From "brute" to "thug:" the demonization and criminalization of unarmed Black male victims in America

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Abstract

The synonymy of Blackness with criminality is not a new phenomenon in America. Documented historical accounts have shown how myths, stereotypes, and racist ideologies led to discriminatory policies and court rulings that fueled racial violence in a post-Reconstruction era and has culminated in the exponential increase of Black male incarceration today. Misconceptions and prejudices manufactured and disseminated through various channels such as the media included references to a "*brute*" image of Black males. In the 21st century, this negative imagery of Black males has frequently utilized the negative connotation of the terminology "*thug.*" In recent years, law enforcement agencies have unreasonably used deadly force on Black males allegedly considered to be "suspects" or "persons of interest." The exploitation of these often-targeted victims' criminal records, physical appearances, or misperceived attributes has been used to justify their unlawful deaths. Despite the connection between disproportionate criminality and Black masculinity, little research has been done on how unarmed Black male victims, particularly but not exclusively at the hands of law enforcement, have been posthumously criminalized. This paper investigates the historical criminalization of Black males and its connection to contemporary unarmed victims of law enforcement. Action research methodology in the data collection process is utilized to interpret how Black male victims are portrayed by traditional mass media, particularly through the use of language, in ways that marginalize and de-victimize these individuals. This study also aims to elucidate a contemporary understanding of race relations, racism, and the plight of the Black male in a 21-century "post-racial" America.

Introduction

On April 28, 2015, President Barack Obama referred to a collection of citizens from Baltimore, Maryland as "criminals and thugs" in response to a question about the recent rebellion that broke following the death of Freddie Gray[i] while in police custody. The use of

the term "thug" by President Obama became the zenith of the word's use to characterize primarily individuals and groups of Black males. In this specific case of the rebellion that began on April 25, 2015, public figures such as President Obama and Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake both used the term "thug" along with many news reporters and others on social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. During an interview with CNN, Baltimore councilman Carl Stokes, a Black male, rejected the notion of calling citizens "thugs" by the news anchor that pushed him to agree with the term to describe the occurrences of looting. Stokes responded by stating, "C'mon, so calling them thugs, just call them niggers, just call them niggers" (WSHH, 2015). Councilman Stokes was calling attention to the use of coded language that is in some ways explicitly and other ways implicitly used as a substitute for personally mediated racism, specifically the term "nigger."

Over the last several years, the term "thug" has become a way to describe Black males who reject or do not rise to the standard of White America. For example, NFL football player Richard Sherman was called a "thug" for his post-game interview following the National Football Conference (NFC) Championship game (Wagner, 2014). While Sherman did not use vulgar language or express any feelings of violence or criminal action, his physical presence and loud voice was used to evoke the idea of "thuggery." Additionally, political adversaries of President Obama such as Michelle Bachmann, Karl Rove, and Rush Limbaugh have referred to him as a "political thug." This term has become the platform to dismiss Black life as less valuable and perpetuates a negative and criminal connotation in forms of micro-insults and micro-invalidations. Moreover, the recent killings of unarmed Black men have sparked discussion and discourse surrounding the term "thug" and how it is used in the context of reshaping perceptions of Black life broadly and Black males specifically.

This study investigates how language is used to describe Black men who have been killed by law enforcement in the past year (July 2014-April 2015). Specifically, there is a demonizing process that happens to unarmed Black men posthumously. Unlike earlier Black icons and figures, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, that were vilified while alive and then sanitized in death to be repackaged as an acceptable part of the United States historical narrative, these men are portrayed as thugs and criminals to seemingly justify their deaths while simultaneously shifting blame away from law enforcement. To illustrate, we examine six different unarmed Black men[ii] who were killed by police throughout the United States in order to understand how media coverage addresses their deaths. By utilizing local, national, and international media coverage of these cases, we are able to find both overlapping and unique themes to each case which support the notion of posthumous demonization and criminalization of unarmed Black men.

In order to explore this notion of posthumous demonization and criminalization, we examine this inquiry in several ways. First, we look at the terms historically used to describe Black

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[i]Note Freddie Gray, 25, was an African-American male who was arrested by Baltimore City police on April 12, 2015. Mr. Gray died on April 19, 2015 stemming from neck and head injuries he suffered while in police custody. On May 2, 2015, Baltimore City's State Attorney, Marilyn Mosby, ruled the death a homicide and charged six officers involved in Gray's death.
[ii]Eric Garner (NY); Michael Brown (MO); Akai Gurley (NY); Tamir Rice (OH); Tony Robinson (WI); and Freddie Gray (MD)

people in the United States. Secondly, it is important to connect the historical legacies of racial demonization to contemporary criminalization of Blackness, particularly in a Post-Obama America. Therefore, we utilize four major groups to categorize the language and imagery of the articles being investigated for this study: (1) Behavior, (2) Appearance, (3) Location, and (4) Lifestyle. These are used to specifically address both overt instances of racism as well as micro-insults and micro-invalidations. Moreover, we look at the cases of each unarmed Black male and how they are treated by media sources focusing particularly on the primacy effect, or the first impression media outlets create when describing these males posthumously which either justifies or negates their death by law enforcement. Finally, the paper discusses the growing social movements of #BlackLivesMatter and the impact these collectives have on both national and international awareness of White privilege, White supremacy, and coded race-based language.

