical Race Theory* (CRT) factors into this conundrum. CRT is defined by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund as an academic and legal framework that denotes that systemic racism is part of American society—from education and housing to employment and healthcare. CRT also recognizes that racism is more than the result of individual biases, and is also used in sociology to explain social, political, and legal structures and power distribution through a "lens" focusing on the concept of race, and experiences of racism (NAACP Legal Defense Fund 2023).

Recently, in light of the coronavirus pandemic that has taken a stronghold of the world and has claimed the lives of over 1,121,512 Americans to date according to official statistics by the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* (CDC), unarmed Black Americans continue to be beaten, shot, and/or killed by various law enforcement agencies across the country. In 2022, A total of 1,096 civilians had been fatally shot, 225 of whom were Black. Furthermore, the rate of fatal police shootings among Black Americans was significantly higher than that for any other ethnicity, standing at 37 fatal shootings per million of the population in 2022 (Statista Research Department 2023).

The videotaped events that evidenced the murder of *George Floyd* led to nationwide riots, protests, and civil unrest that would become a central focus of media attention across the world. *The Black Lives Matter Movement* emerged as a vocal and demonstrative part of the movement against police brutality in the U.S. by organizing many of these marches, protests, and rallies in response to the killings of Black men and women by police. While *Black Lives Matter* has become a polarizing mantra and subsequent movement within the U.S., often being politicized

inappropriately, it has brought considerable attention to the number and frequency of police shootings of Black civilians. Indeed, a CBS news publication identified that police have killed at least one Black man or woman every week in 2020, as of August 31, 2020.

Many prominent Black athletes, including the likes of LA Lakers star *LeBron James* and NBA legend and recent philanthropist *Michael Jordan*, have grown committed to bringing awareness to this social injustice and have been advocating for systematic changes that would save Black lives. This stance for change was on display through basketball players' camaraderie when the NBA season came to an immediate halt in 2020. Many NBA players willing to forfeit their salaries in the name of social justice in the wake of the shooting of Jacob Blake, an unarmed Black man who was shot (in front of his three children) and paralyzed on August 23, 2020, by law enforcement officers in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

CRT seeks to address the general and systemic features of the legal system that serves to perpetuate race-based oppression. This system that CRT challenges permits law enforcement to continue to brutalize and kill Black Americans with no recourse and with longstanding impunity. In this way, we see the significance of sociology in contextualizing societal issues and the undue impact of CRT, to the extent that it transcends itself in the domains of community, politics, and sports. This is the eminence of sociology, in that it provides a systematic approach to thinking about, examining, and comprehending society and its social problems, human social comportment, and social groups which athletes, politicians, and other societal leaders make up.

Being a Black man who has experienced police brutality growing up in South Los Angeles, I have pondered some important questions relative to this experience and seemingly nationwide phenomenon: *How do people feel about the particular issue of race and police brutality*? I've also been intimately curious as to why Black men specifically are targeted at such high rates for police-enacted violence. *Do people of different races, other than African Americans, view police brutality differently? Are non-Black people more accepting of police brutality knowing that it is directed at African Americans as*

opposed to their own people? Do people, in all actuality, believe that Black men deserve to be brutalized, even killed, if they resist arrest or refuse to comply with police directives in any encounters? These are some of the questions essential to this disquisition. Prior research on this topic has contextualized the social construct of race and race relations here in the United States, examined marginalized communities and their lack of trust and collaboration with law enforcement (Braga, Brunson, and Drakulich 2019), the history of this nation and subsequent colonization & enslavement of Black people, cultural and familial influences including racism and anti-Blackness and the effects of such (Alexander 2010), as well as the ways in which popular media, including music, television, radio, or social media depictions and stereotypes have attributed to the negative portrayals of African American men in ways that impact people's views on police brutality against unarmed Black men (Jeffries and Jeffries 2017).

This literature does not necessarily explain the reasons for people's attitudes towards police brutality against unarmed Black Americans, but rather addresses the overall scope of how people view the treatment of Black people in general. Arguably this dearth of understanding is contributing to tolerance of abuse and police brutality against African Americans. Simply put, public structures, policies, and laws can disproportionately place African Americans at a higher risk for "justifiable" violence (Jeffries and Jeffries, 2017). We must understand the factors contributing to the public's opinion in order to save Black lives.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Another conception to be taken into consideration in relation to police brutality against unarmed Black men is the historical context of the perception and treatment of Black Americans since the inception of this country. Race theorists contend this is the belief that history has had an influence in the present trend of Black men being killed, and legally justified, by law enforcement. It's rooted in our country's history and systemic anti-Black structures. The treatment of African Americans, and specifically Black men in the United States, as foundational to what we see today in terms of classism, racism, mass

incarceration, systemic oppression, and the common use of deadly police brutality. Historically, African American men have been demonized in this country, and as such, the White establishment has created a practice of unlawful and heinous behavior that has been accepted by society under the shield of law and order (Alexander 2020).

