Police Brutality and the Media: Impact on African American and biracial high school students

and their perceptions of the U.S. police force

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Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

Police brutality is defined as the police force using unnecessary or excessive force on civilians. For my research purposes, "Excessive use of force" is defined as a force well beyond what would be necessary in order to handle a situation (Danilina, 2013). Over the years, police brutality has rapidly increased throughout the United States. According to the F.B.I, the account of justifiable homicides by police officers in 2009 have ranged from 397 to 426 deaths annually before jumping to 461 in 2013, the latest reporting year (Cohen & Wines, 2015). It has become more prominent when observing relationships between African-Americans and police officers. Incidents such as the Michael Brown case, in which the 18 year old was fatally shot and killed in the hands of a white Ferguson police officer, have made headlines in the media. The media has become a popular source for people around the world to experience firsthand what goes on. In some cases, it can cover more of one side compared to the opposing side. The media might may not portray the events accurately. People tend to form their opinion on a matter based on what they see from the media instead of researching it themselves, or they might feel a certain way based on what the media has covered. This brings up a very important question: in what ways has media's coverage on police brutality affected African American perceptions of the U.S. police force? From the research I have read and reviewed, I have created a gap that focused on African American and biracial (African American and other race) high school students' perceptions.

Cases and the Media

Bonilla and Rosa's (2015) article discussed the 2014 police brutality incident that happened in Ferguson, Missouri. The entire African-American community within Ferguson came together and united in protest of the fatal shooting of 18 year old Michael Brown. Thousands of people attended this event. Brown was an African American teenager who was found unarmed. This incident was the highlight of the news for a consecutive amount of time. The media covered news on the shooting and the protests significantly. Many people across the country voiced their opinions on social media networks such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. In order to show how the media's coverage on police brutality impacts society, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) researched Twitter posts. It appeared that 3.6 million posts were made on Twitter. These posts documented the details of Michael Brown's death. This was only during the first week of protests. By the end of the month, the hashtag "Ferguson" appeared on Twitter more than eight million times. That alone shows how the media has a major impact within our society. According to Bonilla and Rosa (2015), the media has proven to be a power source for documenting incidents in police brutality and false racial stereotypes in mainstream media. In a negative standpoint, the media has become the main source of information that citizens base their opinions off of. This can be seen as destructive because the information presented on the media is often biased.

Gibbs & Bankhead-Greene (1997) conducted a combined qualitative and quantitative research methods to investigate the impact of the verdict and civil disturbances in the Rodney King police brutality case upon Black youth, ages 15-30, in South Central Los Angeles. The 1993-1994 study, focused on the attitudes and experiences of these youth in four institutional

systems: education, employment, criminal justice and health care. This study helped understand the ruling of Rodney King.

Police Officers

After reviewing Renauer and Covelli's (2011) article on police bias, I found that they focused on three perspectives when researching how the United States police force makes certain stops according to race: 1) they wanted to understand various public opinions of using race unfairly. In their study, 2) it showed that recently, police were victimizing civilians involuntarily and showing negative treatment. 3) They also found that the strongest police bias opinion came from African American respondents. Most of the recent police brutality cases that the media covers are of African Americans. There is also a similar pattern of punishment. Many of the victims were shot in the back or when handcuffed or otherwise disabled (Martinot, 2013). However, based on this research, the gap that I am attempting to fill is the relationship between media representation and how it influences the perception of police officers of African American high school students. Therefore, I surveyed African American and biracial high school students since recent police brutality incidents consisted of teenagers. In addition, since we're in the 21st century, it is quicker and easier to receive media coverage via phone or computer.

Birzer wanted to figure out what makes a good police officer. His results of the study is based on using a phenomenological method. The study investigated two questions: what are African-Americans' perceptions of the police following contact with a police officer, and what are the qualities that African-Americans think are important for police officers to possess. Data was gathered through structured interviews over a three-month period with 32 African-American participants. The findings suggested that African-Americans viewed a positive contact with the police when the officer utilized cultural sensitivity, empathy, and fairness. The qualities deemed

important by African-Americans for a police officer to possess were similar with human relations qualities (Birzer, 2008). This study was essential in order to discover what African Americans think of the police.

