

Perceptions of Police Brutality and Media Exposure: a Research Proposal

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In recent years, a growing discussion about police brutality and the ensuing debates about racial prejudice in law enforcement has become prominent across many media. Along with the topic's regular coverage in mainstream media, the rise of social media has challenged dominant narratives about race and law enforcement in the United States, and has allowed a diverse set of voices to participate in public debate about these issues. This increasing democratization of media has made police brutality incidents more widely publicized, and has established a complex set of discourses between individuals, communities, law enforcement, and the mainstream media.

While the issue has been sporadically discussed in the mainstream and long relegated to political and identity-oriented niche media, several major incidents of alleged police brutality have become galvanizing social topics with widespread coverage. In recent years, several high-profile cases have received consistent media attention and resulting public conversation. The death of Oscar Grant at the hands of Bay Area Rapid Transit Police in Oakland in 2009, various police altercations during Occupy protests in 2011 and 2012, and most recently the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, have all sparked wide discussion about police brutality in the United States, both domestically and abroad. (McCoy 2014)

In the United States, increased visibility of police brutality has led to larger efforts at documenting and sharing police misconduct. With image and video capturing capabilities an increasingly common feature on cell phones, images of police brutality are being shared on social and news media with a greater frequency than ever before. Large-scale encounters between police forces and protesters have generated significant coverage and scrutiny on social media, such as police response to Occupy Wall Street and ongoing protests in Ferguson, Missouri. (O'Malley 2014)

Twitter in particular has become an important mode of discourse about police brutality, and has shown social media's ability to create counter-narratives to mainstream messages about race and law enforcement. The response to NYPD's recent #MyNYPD social media campaign showed the power of anti-police brutality advocates propagating the issue in seemingly unsympathetic spaces. While the goal of the campaign, created by NYPD's Twitter account, was for users to share positive photos and experiences regarding the NYPD with the tag, the overwhelming response featured images and accounts of police brutality. (Cheadle 2014) In the United States and abroad, the site has received attention for its use by activists and protesters to organize and spread awareness of their goals, both against regimes and police actions. (Ulgen 2013)

On Twitter, reaction to Michael Brown's death has provoked a major discussion about portrayals of African Americans in the media. In particular, the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown has become an especially popular method of exploring media bias in the context of police brutality. Users of the hashtag share two photos, one in professional attire, and one in a seemingly "thuggish" pose or outfit, and rhetorically ask which photo would be used if they were the victim of police brutality. This hashtag is a component of the network of users, topics, and conversations about the African-American experience on the site that has been colloquially called "Black Twitter." (Lemon 2013)

A multi-stream discussion between mainstream media, social media, and communities has set off a cloud of multimedia discussion and criticism about the topic the breadth and depth of which is arguably unique in the history of American media and law enforcement. The diversity, accessibility, and democratic nature of media today has made police brutality a national discussion and has had a major role in shaping Americans' perceptions of race and law enforcement. This paper will explore scholars' frameworks for this discussion, and propose a triangulated survey to measure how media exposure affects individuals' perceptions of law enforcement when variables such as race and criminal history are accounted for.

Literature Review

There is a growing body of literature regarding the sources of police mistrust in the United States, alternately emphasizing the nature of social factors such as race and community standards in perceiving law enforcement, and the shifting capacity of mass media to portray law enforcement and its perceived flaws in an objective or subjective manner.

Without consideration of media exposure, race continues to be a major factor in determining American's perceptions of law enforcement. Tuch and Weitzer (2004) engage this racial component with the *Group-Position Thesis*, a variant of conflict theory that views attitudes of different groups as an expression of inter-group competition for status in a diverse society, and the ability of mass and social media to convey messages of social privilege and police protocol is critical to this application.

Within this theoretical framework, Tuch et al. use three practical explanations for racial minorities' police mistrust on individual, communal, and commercial levels. On the individual level, individuals with more negative interactions with police officers are more likely to engender personal feelings of mistrust towards law enforcement. On the communal level, community norms are developed and enforced by communication within a given community, whether a neighborhood with shared social status or a larger ethnic or cultural group with shared identity and cultural norms. Social media has proven as especially important tool in articulating and sharing these community responses, such as the previously described phenomena of "Black Twitter." (Lemon) Finally, these two levels also interact with the commercial mass media's portrayals of law enforcement, police brutality, and mainstream society's prevailing social norms.

Tuch et al (2004) tested these theories with a quantitative survey distributed to 1,792 white, Hispanic, and black individuals living in American metropolitan areas in late 2002. Along with basic demographic questions including race, neighborhood environment, and previous interactions with law enforcement, the surveys asked respondents about the perceived prevalence of excessive police force, frivolous police searching, abusive language from law enforcement, and police corruption. In an analysis of the results, it was found that blacks were far more likely than either whites or Hispanics to report a high incidence of perceived police misconduct including corruption and were also more likely to have personal negative experiences with law enforcement in the past.