Authors Anthony A. Braga, Rod K. Brunson, and Kevin M. Drakulich (2019:539), speaks to this truth in their article when they state,

> policing, however, strike[s] an especially raucous chord with people of color, who possibly view contemporary policing strategies through historical lenses. For example, historians have uncovered that, in addition to functioning as slave patrols, surveilling and limiting blacks' physical movement, early law enforcement officers were instrumental in a wide range of illegal activities: mob action, torture, and countless killings of freed blacks.

Furthermore, the authors also postulate that

> Southern blacks' experiences with lynching are well-documented in American history...The police—as well as the criminal justice system more broadly—have long participated in efforts to suppress and exploit Black Americans, including enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and the convict leasing program, as well as enforcing the so-called tough on crime laws. (Braga, Brunson, & Drakulich 2019:539)

Additionally, scholars Devair and Rhonda Jeffries (2017) address the issue of police brutality in their analysis using *"Marxist Materialism and Critical Race Theory"* frameworks to call codified culture into questioning the establishment of style as an act of assigning or opposing with regard to the proliferation of the dubious and reprehensible treatment of Black males by law enforcement. Jeffries and Jeffries states that,

> Materialists point out that conquering nations universally demonize their subjects to feel better

> about exploiting them...For materialists, understanding the ebb and flow of racial progress and retrenchment requires a critical look at conditions prevailing at different times in history. Circumstances change so that one group finds it possible to seize advantage or exploit another. (Jeffries and Jeffries 2017:3)

They also go on to propagate that racial categorization has and continues to permeate American culture, and Black men are the targeted subjects. It is indeed factual that the United States has steadily harbored discrimination against people of color throughout its history. This is currently demonstrated through instances of injustice, especially with the disproportionate number of police brutality cases against Black males in recent years.

Social scientist Marcelo Diversi (2016) also provides his perspective on this in relation to the historical connotations of the treatment of Black Americans in his research and critique of police brutality against unarmed Black men.

> We are living more than 400 years since the first slave ship landed on our Atlantic shores, more than 238 years since the Declaration of Independence proclaimed us free from the tyranny of a faraway King, more than 151 years since the Emancipation Proclamation, more than 149 years since the end of the American Civil War and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment (and that we had to pass two more amendments to spell out Black people's rights to citizenship and voting after that), more than 50 years since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Yet, brutality against people of African ancestry continues to be justified by the American establishment. (Diversi 2016:247)

Diversi also goes on to assert that, "This is the logic of a hatred that is older than the birth of this country, a hatred that continues to make Black people fair game for police harassment, abuse of power, and perverse brutality. This is the logic of politically correct lynching" (Diversi 2016:248). In this case, *lynchings* are

what we see today in terms of Black men being brutally killed by law enforcement with no consequence.

POLICE-MINORITY COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

Previous studies highlight the relation of police brutality with the existence of strained relationships between law enforcement and the Black communities in which they serve. According to an article written by Anthony A. Braga, Rod K. Brunson, and Kevin M. Drakulich (2019), in many destitute communities of color, deficient relationships between law enforcement and residents undermine effective policing. This, in turn, leads to inequitable practices and contemporary proactive policing strategies that are hostile and associated with racial disparities. This exemplification demonstrated the effect of ineffectual police-minority community relationships and the ways police-community members' interactions may differ in Black communities in contrast to non-Black communities. There is also official data to validate claims such as, "African Americans experience substantially more contact with police than do whites. African Americans are significantly more likely to be stopped, searched, frisked, and arrested by police than similarly situated whites" (Braga, et al. 2019:539).

One can surmise that there are indeed poor relations with the community and law enforcement, in which Black men have become targets of harassment and encounters with law enforcement without committing a crime. This was evident recently with *Derrick Cooper*, a resident and founder of the L.A. City Wildcats Youth Academy in Compton, who was wrongfully detained and humiliated in his home by LA County Sheriff's deputies after responding to an alleged attempted burglary call (DuBose, Fenoglio, and Wynter 2023) With poor community relations, there will also exist an erosion of trust and general disdain for police officers, thus, resulting in a higher propensity for overly aggressive police tactics being exerted by officers in everyday encounters with Black residents. We find a variety of situations like this exemplified in everyday media in which use of deadly force is quickly utilized in confrontations with regular civilians, as opposed to a more rational, humanistic approach. In specifically marginalized communities where there exist poor or

non-existent relationships between law enforcement and the community in which they are obliged to serve, we can expect high numbers of police brutality against Black Americans, as prior studies have suggested (Braga et al. 2019).