Black Lives Matter

Black Lives Matter is a movement that originated in the African-American community. The activist movements' goal is to campaign against violence toward African American citizens. The movement began when the Trayvon Martin incident occurred back in 2012. Martin was killed by George Zimmerman when attempted to purchase candy and tea. Since then, Black Lives Matter has become one of the biggest movements since the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. According to Rickford (2016), movement participants have refused to engage in victim blaming. They have been accused of excusing "black-on-black crime" while fighting against "white-on-black crime". Some deemed the movement as being racist towards white citizens, increasing these horrific crimes instead of condemning them. These perspectives argue that black pathology—not white supremacy—is primarily responsible for the systematic assault on black people (Rickford, 2016). The Black Lives Matter movement had caused a stir in racial equality.

Teen Empowerment

The Center for Teen Empowerment (TE) is a Boston-based nonprofit organization that trains and supports youth, and adults who work with youth, to develop more healthier and productive communities, schools, and institutions (Fusoni, 2005). The youth and staff members have worked over a four-year period in one Boston neighborhood in order to build a partnership between youth and police and between youth and adult community members. This article shows the importance of having a relationship with the youth and police.

Racial Profiling

According to The Leadership Conference (Walker, 2011), Racial profiling" refers to the targeting of particular individuals by law enforcement authorities based not on their behavior, but rather their personal characteristics. An article by Thompson (2015) refers to the protests in New York regarding frustration about rising racial profiling in the United States. It discusses Michael Brown's brutal murder in Ferguson, Missouri. Based on the research, there is a correlation between racial profiling and the increase of murder from police.

Perspectives

With regard to the perspectives of Elicker (2008), conducted researched on the changes in viewpoints were based on race and occupation. From conducting an opinion study, she was able to find out if there was unlawful justice of police use of force. Elicker organized her research by conducting a relationship between three points towards police officers. The three points are race, criminal justice occupations, and attitudes. In order to find the relationship, Elicker used data from the General Social Survey (GSS) for years 1994 through 2004 (Elicker, 2008). Based on her results, she found that police use of force was more accepted from white individuals when a citizen was attempting to escape custody than black individuals. We can conclude that criminal justice occupations play a big role on attitudes towards police.

Gaps in the Literature

After analyzing several articles, I have found that they were very beneficial towards my research in which I have found a gap. There are gaps in the literature regarding how the media's coverage of police brutality impacts the perspectives of African American and biracial high school students towards the United States police force. More research is needed on the thoughts of these students. My study will examine African American and biracial high school students and

create a survey that determines if media is a major influence in their establishment of their

perception towards the U.S. police force.

Conclusion

Although, little to no research has been made on the perspectives of African American

high school students, this can be improved with suffice research. There has been useful

information that I can include in my case study. With this knowledge, I accurately created my

survey without any biases such as African American and biracial high school students that felt

scared towards police officers or were aware of what police brutality is and incidents' that have

occurred recently.

Methods

Introduction

This section starts off with a review of the purpose of the study and the research questions that will guide the study. I have discussed the context of the research design, how I have chosen my participants, data collection methods, data safety, and the data analysis procedures. I have also explained the methods I used to ensure that the study has validity and provide the limitations of the study.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to collect the perceptions of the African-American students in order to detect if the media's coverage on recent police brutality incidents has played a role in their perceptions of the U.S. police force. In this study I 1) created a survey that the participants will answer from the computer, 2) gathered the results and evaluated them, 3) compared the results of each male and female participant to see if there is a trend, and 4) determined if the media plays a big role in the students' perceptions of the U.S. police force based on their results.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided my inquiry:

1. In what ways has the media's approach on police brutality influenced African American high school students' perceptions of the U.S. police force?

2. Should there be a balance between negative and positive reviews of police officers in the media?

3. Is there a correlation between police officer behaviors from the past to recent police officer behavior?

4. How can this research study benefit the participants?

Rationale for Design

I have conducted a qualitative case study through a survey. The survey consisted of approximately 11 questions, which began as broad questions and then went more in depth to discover if the media's representation of police brutality influenced the student's perception of the United States police force. A qualitative research study explores real world problems and discusses what solutions these problems can have. A case study is a particular individual, program, or event is studied in depth for a defined period of time (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). In order for me to achieve a successful research study, I needed to go in depth with my study and find out what the participants felt when they heard about police brutality occurring in the United States. The goal of this study was to find out if the media's approach on police brutality had an impact on the African American and biracial high school students and if it did have an impact, how has it impacted their perceptions of the U.S. police force.

Context

This research design was conducted at a four year public high school in the Southern region of the United States. The high school ranged from 9th through 12th grade. In the 2015-2016 school year, there were currently 1,676 students enrolled that consisted of 43% males and 57% females. The demographics showed that there were 0.23% Indian/ Pacific Islanders, 4.29% Multiracial, 4.77% Asians, 9.18% Hispanics, 37% Whites, and 44% Black students.