Literature Review

Race is the most significant sociodemographic distinction in the United States. The social construction of contemporary racial ideology finds its birth in the period known as the Enlightenment (Eze, 1997). Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Jefferson contributed to the literature and theory behind biological racial differences. Jefferson, a founding father of the United States, third U.S. President, and slave owner, wrote about the differences between the races in his essays, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In his writings he describes physical differences such as skin color and hair texture as the basis for scientific distinction, stating, "the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and causer were better known to us" (Jefferson, 1997, p. 97). Jefferson uses observable data – presumably his own slaves – to come to his conclusions, stating:

> Besides those of colour, figure, and hair, there are other physical distinctions proving a difference of race. They have less hair on the face and body. They secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the skin…They seem to require less sleep…They are at least as brave, and more adventuresome…They are more ardent after their female; but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. (Jefferson, 1997, p. 98)

These sentiments and ideologies were carried on to develop notions of race, and more specifically the racial dynamics of superiority and inferiority.

As slavery prevailed this dichotomy of racial superiority and inferiority metastasized because of the need for economic labor (Fields, 1990). The need for a surplus of cheap labor, which was acquired in Africa, was justified through racial distinction primarily set by law (Fields, 1990; Memmi, 2000). Separations were made clear through the passage of laws that determined the race of child via the matrilineal line and anti-miscegenation laws, harsher punishments for Black runaway slaves, and the use of poor Whites as laborers to monitor and guard against slave rebellions. These legal distinctions coupled with economic need justified slavery and the growth of racial ideologies, to which Barbara Jeanne Fields (1990) states, "Racial ideology supplied the means of explaining slavery to people whose terrain was a republic founded on radical doctrines of liberty and natural rights; and, more important, a republic in which those doctrines seemed to represent accurately the world in

which all but a minority lived." (p. 114) In other words through the repetitive and daily routine, these social constructions take on meaning over time and become seen and internalized as truth.

This "truth" of racial ideology spawned racism, which is practiced at both the institutional and individual level in American society. However, we must be cognizant of other sociodemographic variables such as social class and gender and the authority they play on influencing the dynamics of the superiority and inferiority dyad. Therefore, to understand racism in the 21st century we must look at the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) of these variables in how it relates to the use of excessive and deadly force by law enforcement on unarmed Black males and its relationship to historic views of race, class, and gender. Specifically, there must be an understanding of the shift from the "brute" which demonized Black males in the 19th and early 20th century to the "thug" that brought about criminalization in the late 20th and early 21st century.

From "Brute" to "Thug"

During the institution of slavery, the image of Black people, specifically Black males, was of a docile character. The images of buffoonery, blissful ignorance, and juvenile angst were seen as the primary traits of enslaved Blacks. This is characterized in several portrayals of Black males of this time. The use of Blackface – a type of performance that generally used White actors wearing black make-up to portray Black people in stereotypes – became popular in the 19th century. White actors popularized minstrel shows, depicting stereotypes of Black life as foolish, messy, and overall comedic at the expense of Black culture (Lhamon Jr., 2000; Strausbaugh, 2006). In addition, other popular literature and media characterized antebellum enslaved Blacks as content with their place in society. In literature, the character of Uncle Tom in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is portrayed as an older Black slave who is faithful and dutiful to his White master. The film *Gone with the Wind* depicts content slaves, specifically the role of Mammy who even fends off freedmen. Finally, the Disney film *Song of the South* depicts Uncle Remus as an elderly Black freedman who was satisfied with his place in society, singing the famous happy song, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah."

These depictions of Blackness as docile and manageable reflected the ability to control the Black body and mind, creating the idea that slavery was the best position for Black people. This status of inferiority is echoed in W.E.B. DuBois' writing of how Whites viewed freedom as a way to "spoil" and "ruin" Black people (DuBois, 1903). Additionally, according to David Pilgrim:

> These portrayals were pragmatic and instrumental. Proponents of slavery created and promoted images of blacks that justified slavery and soothed white consciences. If slaves were childlike, for example, then a paternalistic institution where masters acted as quasi-parents to their slaves was [sic] humane, even morally right. More importantly, slaves were rarely depicted as brutes because that portrayal might have become a self-fulfilling prophecy. (2012)

However, this image of Blackness ended after the American Civil War. During the period of Reconstruction (1865-1877), newly freed Blacks began to obtain social, economic, and political rights with the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution.

This growth was seen in the building of Black communities such as Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which was referred to as "Black Wall Street" (Pickens, 2013), the building of schools now known as Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs), and the election of the first two Black U.S. Senators in Hiram Revels and Blanche Bruce.

This growth in power challenged White supremacy and created White fear of Black mobility. Particularly, wealthy Whites were fearful of political power newly freed Black people could acquire via voting, whereas poor Whites saw Blacks as competition in the labor force. Thus the rise of the Jim Crow era began, which was solidified by the Supreme Court ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* which stated, "separate but equal is constitutional." This fear was met with a shift from Black people being viewed as compliant and submissive servants to savages and brute monsters.

Media portrayals of this mythical Black brute began to grow using the same initial science Jefferson and other Enlightenment-era theorists proclaimed, which was based on inaccurate anthropological and biological factors. This time, the argument was that Blacks were naturally more prone to violence and other aggressive behaviors. Charles H. Smith wrote in 1893, "A bad Negro is the most horrible creature upon the earth, the most brutal and merciless" (p. 181). This myth of cruelty and vicious disposition was directed towards White women. As the myth grew and stories spread about the savage Black brute, so did the occurrences of lynching. Lynching – the extrajudicial punishment – was ritualistic and struck fear into Black residents throughout the United States (Litwack, 2004). The most prevalent accusation was the rape or sexual assault of a White woman by a Black male. This allegation would have reverberating effects throughout entire communities. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, a young White woman accused a Black male of sexual assault and roughly 300 Black people were killed and more than 9,000 people were left homeless after White mobs destroyed the Greenwood community (Pickens, 2013). Regardless of producing evidence or facts, White mobs would seize Black defendants or attack Black neighborhoods to seek out revenge for this crime.