Hasisi (2008) creates a theoretical perspective that again focuses on community values of a given subculture. In this perspective, the organizational culture of law enforcement interacts

with the diverse sub-cultural values of minority groups to create misunderstanding and mistrust. Furthermore, underrepresentation of minority groups in law enforcement may push police culture further towards the culture of the privileged majority, further increasing the social gap between police and minorities. (1124) This gap in perception is especially salient in “deeply divided societies,” that is, those in which a minority group experiences significant and regular socio-political conflict with a ruling majority group. In response to this mistrust or as an extension of unique community values, these minority communities often turn towards self-policing as a remedy to this mistrust. (1127)

Lopez et al’s (2004) study of police violence in the US in the 1990’s does indeed show that racial divisions play a significant role in the prevalence of police mistrust, stemming from the realities of police brutality in areas with high black and Hispanic populations. In contrast to Hasisi’s method of describing minority perceptions of law enforcement in cultural divided regions, Lopez describes the perceptions of ethnic minorities by law enforcement. In particular, “young African American and Latino males are as seen by police officers as potential criminals,” leading to broad and subtle patterns of harassment and abuse, particularly in more racially-divided regions like the American South and border regions with high immigration from Latin America. (380)

Solomon and Solomon (2004) describe the role of the mainstream news media in the aftermath of the 1992 Rodney King beating and riots as self-limiting in their use of activist sources critical to law enforcement, and ultimately bending towards a broad pro-establishment consensus. (32) While coverage from local and national newspapers featured an apparent spectrum of ideological responses to the incident, the ensuing trial and acquittal of the involved officers, the resulting civil unrest, and the leadership of police chief Daryl Gates, the selection of sources was comparatively narrow, and coverage increasingly de-emphasized the social and racial implications of police brutality towards the end of the affair. (28) According to Solomon, the news media created a veneer of diversity regarding responses to the King affair while ultimately “articulat[ing] the parameters of acceptable thought” regarding the role of race in the affair, and subsequently shifting a more conservative outlooks defined by courtroom proceedings rather than social realities. (26) In racially-charged police brutality cases such as the King affair and subsequent stories to 2004, Solomon et al argue that mass media “inscribe[s] inferential racism within the ideology of empire,” reinforcing a dominant ideology (to Solomon, white supremacy and capitalist corporate hegemony) while presenting a seemingly balanced viewpoint. (34) With this model of a mass news media devoted to preservation of a political or cultural status quo, the rise of social media is a potentially significant factor.

In a study of general police misconduct in the 1990’s- a category that includes corruption and internal abuses of power- Lopez et al. (2004) state that mass news media were not reliable as a source to report on police misconduct. News media tended to be biased towards reporting on police misconduct in larger cities, while treating issues in rural areas with relative neglect. Furthermore, a significant regional divide was found on reaction to and coverage of police brutality in the late 20th century. In the Southeast, police brutality was found to be more common yet less reported, with reactions to and coverage of southern police conduct strongest in the Northeast. (378) More generally, police brutality complaints during the era of study were

especially concentrated in impoverished rural regions with little access to news media coverage, with the notable exception of Rhode Island. (383)

Lopez notes that media coverage of police brutality has been misleading: “While the media has emphasized the problem in the nation’s most populous states, [police brutality] is alarming in states with significant minority and poor communities, Rhode Island, and the South.”(389) Similarly, Skolnick et al (2004) suggest that populations with minimal local news coverage- a category that includes outer suburbs as well as rural areas- have perceptions of crime and police response that is warped by the primacy of urban centers in news coverage. (539) This geographic discrepancy between portrayals of police brutality and it’s reality has significant implications for scholarship on the relationship between media consumption and perceptions of law enforcement.

Writing in 2004, Michael Huspek states that members of the general public “draw their perceptions of police-aside from direct citizen-police contact-from the mass media.” (529) This observation should not be surprising, given American citizens’ wide exposure to media messages and interaction with law enforcement, but is greatly complicated by the increasing intermingling of personal experience with media transmission that social media services have created. When consumer media is increasingly injected with participation from a diverse group of non-professional citizens, perceptions of police brutality are inevitably complicated.