Participants

I have conducted a survey on African American and biracial students from grades 9th through 12th, ages 14 through 18. The research and IRB were approved by the school district. My participants were chosen by random sampling. I thoroughly explained my survey to the possible participants. The students that agreed to participate in the survey were provided with a

child consent form to give to their parents (if under 18) or an adult consent form to sign. The

participants were given a week to sign it. When the consent forms were completed, then I sent

them the 11 question survey to complete through email and gave them approximately one week

to send it back with honest answers.

Data Collection

Data was collected through a survey. Gathering data occurred within a month

period to ensure that the participants had a convenient time to complete the survey.

The data helped answer how police brutality affects African American and biracial

students mentally. Based on the data collected from the survey, I have obtained

specific answers on the student's thoughts about the media and their perception on the

U.S. police force.

Survey: The participants answered a survey consisting of 11 questions. (See

Appendix A)

Data Safety

The data collected from the survey was 100% safe for all students participating. Their

names and responses were anonymous. To insure that their identity is safe, I used pseudonyms

when explaining my results in this survey. Participating in this research study was voluntary and

the participants were not forced in any way. Only I, the researcher viewed the survey results.

Any information pertaining to the research and the participants were erased electronically and

thrown out once the research study was complete.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2007) and Stake (1995), Data analysis involves the following

steps: 1) organization of details about the case 2) categorization of data 3) interpretation of single

instances 4) identification of patterns and 5) synthesis and generalizations. I have analyzed my

data from an inductive approach. An inductive analysis is collecting the data and grouping them

together to form relationships. I have investigated my participants in order to find out if the

participants have similar perceptions of the media and U.S. police force. Using inductive analysis

in my research, has helped me make generalizations of my findings and allowed the participants'

voices to be heard through the data.

Limitations

Limitations included the participants not being truthful when answering the survey

questions. It was very essential for the participants to trust the researcher with any information

regarding them. This study would be useless if the participants were not truthful with their

survey answers. The participants could also be lazy and not answer the survey questions

completely or type a lot of information. Another limitation could be the sample size being too

small. If I had enough time to do this research, I could have added more participants to give me a

better analysis and comparison of my results.

Findings

The problem posed by the first research question was to detect if the media's coverage on recent police brutality incidents had played a role in their perceptions of the U.S. police force. For my research, I conducted a random sample qualitative method using a survey. I decided to choose this method based on many factors, such as time restraints and limit of information. Originally, my participants were going to consist of four males and four females of grades 9th through 12th. I wanted to collect my participants as randomly as possible. Therefore, I changed it to four biracial and four African American students from grades 9th through 12th. For this reason, my results reflect on race not gender. The names mentioned in my research are all pseudonyms to protect the identity of my participants.

The entire results process took a massive amount of time. I had to create the consent forms for both adults over 18 and minors. When selecting random possible participants, some were not interested. After gathering all eight participants, I handed them their consent forms and asked them to have it sign within a week. Half of the participants did not hand in their signed consent forms on time, delaying the result process. I finally received every participant's consent forms and started the 11 question survey.

My first hypothesis was the media's approach of police brutality have heavily influenced the African American and biracial high school students' perceptions of the U.S. police force. After collecting the results, I found that every participant understood the definition of police brutality and all of them believe that the media has an impact on their view of the U.S. police force. One participant, Quincy, wrote "The media can over exaggerate." According to Merriam-Webster, the term exaggerate is defined as representation of something as being larger, better, or worse than it really is. In this case, Quincy believes that the media portrays police officers as

racist and unjust murderers that use their power and position in the wrong manner, when in fact, not all police officers are like that, which creates a bias towards one side. When asked if he was aware of the police brutality cases occurring, Quincy said, "When James Blake was mistaken for a suspect by an NYPD officer with a history of excessive force the officer charged him, picked him up and slammed him on the ground." James Blake was not mentioned in the study, but I found it interesting that a participant included a police brutality incident that wasn't heavily broadcasted on media outlets. The first hypothesis was supported.

The second hypothesis was that there is an unbalance between negative and positive reviews of police officers in the media. Another participant, Zack, wrote,

 Yes, the media I see is often presented by other African-Americans, which may

 result in some bias within their posts on social media. They are often bashing

 police as a whole, which influences by view of them.

Based on these quotes, my participants think the media can over exaggerate and create more bias towards police officers. In social media, people tend to view every police officer as good or bad depending on the news, which can influence their view.