Additionally, authors Keon L. Gilbert, Rashawn Ray, W. Carson Byrd, Joseph Richardson, and Odis Johnson, Jr. (2019) affirm these notions when they assert in their article that,

> The world has received a front row seat to view the erosion of community trust in some police officers and their departments. This view has been provided by social media outlets and body cameras worn by police officers raising many questions about safety, police excessive use of force, crime in the US, and whose life matters more, blue, black, or all? (Gilbert, Ray, Byrd, and Johnson 2019:172)

Based on this knowledge, what seems plausible is that if law enforcement is stationed in cities where they are not liked or where they have no equity or community accord, they will have encounters with residents. We can expect hostile and confrontational behavior by the police which often leads to these community residents being brutalized or even killed. An exemplification of this is how the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) operates and patrols in areas of South and East Los Angeles. They utilize overly aggressive tactics in routine encounters with residents, including traffic stops and house raids in which, under then police chief Daryl F. Gates, utilized armored trucks with battering rams to enter the homes of alleged minority offenders (Lindsay and Martin 2017).

This is compared to law enforcement agencies in a city like Manhattan Beach, California that has an overwhelmingly White population and have no such practice within their city's department. Indeed, CRT posits that,

> Critical race theory not only dares to treat race as central to the law and policy of the United States, it dares to look beyond the popular belief that getting rid of racism means simply getting rid of ignorance, or encouraging everyone to get

along...racism is part of the structure of legal institutions. (Delgado and Stefancic 2012:28).

MEDIA INFLUENCE

The role of popular media through television, radio, social media platforms, and other outlets was most influential in my findings and provided the most relevant context to date in terms of people's attitudes toward police brutality against Black men. Understanding the power of both media and cultural influences provided a more in-depth reasoning as to why people may arrive at some of their sentiments. Scholars *Devair and Rhonda Jeffries* divulges in their article the significance of this, stating that, "the basis on which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose economic hold over society is greatest" (Jeffries and Jeffries 2017:4) In this way, people are presented ideals about influence and power on a regular basis through a number of forms. These types of technologies, including radio, television, and film, have seemingly diverse purposes. Media and its various platforms have the ability to influence people, for better or for worse.

This has always been the case for Black Americans. Jeffries and Jeffries (2017:5) states that,

> Society constructs the social world through a series of tacit agreements mediated by images, pictures, tales, blog postings, and other scripts. Much of what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel but is not perceived to be so at the time. Attacking embedded preconceptions that marginalize others or conceal their humanity is a legitimate function of all fiction."

With this being the case, media technologies heavily influence the subjects that people should be concerned about, the ways in which they should be concerned about them and validate the everyday existence and continuation of the seemingly crazed status quo of the demonization of Black Americans. These scholars urge people to challenge the images and representations they are fed on a regular basis in which Black people are viewed negatively through various means and to not merely just accept them.

In consilience with the media influences of hip-hop, the point can be made that indeed hip-hop manifests itself in various media forms that contribute to the very stereotypes and negative attitudes creating the ideal atmosphere for police brutality, commencing with the "blaxploitation" movies of the 1970s, which employed the aggressive *Black Buck* stereotype -A figure regarded as "a brutal, animalistic, hypermasculine and threatening African American man" (Jeffries and Jeffries 2017:9). Note the keyword mentioned being *threatening* in the description of this *prototypical* Black man. This characterization brings the media's influence that the authors speak of; stereotypes as such that were fashioned in the early nineteenth century as a means to dissuade and overtly prevent miscegenation and were also used as a mechanism to make the Black man in this country a feared individual.