The case of Sam Hose is an example of how different and various versions of the truth were reported. Hose killed his employer in self-defense after being threatened with a pistol. However newspapers wrote "a monster in human form" emerged, which detailed Hose as cold-blooded, killing his employer, and savagely raping his employer's wife. The report drove White fear to lynch Hose (Litwack, 2004). In reality, these charges were mere excuses to exercise exorbitant amounts of violence on Black people. The lynching of a Black body became a form of ritualistic violence where limbs and other body parts were taken as souvenirs. Litwack wrote:

> After stripping Hose of his clothes and chaining him to a tree, the self-appointed executioners stacked kerosene-soaked wood high around him…they cut off his ears, fingers, and genitals, and skinned his face…the contortions of Sam Hose's body as the flames rose, distorting his features, causing his eyes to bulge out their sockets… Before Hose's body had even cooled, his heart and liver were removed and cut into several pieces and his bones were crushed into small particles. The crowd fought over these souvenirs. (p. 123, 2004)

This overkill of the Black body became part of the racist ideology that was used to justify these acts of violence. This mythical act of Black savagery was situated in this idea of Black brutality and criminality that had no other recourse but death. A prominent Georgia woman wrote about the Sam Hose lynching, "The premeditated outrage on Mrs. Cranford was infinitely more intolerable than the murder of her husband" (Litwack, 2004). Hence, uncontrollable desires of Black males were illegal, criminal, and needed to be stopped through the use of physical force. Therefore, this justified vigilante justice in the name of keeping White womanhood pure.

The brute image of Black men became significant moving into the early 20th century, when fear was reinforced with depictions of Black men as harmful. The film *Birth of a Nation*, made in 1915, shows Black men as savages trying to attack White women. Their brutality is met with propaganda depicting the Ku Klux Klan as heroic and honorable. The result was Blackness becoming closely associated with criminalization. The criminalization of Blackness (Davis, 1998; Alexander, 2010; Muhammad, 2010) allowed for White supremacy to use Black bodies as their scapegoat for all problems, real or fictional. The driving forces behind Black criminality as savage and unmanageable were structurally reinforced by passage of stricter sentencing guidelines in prison and the expansion of the War on Drugs in the second half of the 20th century (Mauer, 2002). These programs and stricter prison guidelines exponentially grew the American prison system by 700% (Pew States, 2007). During this time campaigns for "tough on crime" policy emerged as the soundboard for elected officials. For example, George H.W. Bush's presidential run used a smear campaign tactic, famously known as the "Willie Horton" ad, where a Black prisoner's face was used to talk about his heinous crimes and Bush's opponents' soft-on-crime policy. While the ad overtly discusses a single Black man, the subliminal and larger take away is Willie Horton's face became synonymous with all Blackness. In short, the mythical brute became the realistic thug via the process of criminalization.

The image of Black men as brutes in society has a long legacy that begins with the social construction of race and brings us to the current period of mass incarceration. In the United States, Black men are six times as likely to go to jail or prison as White men (Gao, 2013). This disproportionate and unequal number indicates the skewed representation of Black men in U.S. prisons. However, the argument is shifted to no longer being about race but about crime and community safety. This negation of understanding the historical link between "brute" and "thug" marginalizes the significant role race plays.

Lastly, a prime example of how the brute image still thrives in society is the April 2008 *Vogue* magazine cover of professional basketball player LeBron James holding super model Gisele Bündchen. The image of LeBron giving a menacing look while Gisele is in his arms shares a strikingly eerily similarity to a World War I poster that depicts a gorilla holding a White woman with the title "Destroy this Mad Brute" (Shea, 2008). These types of images that draw on past racial stereotypes and myths reinforce this criminalization, and are now coded with terms such as "thug" today. While historically in America overt racist language was socially acceptable, there has been a cultural shift of social intolerance to this blatant racist behavior. This does not mean that racism or discriminatory actions have been eradicated but rather driven beneath the surface and reemerged as coded language, gestures,

signs, and symbols to indicate difference. Terms such as "thug," "ghetto," "hood," "sketchy," and "shady" are all examples of coded language that are used to refer to or speak of Blackness without overtly sounding racially prejudiced. Fraternities on college campuses throw "Pimps and Hos" parties where stereotypes of Black people as pimps or prostitutes, exemplifying characters from the film *Superfly* (1972), also lack the language of race but show in physical gesture and imagery the racism encoded in the details.

Over the last several years with the proliferation of social media, many more events are documented and shared via social networking sites (Yar, 2012; Smiley, 2015). Some of these events captured on video are cases involving unarmed Black males being killed by law enforcement agents. While some videos show the disturbing death, such as Eric Garner, others show the aftermath like that of Michael Brown's body in the street. These deaths and others have sparked outrage across communities looking for justice and accountability of law enforcement's excessive force when dealing with Black people.

Furthermore, this paper looks at how these Black males who are killed by law enforcement are turned into a "thug" (the modern day "brute"), which seemingly tries to justify their death or personal contribution to their demise. Beyond this, a "blame game" effect occurs that shifts culpability from the perpetrator to the victim. In this case, the blame moves from law enforcement agents to the Black males who have been killed.

Methods

Content Analysis

For this study, media coverage of the deaths of six unarmed Black males resulting from law enforcement interaction were investigated. Specifically, the portrayal of the incidents and the victims involved via newspaper articles were examined. Newspaper articles were chosen as the modality for investigations because of the understanding that all published articles go through a vetting process. As a result the articles, including the perceptions created, are an organizational decision. The cases garnered significant national and international coverage for a notable period of time, leading to a considerable database from which to select samples. The incidents chosen for analysis are as follows, listed in chronological order from earliest to latest:

- Eric Garner – 43 years old, died July 17, 2014 due to "compression of neck (choke hold), compression of chest and prone positioning during physical restraint by police" after altercation with New York Police Department officers Daniel Pantaleo and Justin Damico in Staten Island, New York.