While mainstream news media may be a significant factor in shaping Americans’ perceptions of police brutality, perceptions of media bias are widely held. Writing in 2003, Eveland and Shah found that perceptions of ideological bias in the news media are widespread across the political spectrum, and typically viewed as being against an individual’s personal beliefs. (101) While minimal evidence suggests that mainstream news media is biased in any direction, the “hostile-media phenomenon” has been repeatedly shown to exist across political lines, and is influenced by personal interaction and community norms, and typically strengthened by a high degree of personal partisanship (112). Writing in 2010, Feldman maintains these findings, describing the process of “selective categorization” that allows partisans to maintain their perception of bias in news media by selectively scrutinizing niche messages. (410) Substituting perceptions of police brutality for political orientation, this hostile-media phenomenon can be applied to this study. Individuals who have a negative view of police protocol in light of police brutality are more likely to view news coverage of the topic as overly sympathetic to law enforcement while failing to cover the supposedly true extent of the issue, and those who have a positive view of police protocol are more likely to view coverage as overly critical of police protocol and over-covering the supposedly small extent of the issue.

Statement of Hypotheses

The hypotheses presented in this study will explore the link between police mistrust and social position, particularly in terms of ethnicity, social class, and prior interactions with law enforcement. From this study of relevant literature, three overlapping spheres influence the regular citizen’s perceptions of police brutality: personal interactions with law enforcement, the norms of the surrounding community, and media portrayals of the issue.

H1: Those who do not follow news stories through mainstream media will have perceptions of police brutality that will be predicted by demographic and personal factors. The literature reviewed described both mass media and community and personal experiences as creators of their own largely separate narratives and perceptions of police brutality. Huspeck describes both spheres as the main influences of individual perceptions of the issue, while Hasisi engages the social and community norms that affect non-media images of police brutality, and scholarship from Lopez, Solomon, and Tuch emphasize the potential cleavage of mass media portrayals of police brutality from the social realities that are experienced on an individual and community level. These conclusions suggest that community and social factors such as race, prior interactions with law enforcement, and demographic balances in a community influence perceptions of police brutality in a way that is removed from the more homogenous portrayals of the issue in national news media.

H2: Respondents who rely on social media to explore news stories are more likely to find mass media portrayals of police brutality to be biased. Social media has allowed non-journalists to create complex counter-narratives to the issue of police brutality, creating a more diverse analysis of the issue than the limited perspective given in mainstream news media. Social media allows ethnic and cultural communities to create social and political narratives with more ease and exposure than before. It should follow that heavy social media users are more attuned to their community's standards regarding police brutality, and will view the gap between those standards and the norms portrayed in mass media as an indication of the latter's bias.

Methodology

The sample group for this study will consist of voluntary participants from the greater Pittsburgh area. This proposed study will consist of two phases, and both will be administered online over a one-month period. For the quantitative phase, a questionnaire will be published online for respondents to take anonymously. The qualitative phase will consist of online interviews in the form of an anonymous two-member chatroom that includes the participant and the administrator. Participants in the qualitative study would first have to complete the questionnaire to guarantee consistency, and a group of five administrators would be available to administer the interview during a set period throughout the day throughout the duration of the study, so that five interviews can take place at any given time. The general availability of chatroom slots for the interview would be posted on the main page of the web site, and the specific availability of an administrator will be shown to a participant after he or she completes the questionnaire. If none are available, that participant will be put in a queue to chat with the next available administrator.

A website would be set up to contain both sections of the survey, and participants will be entered to win a \$50 gift card from a selection of local restaurant and retail chains. Participants will give an email address and or phone number to ensure uniqueness and provide a method of contact if they win a gift card. Those who just fill out the questionnaire will be entered once, and those who fill out both sections will be entered three times, to compensate for the longer amount of time put into the study. Participants will remain anonymous, but will be prohibited from

participating in each section more than once from email address or phone number. To recruit participants, the study would be advertised in Pittsburgh busses. By incentivizing the study and advertising on public transportation, the study has the potential to recruit a significant and relatively diverse group of participants. While the study will be advertised in the Pittsburgh area for the sake of simplicity, it will not be limited to Pittsburgh residents, and participants will be encouraged to share the study with peers.

Both the qualitative and quantitative sections of the study aim to gauge three basic factors: how participants interact with news media and social media, what demographics they represent, how they have interacted with law enforcement personally, and what their opinions of police brutality are. The questionnaire follows the typical general-to-specific flow of questioning, with prompts about perceptions of law enforcement as the final section for both surveys. The predicted non-media determinants of law enforcement perception are race and prior interactions with police, represented in the questionnaire by questions 2, 11, 12, and 13, while the independent variables are usage of social media, mass media, and degree to which these influence personal opinion, and these are represented by questions 4 through 10.

The qualitative interview section adds to the questionnaire's raw data by asking participants more in-depth questions about identity, community values, and perceptions of media representation, topics engaged by Tuch and Weitzer, Hasisi, Lopez, and Feldman. Anecdotes from the interviews section will be recorded, categorized, and tagged on the basis of content and results. Once the month-long study period is completed, these results will be compiled into a general report, and compared with the findings of the quantitative study.