My third hypothesis was that since the police brutality incidents occurred in the media, many African Americans and biracial high school students would be scared in their community. I have found interesting results relating to this hypothesis. The biracial participants viewed the police brutality incidents and the media a little differently. Since the incidents have occurred recently, they have not felt scared in their community. In fact, they say the incidents have not affected their view on the police force. When asked if there are more good cops than bad cops, one participant wrote, "I'm not sure about good or bad but I'm sure there are more police officers that know the right ways of handling a situation and how to do their job correctly." The African

American participants felt scared whenever they're near police authority or out in their

community. They feel less protected. One participant named Michael wrote,

> I feel a bit eerie around police officers now, especially for my younger brother.
>
> Incidents of police brutality have always been around but now it has really
>
> increased and I feel scared around most police officers I see.

Once the Michael Brown and Freddie Gray incidents resulted in the death of two African

American teens, the Black Lives Matter members hold out signs stating "Is my son next?", "My

humanity should not be up for debate", and the most chilling, "I might be next." I understand

why this participant feels scared for his younger brother. My third hypothesis was partially

supported.

Overall, the results indicate that the media has a huge influence on the participant's

perception of the U.S. police force. All participants were aware of the incidents from social

media like Facebook, Twitter or online news sites. Because of this, readers feel that they do not

get the whole story behind the police brutality incidents. One participant, Derek, wrote his

opinion about the media's coverage on police brutality.

> The news, Facebook or wherever people find these videos of police
>
> brutality never show the whole video or explain the whole story. For news
>
> sometimes it's understandable as they try to create stories that people will be
>
> willing to listen to. However on the other hand those who release the videos or
>
> those who edit them so that we are not seeing the whole picture do it to stir up
>
> feelings of insecurity in their community. These videos/stories make us question
>
> who are we supposed to trust to protect us when it's the very people that are
>
> supposed to protect us are the ones hurting us. My views on the police have not

changed because I know that they are doing their job and while sometimes it may

be sketchy it still prevents from problems becoming a bigger issue.

I am satisfied with my results besides the fact that one of my participants dropped my

study and another participant that was unable to answer my questions completely. This could

have resulted in different findings.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was detect if the media's coverage on recent police brutality incidents had played a role in their perceptions of the U.S. police force. Based on my results, most of my participants felt that the media plays a huge role in their perception of the U.S. police force. The fact that my participants were teens could define the results. Teenagers are more likely to make decisions from peer pressure and are easily influenced based on what they hear and see.

There were also some limitations that affected my study. For instance, one person felt that they should discontinue participating in my research. If I was notified sooner, I could have gotten another participant to take their place. Another limitation included one survey being incomplete. It was extremely difficult trying to comprehend their rationale on police brutality and the media when the participant did not answer some of the basic questions.

My research adds to the current events field. Bonilla and Rosa's (2015) article discussed the Michael Brown police brutality incident that occurred in 2014. The 3.6 million Twitter posts documented the details of Michael Brown's death. That alone shows how the media has a major impact within our society. The results from my survey helped proved that the media, specifically social media does influence teens' perception of the U.S. police force.

As previously stated in my literature review, even though research on past police brutality incidents have been done (Fusoni, 2005), little information exists exploring the media's influence on African American high school students and their perspective on the U.S. police force. My research has helped enhance a better understanding of the media's influence on African American and biracial high school students.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Future studies regarding police brutality and the media should consider the perspectives of older African American and biracial citizens. There is a need for more research on the media's impact on African American perceptions across the United States. My research could be used as a basis for future projects. I would like to see future studies on this research that contains a large group of participants. Instead of a survey, an interview on each participant could benefit the results even more. Future researchers could also collect data from other regions of the United States.

This research on police brutality and the media can help people know that media coverage can provide people with false assumptions or make people feel scared around their community. For instance, those who release the videos or those who edit them so that we are not seeing the whole picture do it to stir up feelings of insecurity in their community. In the future, researchers can maybe step up the research by providing psychological evidence that the media coverage affects changing behaviors of authority such as the police.

Appendix A

The questions provided were:

1. Do you know what police brutality is?

2. If so, have you been aware of the police brutality incidents occurring over the past couple of years?

3. If so, which one(s)?

4. How were you aware of the police brutality incidents?

5. Since viewing the incident, has your view on the U.S. police force changed?

6. If so, how has your view changed?

7. Do you feel safe in your community?

8. Do you feel that the media has an impact on your view of the police?

9. If so, how has the media impacted your view of the police?

10. Do you think there are more good police officers than bad ones?

11. If you have comments, please type them here.

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