- Michael Brown, Jr. – 18 years old, died August 9, 2014 due to multiple gunshot wounds after altercation with Ferguson Police Department officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri.

- Akai Gurley – 28 years old, died November 20, 2014 due to single gunshot wound after interaction with New York Police Department officer Peter Liang in Brooklyn, New York.

- Tamir Rice – 12 years old, died November 22, 2014 due to single gunshot wound after interaction with Cleveland Police Department officers Timothy Loehmann and Frank Garmback in Cleveland, Ohio.

- Tony Robinson – 19 years old, died March 6, 2015 due to multiple gunshot wounds after altercation with Madison Police Department officer Matt Kenny in Madison, Wisconsin.

- Freddie Gray – 25 years old, died April 19, 2015 due to various injuries, including three fractured vertebrae, damage to the voice box, and spine 80% severed at the neck, after altercation with Baltimore Police Department officers Caesar Goodson, Garret Miller, Edward Nero, William Porter, Brian Rice, and Alicia White in Baltimore, Maryland.

Analytical Plan

For each incident ten news articles, each published no more than 30 days after the victim's death, were selected. The time range allowed for an accurate capturing of the newspapers' initial portrayals of the victims, underlining the influence of the primacy effect (Holbert et. al., 2007), as well as minimized the coverage of tangential events to the incident such as protests and legal proceedings. All newspaper articles were retrieved from LexisNexis using only the names of the victims. An effort was made to select an equal number of articles from national and international outlets if possible, and particular attention was paid to articles from news outlets in the cities where the deaths occurred. Analysis of the articles were based on the concept of autoethnography, which allowed the authors to utilize personal knowledge of and experience with racial profiling, harassment, negative interactions with law enforcement, and involvement in protests stemming from a number of police brutality cases, as a primary foundation of expertise and evidence.

Autoethnography

While this paper is an exercise in academic writing about current and social issues, for the authors – both of whom identify as Black males – the intersections of race, police brutality, and harassment are part of the lived experience which contextualize our social milieu. The relevance and urgency in creating a discourse around state violence, particularly law enforcement, upon the Black community, specifically unarmed Black males, is not at a distance but an immediate threat to the health and livelihood of the authors. Therefore, autoethnography becomes an important and useful methodology to include in this work because it relies on the narrators' credibility of using memory as legitimate data (Ellis et. al, 2011; Wall, 2008; Byfield, 2014). In other words, as Blacks in America experiencing racism through forms of overt speech and actions, as well as through micro-insults and micro-invalidations (Sue et. al, 2007), we believe our own experiences are relevant and valid towards assessing the results and conclusions of this paper.

There has been a precedent set by scholars using autoethnography. Natalie Byfield (2014) utilized autoethnography methodology in her study of media coverage of the "Central Park Five" case, where five young men of color were tried and convicted for the rape and attempted murder of a White female jogger in New York City. Byfield, who is a Black

woman and a reporter for the *New York Daily News* at the time of the event, covered the case from the arrest, trial, and conviction, and then followed up when another person admitted to the crime. Byfield wrote, "Autoethnography seemed an ideal methodology for me to incorporate into this study because it is a technique that allows the researcher to also be a subject in a study" (2014, p. 20). Furthermore, while not articulated through the term "autoethnography," various Black historical figures have utilized this methodology to bring to light their experiences of racism and social justice. People such as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Malcolm X elucidated their narratives of being victimized by state violence, and their memories and experiences validated their claims.

Our personal encounters with harassment by law enforcement become a way in which we corroborate the narratives of unarmed Black males being killed by law enforcement. For example, the first author of this paper has been stopped by New York City Police and has been questioned by all White officers if he, "was the one screaming nigger down the street?" The second author, while having no notable instance of harassment by law enforcement, has lived much of his adult life combatting the perception of being an intimidating, menacing Black male due to his large size, long locked hair, goateed facial profile, and propensity to wear urban attire. Additionally, he has experienced the physical and social manifestations of anger and pain due to the death of an unarmed Black male by law enforcement as a lifelong resident and participant in protests surrounding Freddie Gray's death in Baltimore, Maryland. These are just a couple of illustrations of law enforcement's abuse of power through micro-aggressions, believing the police were looking for a hostile reaction in order to escalate the situation. Overall,

> Autoethnography is characterized by personal experience narratives, auto-observation, personal ethnography, lived experience, self-ethnography, reflexive ethnography, emotionalism, experiential texts, and autobiographical ethnography. Thus autoethnographic accounts are characterized by a move from a broad lens focus on individual situatedness within the cultural and social context, to a focus on the inner vulnerable and often resistant self. (Boyle & Parry, 2007, p. 186)

Results

Research suggests that race and racism is still a relevant and determinant factor in the United States (Advisory Board to the President's Initiative on Race, 1998; Thompson & Neville, 1999; Haney-Lopez, 2010). The election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States and the first Black president led many to believe that America achieved racial equality. The term "post-racial" America was coined to validate this notion of racial parity, while simultaneously negating issues of racism as somehow irrelevant in this new era of American history. Despite this idea of being post-racial, several cultural critics and scholars point out that this racial equity has not been reached or achieved (Wise, 2010; Tesler & Sears, 2010). Further research indicates the widening gap in racial inequality in this post-racial era include the following: education research shows racial segregation has grown in the last forty years and policy makers have abandoned policies to create efforts for integration (Rothstein, 2013; Kucsera & Orfield, 2014); housing examinations determine that Black and White citizens still live in racially segregated communities (Desmond, 2012;

Crowder et al, 2012); health disparities indicate the vast differences in health care determined by race (LaVeist, 2005; Dressler et. al, 2005); employment opportunities starkly contrast by racial differences favoring White potential employees over their Black counterparts (Western, 2006; Pager, 2007); voting rights have been shown to play a significant difference in changing election results and denying Black citizens through disenfranchisement laws (Harvey, 1994; Manza & Uggen, 2006; Uggen et al, 2006); incarceration has been shown to be unequally distributed across racial lines (Wacquant, 2002; Western, 2007; Alexander, 2010).