This proposed study has several strengths and drawbacks. The presence of both a qualitative and quantitative component allows for the resulting data to be compared and triangulated. By using a web-based interface, the study has the capacity to reach a much wider sample group than paper and in-person research. Advertising on public buses is a common tactic for research studies due to the wide exposure and relative diversity of the audience for a fixed price, and drawing participants for gift cards incentivizes participation.

While publishing the study on the web allows broader participation, it does exclude individuals without internet access or those who have neither an email nor a phone number. It is foreseeable that some participants could participate multiple times if they were to provide a different phone number or email for their subsequent surveys and interviews. Finally, the use of an online chatroom to facilitate interviews may allow administrators to interview more participants, but also requires a significant time commitment for the administrators.

The total budget of the study should include at least ten gift cards, a bus advertisement, and sufficient manpower to administer interviews, totaling \$500 for the gift cards, \$2000 for the advertisements, and five administrators willing to work at least ten hours each week to conduct interviews for one month.

Quantitative Section: Questionnaire

This questionnaire will be presented to participants as a single-page form with a clickable button next to each selection. Participants will be given one hour to complete the survey.

1. What is your age?

1. 18 or under
2. 19-25
3. 26-39
4. 40-55
5. 56 or older

2. What is your ethnicity? Select all that apply.

- a. White/ Caucasian
- b. Black/ African American
- c. Hispanic (any race)
- d. Native American or Pacific Islander
- e. East Asian
- f. South Asian/ Middle Eastern
- g. Other/ choose not to say

3. What is your household income? (If claimed as dependent, list income of providing household)

- a. under \$10,000
- b. \$10,000-\$20,000
- c. \$20,001- \$40,000
- d. \$40,001- \$80,000
- e. above \$80,000
- f. I choose not to say

4. What news sources do you use regularly? Select all that apply.

- a. Print newspapers
- b. Cable television news (CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, etc)
- c. Local television news
- d. Online news sources including blogs and forums (Reddit, Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, etc)
- e. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc)

- f. Niche news sources (any type of news source that is published for a small, specific audience, such as the Pittsburgh Courier, NewPeople, etc)
- g. I do not use any news sources regularly

5. I pay close attention to news and current events.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

6. I believe that mainstream news sources are usually balanced in their reporting.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

7. I am a heavy user of social media.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

8. I often read and share articles and posts on social media that are related to news and current events.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

9. If you use social media, what do you most often use it for? Select all that apply.

- a. Socializing with friends
- b. Finding and sharing links (articles, videos, music, images, etc)
- c. Finding and sharing news stories
- d. Sharing my opinions

- e. I don't use social media

10. How do you typically form your opinions? Select all that apply.

- a. Following the news
- b. Doing my own research
- c. My personal experiences
- d. The experiences and beliefs of my peers
- e. Gut reactions
- f. I don't know

11. Have you ever been arrested in the United States?

- a. No
- b. Yes, once
- c. Yes, a small number of times
- d. Yes, a significant number of times

12. Have you or a peer ever had an interaction with law enforcement that you would describe as confrontational?

- a. No
- b. Yes, once
- c. Yes, multiple times
- d. I don't know

13. Has a police officer ever used physical violence or harassment against you or a peer?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. I don't know

14. I believe that police brutality is a major problem in the United States.

- e. Strongly Disagree
- f. Disagree
- g. Neither Agree nor Disagree
- h. Agree
- i. Strongly Agree

15. I believe that police officers are typically biased towards particular groups.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree

- c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

16. I believe that police officers usually act fairly and justly.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

17. I feel comfortable in the presence of police officers.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

18. I believe that the mainstream media reports on police brutality in a fair and unbiased way.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

19. I believe that police brutality is sometimes unavoidable or called for.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

20. I believe that police brutality is underreported in the mainstream media.

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree

- c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

Qualitative Section: Online Interview

This series of prompts will be given to administrators to ask participants who choose to complete the interview section of the survey. Administrators will begin the interview by greeting and thanking the participant, reminding them of their anonymity, and explaining the general procedure of the interview. In addition to asking the following questions and recording responses, administrators will be trained to politely invite participants to elaborate on their responses if they seem particularly valuable to the hypotheses. If an administrator considers a response to one prompt to include a satisfactory answer to another prompt, the administrator may choose to not provide that prompt.

1. Introduction and explanation of procedure
2. What are your general thoughts on police brutality? Is it present in the United States, and if so, what are its characteristics?
3. What do you base these opinions on?
4. Do you consider yourself to belong to any particular communities, whether a neighborhood, cultural identity, or other group? If so, how important are these communities to you?
5. What are your general opinions of mainstream news media? Do you pay attention to them? Do they have any major strengths or weaknesses?
6. Do you believe that your community or communities like it are typically portrayed accurately in news media, if portrayed at all? Why or why not?
7. If you use social media, what are your favorite sites? What do you like to do on these sites? Do they allow you to do anything that you couldn't otherwise?

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