With this presumption of fear, one could be justifiably lynched by the White man well into the twentieth century if he transgressed any laws or appeared to pose any threat, real or perceived. This is a practice that continues and permeates our society today and confirms, in part, why police brutality against Black Americans persists. Without question, the media also plays its role in maintaining this propriety. There are not many days that will pass without local news or talk radio shows reporting of at least one Black male who has allegedly robbed, raped, or otherwise threatened the presumed purity of American society (Unnever 2014). Though, it should be acknowledged that we do now have heterogeneous examples of positive portrayals of African Americans in various media platforms, such as in the syndicated broadcasts of *The Cosby Show, A Different World, Family Matters, and The Parent 'Hood,* to name a few.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

For this analysis, I interrogated the question of intuition and included, *What factors contribute to negative attitudes towards police brutality against unarmed Black men?* The purpose of this thought has been to ascertain a general understanding of how many people feel when they hear of the many exemplifications of unarmed Black men being brutalized or executed by law enforcement officers across the country by use of state-sanctioned violence. I am also interested in the ways in

which race and how the application of CRT may further expound on this. If those aware of these senseless murders of Black men are not Black, how will this impact their attitudes on this delicate topic? Previous analysis and research on this topic focused on the underlying reasons for police brutality itself, and the way in which we have become desensitized to these occurrences. Police brutality has been justified many times over time, despite repeated evidence showing it unjustifiable.

In instances in which media depictions of African Americans are negative, degrading, and portray Black men in a violent, threatening manner, people generally will be more prone to accept the practice of police brutality, especially if the narrative has been manipulated by popular media and the message has been conveyed that the victim or perpetrator exhibited threatening behavior. Imagine one contemplating, "maybe he deserved it." Or "The news said that he was a convicted felon…so he had it coming." This was the case with police brutality victims *Rodney King* (Linder 2015) and most recently with Jacob Blake (O'Donnell 2020) in which their prior criminal convictions were used by various media outlets to demonize them, thus, giving a sense of consent for the enormities that they would suffer. Prior research and scholarship contend that, indeed, there exists a relationship between people's attitude towards police brutality against unarmed Black men and a multiplicity of factors including racism, and media influences.

With my thorough examination of police brutality against unarmed Black men, while also applying the CRT to this discourse of reviewed articles, literature, and information that was probed, it was fair to deduce that this inquiry has more complexity than one would originally contemplate. There is no straightforward or 'one size fits all' methodology to this issue. The historical, cultural, and social experiences of Black Americans in this nation are all of relevance when contextualizing this scholarship with its subsequent findings. In consonance with this, people's sentiments on this polarizing topic have variances, and as highlighted in earlier sections of this analysis, these variances can be wide-ranging and racially motivated. In this research, we first have the issue of police brutality in itself; and then come to an understanding of why people may feel about it in ways that

reinforce the status quo. Some individuals may or may not know someone that has been the victim of police brutality, may have friends or family members that are in law enforcement or could be the victim of police brutality themselves, which is the case with me. Then we couple that with the current trend of victimization of unarmed Black men, which introduces the role of race into this study. It is reasonable to assume that indeed White people, Black people, and other people of color view police brutality from different perspectives.

Previous research on this topic speaks to how and why police brutality occurs, specifically to African American males. There are even explanations presented as to why American society has grown to accept this. Most, if not all, of the available research on this topic alluded to the ills of racism, media influences, and the historical implications of what is taking place today. Since the formation of the race concept, African Americans have been and continue to be the victims of violence, in which this has evolved over time to what we witness presently with police brutality, in addition to the tragic and senseless killings of unarmed Black men. Not only does the prior research highlight the actuality of this, but it further brings due awareness to the countless number of Black men that have been executed by law enforcement across the nation. In this way, we can discern for ourselves the proper application of CRT to this phenomenon and the horrors of police brutality, in addition to the dangers presented by simply being a Black man in America. The killings that we see daily in news reports or read about in the daily newspaper of unarmed Black men by law enforcement are no different than the lynchings of years past; and the justifications of these murders with officers constantly being absolved of accountability continue to validate the claim that some lives mean less than others.

It is through research like this that I hope to continue to bring awareness to this injustice and also challenge society to look at their own implicit biases in how their own personal attitudes may be impacted in relation to police brutality against unarmed Black men. Future research would continue to bring awareness to the issue of police brutality against unarmed Black men and would be potentially the most relevant, amongst many other developing social issues, contribution to the field of sociology. Additionally,

further research could be modified to include other sociological theories and develop ways to measure people's attitudes according to age groups, political parties, geographical locations, and so on.

Other individuals interested in expanding this research could perform field studies that examine people's attitudes towards brutality by modifying the category of victims to being unarmed immigrants, homeless veterans, women, Latinx men, or gang members as examples. Furthermore, this information gathered through data collection and statistical analysis could be used to bring awareness to various diverse communities in Los Angeles in hopes of providing informed education and creating dialogue about ways in which we can build better working relationships and support our collective calls for social justice and racial equality. In this way, we can demystify the "divide and conquer" mentality that has permeated many of the formidable communities here in Los Angeles and alternatively stand in solidarity.

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