Despite the abundance of research specifying stark differences by race and creating enormous racial disparities, White Americans believe racial differences are declining (Sue et. al, 2007). In addition, many White Americans view themselves as good, moral, and believe in equality, which would refute ideas of prejudice or discrimination (Sue, 2004). Therefore, racism in a post-racial America is much more covert and implicit as opposed to earlier forms of overt and explicit forms of racial aggression. Scholarship indicates that new forms of racism have emerged via micro-aggressions that imply traditional racist ideology without having to be explicit in using race but now use other traditional American values (e.g. self-reliance) as a reason why individuals or groups are unsuccessful.

Operational Definitions

The sample of news articles fell under two operational classifications, both derived from the concept of racial micro-aggressions. The first classification is the micro-insult, which is defined as "verbal and nonverbal communication that subtly conveys rudeness and insensitivity as well as demeaning a person's racial identity and heritage" (Sue et. al, 2007). The second classification is the micro-invalidation, defined as "communication that subtly excludes, negates, or nullifies the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue et. al, 2007). A number of examples demonstrated aspects of both micro-insults and micro-invalidations, suggesting that the two are not mutually exclusive.

Key Themes

In addition to the two operational classifications, the portrayals of the victims fell under four major recurring themes:

- Behavior – the actions of the victim at the time of their death. Also found were actions of the victim prior to their death that could be considered correlational to the interaction with law enforcement. This included but was not limited to past criminality.

- Appearance – the look of the victim at the time of their death. This included both their physical composition as well as the style of apparel worn.

- Location – the geographical area in which the victim's death occurred. Also found were references to the area in which the victim lived and references to the area(s) in which the victim frequented for social engagement.

- Lifestyle – the culture(s) with which the victim was associated. Family usually provided friends, this information, or close associates of the victim.

Eric Garner

Eric Garner's representation in newspapers primarily featured micro-invalidations revolved around his physical composition. Specifically, Garner's health and size, as he was a particularly tall and large individual with a number of preexisting medical conditions, were among the first pieces of information introduced in many of the articles:

The 350-pound man, about to be arrested on charges of illegally selling cigarettes, was arguing with the police. (Goldstein & Schweber, 2014)

But the 350-pound Garner's poor health, including 'acute and chronic bronchial asthma; obesity; hypertensive cardiovascular disease,' were also 'contributing conditions' to his death, it added. (Schram et. al, 2014)

A 400-POUND asthmatic Staten Island dad died Thursday after a cop put him in a chokehold and other officers appeared to slam his head against the sidewalk, video of the incident shows. (Murray et. al, 2014)

The prominent references related to Mr. Garner's physical attributes were micro-invalidations and micro-insults regarding his behavior at the time of his death, which involved Garner vehemently defending his role in breaking up an altercation. Additionally were the micro-invalidations related to his past actions and lifestyle. This included criminality and the perception of being a "hustler" due to his propensity to sell single cigarettes, which is illegal yet not a felony in New York:

The encounter between Mr. Garner and plainclothes officers, from the 120th Precinct, began after the officers accused Mr. Garner of illegally selling cigarettes, an accusation he was familiar with. He had been arrested more than 30 times, often accused of selling loose cigarettes bought outside the state, a common hustle designed to avoid state and city tobacco taxes. In March and again in May, he was arrested on charges of illegally selling cigarettes on the sidewalk. (Goldstein & Schweber, 2014)

The pending cases, which have now been dismissed and sealed, included selling untaxed cigarettes, driving without a license, and possession of marijuana, said a law enforcement official. (Fox, 2014)

Police suspected that Garner, who was African American, was selling untaxed cigarettes - a charge that he had faced numerous times before. (Blakely, 2014)

Michael Brown

The representation of Michael Brown in the media immediately following his death surrounded issues of behavior and appearance. The incident between Michael Brown and Officer Darren Wilson was wrapped in opaque details with various eyewitness testimonies contradicting each other. On one hand some witnesses, including Brown's friend, indicated

that he had his hands raised in the air when Wilson opened fire. On the other hand others, including Officer Wilson, said that Brown lunged at the officer and physically assaulted him.

Brown's death ignited the "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" chant in subsequent protests around the country. Within days, articles appeared that implicated Brown in a robbery moments before his death:

> Police on Friday said that Darren Wilson, the officer who shot and killed Michael Brown last weekend, confronted Brown after the teenager was identified as the main suspect in a convenience store robbery that occurred Saturday morning. (Berman & Lowery, 2014)

> Almost a week after 18-year-old Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, the police department identified the officer involved as six-year veteran Darren Wilson. At a press conference at 9 a.m. this morning, police chief Tom Jackson said Wilson, who has no disciplinary history, was responding to a robbery at a nearby convenience store when he encountered the teenager. The police also released video stills that appeared to show Brown threatening the convenience store owner, and a detailed report on the incident. (Coscarelli, 2014)

These reports became micro-insults and micro-invalidations to Brown's death as this report of him robbing a convenience store took precedent to the overall narrative of an unarmed young Black male being shot several times by a police officer. In addition, there were contradictions in news reports about the relevancy of the robbery and the stop of Brown by Officer Wilson. *The Huffington Post* reported Ferguson Police Chief Tom Jackson said, "the initial contact between 18-year-old Michael Brown and police officer Darren Wilson was not related to a convenience store robbery" (Lavender & Cadet, 2014). Despite the opposing stories, the larger theme of associating the posthumous Michael Brown with robbery became the broader narrative.

Beyond the theme of behavior was that of Brown's physical presence. Images released by the media showed Michael Brown's physical size.

> Brown certainly was a giant, as surveillance footage seems to prove, showing his 6′4", nearly 300-pound self towering over a petrified convenience-store employee, who got manhandled and intimidated for having the temerity to object to his store being robbed. (Duke, 2014)

> Shortly before his encounter with Officer Wilson, the police say he was caught on a security camera stealing a box of cigars, pushing the clerk of a convenience store into a display case. He lived in a community that had rough patches, and he dabbled in drugs and alcohol. He had taken to rapping in recent months, producing lyrics that were by turns contemplative and vulgar. He got into at least one scuffle with a neighbor…He was hit at least six times, twice in the head. His 6-foot-4 frame lay face down in the middle of the warm pavement for hours, a stream of blood flowing down the street. (Eligon, 2014)

Very much married to the theme of the convenience store robbery, descriptions of his physical presence and lifestyle, including the coupling of rapping, has a negative

connotation of both Brown's physical appearance and lifestyle. This larger-than-life description of Michael Brown is supported by Officer Darren Wilson's description of Brown in a media interview given in November 2014. Wilson stated:

> When I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan…and then after he did that, he looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked. (Sanburn, 2014)

While Wilson's description of Brown gave the impression of Brown being a colossal or more than human figure, it should be noted this imagery of Brown became another justification of the use of excessive and lethal force. However, what was very much downplayed was the fact that Wilson and Brown were of the same relative size. Sanburn writes, "Wilson, who is 6′ 4″ and 210 lbs., said of Brown, who was 6′ 4″ and 292 lbs. at the time of his death" (2014). In any professional boxing match or mixed martial arts fight, Wilson and Brown would fall into the same weight class, heavyweight. In other words, Wilson's imagery makes him the victim while simultaneously perpetuates Brown's criminalization.

Akai Gurley

The shooting death of Akai Gurley was immediately spun in the media, mainly by police press conferences as a "tragic accident" by a rookie officer. Despite the concerned effort to make this story not about police brutality or conscious excessive force, this case presented Gurley in several ways including his appearance and location as indications of micro-insults and micro-invalidations, which de-victimized him.

Akai Gurley's death gained coverage because of its timing of happening within days of the grand juries in both the Michael Brown and Eric Garner cases declining to indict the officers involved. Many images of Akai were used in news articles. The most flagrant image of Akai Gurley's mug shot was used by at least two international media sources. The United Kingdom's *Daily Mail* published a story with a double entendre title, "NYPD rookie officer shot 'innocent' unarmed father dead in Brooklyn stairwell by 'accident' as girlfriend watched in horror." The interesting part of this is they put innocent and accident in quotes as if to question if Akai Gurley was actually innocent, which would then imply that his death was not an accident but valid if he was not innocent. The *Daily Mail* goes a step further and published a mug shot photo saying, "Akai Gurley, 28, (pictured left and right in an old booking photo) was shot and killed by rookie cop Peter Liang as he entered a stairwell in a public housing project in Brooklyn" (Robinson, 2014). Beyond the use of mug shots, many of the images published of Gurley show him wearing urban fashion styles: cornrow hairstyle, flat brimmed hats, sunglasses, and visible neck tattoos (Goodman, 2014; Corcoran, 2014). All of these images are associated with Blackness specifically, which are in turn linked to this idea of criminality (Davis, 1998; Muhammad, 2010).

In addition to Gurley's appearance is the location of his death. He was killed leaving his girlfriend's apartment located in the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Pink Houses located in East New York, Brooklyn. The East New York section of Brooklyn is associated with violence and according to DNAinfo.com, East New York holds some of the highest crime rates in all five boroughs. Fagan et. al (2002) have indicated that over seventy

percent of all New York state prison inmates come from New York City. Moreover the majority of those being incarcerated from New York City come from one of seven neighborhoods, East New York being one of them. Beyond just the environment of East New York, the location of Gurley's death at the Pink Houses is also relevant. The Pink Houses is a notorious New York City public housing complex making several online sites' worst housing projects (Ettelson, 2009). *The New York Post* published an article two days after Akai Gurley's death entitled, "Living in Fear at the Dark & Deadly Hellhole Houses" (Feuerherd et. al, 2014). The article discusses the collapse and neglect of the Pink Houses, particularly the lack of proper lighting in the hallways and uncleanliness of the environment. In addition, the article makes reference to violence saying, "The Pink Houses are among the most dangerous projects in the city, and their stairwells are the most dangerous places in the projects" (Feuerherd et. al, 2014). While the article is addressing real concerns of environmental justice and public safety issues, the timing of its release becomes an issue. From the beginning the NYPD claimed this shooting to be an accident because of lack of lighting in the hallways, which once again shifts the blame from the NYPD officer who killed Gurley to city government. In addition, the theme of continually expressing how violent the Pink Houses are does two things: 1. Again, shift the blame from the officer who did not use proper training tactics and 2. Negates Gurley's death as a victim because he is associated with the Pink Houses which is linked to violence, therefore implicating Gurley as a criminal or violent. The micro-insults and micro-invalidations of Akai Gurley come out in a particular manner of subversive text and imagery to take the focus off the particular case of excessive police violence but rather focus on the physical character and appearance of Gurley and the location and environment of the event.

Tamir Rice

Tamir Rice's death was met with questions of lifestyle and behavior. However, the themes of micro-insults and micro-invalidations were expanded to include Rice's mother as part of his death. The first and most shocking theme that emerged out of this case of a twelve-year old child being shot and killed by law enforcement was the discussion of who was to blame. Initially, the city of Cleveland, Ohio announced that Rice caused his own death:

> The city of Cleveland's response to a lawsuit filed by the family of Tamir Rice says the 12-year-old boy is to blame for his own death by police…The family's suit filed in December said Tamir 'suffered terror and fear' at the hands of Loehmann [police officer] before his shooting death — claims the city says Tamir and his family are at fault for. It states Tamir's death was "directly and proximately caused by their own acts. (Hensley, 2015)

> In papers filed in federal court Friday, the city said Tamir was responsible for his own death and said the injuries, losses and damages were "directly and proximately caused by the failure of [Tamir] to exercise due care to avoid injury." (Muskal & Raab, 2015)

> The city also stated in their response, obtained by Cleveland.com, that Tamir died because of 'the conduct of individuals or entities other than Defendant…The Defendant is police officer Timothy Loehmann. (Spargo, 2015).

This blaming of a child for his own demise by a professional law enforcement agent is a micro-invalidation of his death. It puts the ownership on the victim rather than the perpetrator.

Other forms of micro-insults towards the death of Tamir Rice were in the form of blame and lifestyle of his mother. Many on social media outlets were pondering and posing the question: Why did his mother allow Tamir Rice to play with a realistic-looking fake gun? Again, this is a micro-insult, which implies Tamir's mother was not a good parent and did not exercise good parenting skills. This also reinforces micro-invalidation of Tamir's life because it implies his fault that he was shot for playing with this gun. Tamir Rice's mother, Samaria Rice's character became the focus. An article on Cleveland.com, entitled, "Lawyer Representing Tamir Rice's Family Defended Boy's Mom in Drug Trafficking Case" (Blackwell, 2014) explains that the mother's lawyer from an earlier drug charge would be representing her in her son's death case. This irrelevant connection to a previous drug charge becomes a way to invalidate and negate Tamir's death and his mother's credibility as a parent. More recently, Samaria Rice has moved into a homeless shelter, which would also give a negative connotation of her unfit parenting and ability provide for her children, therefore to blame for Tamir's unsupervised playing with a toy gun. Like other cases, this case shifts the focus from excessive force by law enforcement and puts blame on the victim and victim's family.

Tony Robinson

The perception of Tony Robinson was overwhelming concentrated on the behavior that immediately preceded his death, prompting a number of micro-invalidations and micro-insults based on presumed criminality:

> Authorities have said Robinson, who was unarmed, was shot multiple times after he assaulted Officer Matt Kenny, punching him in the head and knocking him off balance. (Savidge, 2015)

> Anthony Robinson, 19, was killed about 6:30 p.m. as police responded to multiple reports of a disturbance, Koval said. Officers were told a man was jumping in and out of traffic and was suspected of committing battery before he ran into an apartment, he said. An officer forced his way inside after hearing sounds of a disturbance, where Robinson struck the officer in the head, Koval said. The officer then fired his weapon. (Frankel, 2015)

> Robinson was shot after Officer Matt Kenny responded to calls about a man dodging cars in traffic who had allegedly battered another person, according to police officials. They said Kenny fired after Robinson attacked him. (O'Brien, 2015)

One newspaper, a local outlet, highlighted Robinson's past behavior that included criminality:

> Wisconsin court records show that Mr. Robinson pleaded guilty to armed robbery last year and received a probated six-month sentence. Chief Koval declined to comment on Mr. Robinson's record. (Brooks, 2015)

Freddie Gray

Much of the narrative surrounding Freddie Gray focused on the behavior immediately prior to his arrest. Many considered his behavior suspicious and thereby warranted a presumption of criminality, resulting in examples of micro-insults:

> Four bicycle officers tried to stop Gray about 9 a.m. on April 12 in the 1600 block of W. North Ave. for an alleged violation that police have not disclosed. He ran, police said, and the officers caught him and restrained him on the ground while awaiting backup. (Sherman et. al, 2015)

> In a police report filed with the court, Officer Garrett Miller wrote that Gray was stopped after fleeing "unprovoked upon noticing police presence." Miller said a knife was found clipped to Gray's pants pocket and he was arrested. (Johnson & Eversley, 2015)

Also notable in Gray's posthumous portrayal were micro-invalidation, which emphasized both, where he lived, known to be one of the more impoverished and crime-heavy neighborhoods in Baltimore, and also his prior interactions with law enforcement and the criminal justice system. A few newspaper outlets included his physical composition:

> Gray was a 25-year-old resident of the neighborhood around the Gilmor Homes, a Baltimore Housing Authority project. He stood 5 feet 8 and weighed 145 pounds. He had a police record, mainly on drug charges and minor crimes, according to court records reported by the Baltimore Sun. (Muskal, 2015)

> Court records indicate that Gray's arrests were mostly for drug charges and minor crimes, and sometimes were not prosecuted. He had several cases scheduled for trial in the coming months. One case, involving charges for second-degree assault and malicious destruction of property, was scheduled for a June trial. He also faced drug charges that were scheduled for trial in April and May. He has been found guilty of drug charges in the past; his sentences were unclear from court records. (Rector & Marbella, 2015)

Discussion

While media depictions of Black bodies have remained compliant to White supremacist structures using body type, negative images (e.g., picture of victim in mug shot), previous criminal convictions or charges, and allegations of criminal behavior, it is important to realize that individual reporters do not need to be consciously racist. The purpose of this study is not to accuse any individual of holding those values, but to recognize how White privilege and other forms of privilege allow journalists and other media outlets to report on these cases the way they do, without self-reflection of how the words, images, and storylines are disseminated. These narratives play a role in the initial assumption of the victim and can shift the perspective of how these victims are viewed.

In this last section, we discuss the overall movement that has grown in wake of these deaths, #BlackLivesMatter. It is important to recognize social movements and their usefulness in

gaining equality. It is also important to recognize and understand why this movement uses the language of "Black Lives Matter."

#BlackLivesMatter

In the wake of the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, which occurred less than a month apart in Summer 2014, activists, students, and many groups of various racial, class, and social backgrounds came together to protest the ways in which law enforcement handled these situations. In New York City, an organic rally emerged using the slogan "hands up, don't shoot!" which was also being chanted in Ferguson, Missouri. Other cities around the country took notice and joined in solidarity. Fast forward to November 2014, when both the Eric Garner and Michael Brown cases were dismissed because grand juries decided to not indict either officer involved in these cases. The first decision came in the Michael Brown case. Contradictory testimony from eyewitnesses, racial tension in the community of Ferguson, and a prosecutor who seemed to not do his job dictated this case. However, the main argument was that there was no video evidence that confirmed either side's story. Conversely, a week later, a grand jury in Staten Island, New York, put forth a non-indictment verdict for the officer who was implicated in killing Eric Garner. The main difference in this case from Ferguson was the video evidence.

Over the next several days and weeks leading into the holiday season, mass movements began to emerge across U.S. cities shutting down highways, practicing forms of civil disobedience, and chanting "Black Lives Matter." #BlackLivesMatter has become a recognizable hashtag on social media, which has been used to connect individuals and organizations in solidarity against police brutality, excessive force by law enforcement, and racial profiling. Critics of the #BlackLivesMatter movement argue that equality is about "all" lives and therefore saying "Black" lives is limiting and a form of racism. The answer is simple: those who have issue with the term "Black" do not recognize their own privilege and why there is both a historical and systemic need to focus on the brutality the Black community has faced throughout America's existence. If Black lives mattered in the United States, we would not see such disproportional rates of poverty, incarceration, school drop-out, lack of secure housing and other socially significant factors. To not recognize racism as an ongoing problem only exacerbates the issue, silences and marginalizes those affected by it, and does not start the process of discourse on how to change cultural and social paradigms in society that only see young Black men as thugs.

Responsibility of Media

As previously mentioned, the aim of this study is not to accuse the selected newspaper outlets of intentionally perpetuating a negative or insensitive racialized portrayal of any of the aforementioned victims of police brutality. We cannot ascertain the mindsets of neither the authors nor the editorial staffs who finalized the articles' publication, so to make such assumptions would be highly flawed and unethical. However, this study aims to highlight that the White-dominated media, newspapers included, is operated under the perspective of White privilege. Among its many aspects, White privilege incorporates an assumed naïveté as to the negative implications of perceived innocuous verbal and nonverbal behaviors committed by Whites against people of color. Simply put, it is not their obligation to

understand, let alone acknowledge, that what they believe to be a compliment, a term of endearment, a simple observation, or even the presentation of facts is anything but what they intended it to be.

Relative to the horrors of lynching and mob "justice" carried out against people of color on a regular basis during the 19th and 20th centuries, personally mediated racism is rarely committed via overt acts of violence today. For as much as it seems that little progress has been made in the efforts to promote true racial equality, such blatant expressions of racial hatred are usually met with the highest levels of condemnation in American society. The resulting adjustments made are that an individual who aims to exert their White supremacy over a person of color is socially inclined to do so via coded language – micro-aggressions, as previously detailed – as its subtlety limits mainstream detection. Additionally, the nature of micro-aggressions has evolved to include tangential facets and characteristics historically linked to people of color such as socioeconomic status and culture (Clark et. al, 1999). What occurs with the inclusion of tangential facets and characteristics to race is that the line of demarcation between entities that are intentional in their racial disrespect and insensitivity and entities that have no ill will are blurred. Therefore even honest reporting of an incident carries the risk of creating a negative persona for the victim, and that is what the selected newspaper articles exemplify.

A reasonable question can be raised when considering the potential influence of micro-aggressions in media: should an outlet sacrifice journalistic integrity for the sake of a heightened sensitivity to racialized language? The simple answer is a resounding no. Rather, outlets must be more judicious in the information that they decide to present regarding any incident, let alone deaths involving unarmed Black males and law enforcement. The situations previously examined provide many teachable moments. For example, how necessary was it that the audience knew Eric Garner was 6′3", 400 pounds, and had preexisting medical conditions (Goldstein & Schweber, 2014)? What greater clarity was achieved by readers in knowing that Tony Robinson was previously convicted for armed robbery (Brooks, 2015)? How does knowing that he lived in a housing project and had an extensive police record promote a better understanding of why Freddie Gray died (Muskal, 2015)? Relative to the facts of each incident, these pieces of information were peripheral at best. The only contributions they potentially provide are a triggering of negative misconceptions that will be unconsciously and unjustifiably attached to these individuals. What is worse is that because this potential triggering is done in the immediacy following their deaths, when all information is novel, the perception created is very difficult to alter even in the face of more sound, debunking information. The growing number of fatal law enforcement interactions involving unarmed individuals, especially Black males, warrants greater cognizance of the images created by the media of the victims. Simply regurgitating all information provided, most of which comes from the same law enforcement agencies involved in the altercations and could possibly contain an agenda, is no longer acceptable. True understanding of the power of racialized language, both overt and covert, should be the new standard of journalistic integrity.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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