

## Review

# How the Desensitization of Police Violence, Stereotyped Language, and Racial Bias Impact Black Communities

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### ABSTRACT

As the access to create media continues to expand, issues related to the desensitization of police violence, stereotyped language (racial baiting), and implicit bias within the criminal justice system are brought to the forefront highlighting the negative and harmful relationships between the criminal justice system and Black communities. In order to address these issues on a national scale, a call to action is made for psychologists to assist in restructuring the understanding of the relationship of violence, cognition, and media in order to advocate for social justice. Psychological research on the topics are discussed as well as how the field of psychology can inform training within police departments and the communities they serve.

### Keywords

Police violence; Racial bias; Black communities.

### INTRODUCTION

The use of media in social justice movements has allowed for national conversations regarding the need to repair how Black communities are policed.<sup>1,2</sup> Activists use their platforms to highlight the repercussions of aggressive policing as well as the impact that mass media has on promoting biased views of Black victims who experience violence *via* the criminal justice system.<sup>3,4</sup> Despite America's well-documented history of aggressive policing against Black communities,<sup>5</sup> social activists and the general public use video-recording technology to assist in documenting acts of excessive force.<sup>6-8</sup> Due to the availability of video recording technology the unnecessary deaths of people of color flood the media<sup>9</sup>; and despite the explicit imagery the utility of the videos are often viewed with skepticism by many within the criminal justice system.<sup>10,11</sup> Although each situation is nuanced by its unique set of circumstances, there are several recurring issues that are paramount to note: violence desensitization, the use of bias and stereotyped language, lack of adequate training and poor community involvement (e.g., community policing). Addressing these concerns is fundamental when attempting to ameliorate the experience of injustice many Black people feel when dealing with the criminal justice system.

These issues require adept training in areas of cultural competence and community systems as well as research, theory, and practice. The field of psychology is a uniquely qualified group of professionals who could and should assist in constructing healthy relationships between the criminal justice system/police departments and Black communities they serve.<sup>12</sup>

### VIOLENCE, COGNITION AND MEDIA

Research on the impact of violence has consistently found that the more people are exposed to violence in television, video games, and real life, the more they become desensitized or habituated to future violence.<sup>13-17</sup> With the desensitization of violence people's natural negative responses to such stimuli are reduced, along with the amount of empathy and sympathy they have for victims of violence.<sup>18,19</sup> Some researchers have noted that America's trending desensitization has resulted in the development of pro-violent attitudes,<sup>7,15,20,21</sup> that can likely be linked to the increasingly violent media we consume daily. These factors may lead one to wonder: how does violence habituation impact and/or affect the relationship between the criminal justice system and communities of color?

Despite the relevant research on how violence affects individuals, mass media and the criminal justice system continue to utilize videotaped violence in a manner that would create a habituated effect on viewers and jurors alike. For example, the key piece of evidence in the 1991 beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) police officers was videotaped. The video recorded beating of Rodney King exposed the use of police violence to communities that would otherwise not witness such acts.<sup>9</sup> And no matter how shocking it was the first time it was viewed, it became less so after its repeated viewing, ultimately causing a numbing effect with the public and jurors, according to psychologist Aletha Huston<sup>8</sup> and political science professor Lester Spence.<sup>22</sup> Similar to the Rodney King incident, videos of violence in Black communities continue to be shown on a rapid loop on various media platforms to either showcase the improprieties of the police, the victims or both.

According to cognitive psychology, bias often occurs because the brain makes shortcuts in order to process information; also known as heuristics. Examples of heuristics as a method of making decisional shortcuts include using a rule of thumb, stereotyping and/or profiling.<sup>23</sup> Some of these short cuts or biases are blatant (e.g. explicit) in people's lives, while others are implicit. Implicit biases are the attitudes or beliefs that occur unconsciously.<sup>24</sup> Several studies have found that police officers find Black faces to be more menacing and criminal when compared to White faces, and the decision to shoot an unarmed Black person occurred more quickly and with more accuracy than a decision to shoot an unarmed White person.<sup>25-29</sup> Because of quick decisional requirements of police officers and the impact that implicit bias can have on the lives of Black community members, there needs to be an intentional re-training of police officers. Through research and the development of best practices psychologists can inform police departments, judges, lawyers and other important decision-makers on how trauma impacts brain functioning, behavior, and the perspectives of those people affected. Psychologists can help in reducing the possibility of traumatizing communities of color through the constant viewing of violence, can assist in teaching police how to respond to people who suffer from trauma.

Similarly impacting the course of justice is the use of violent, racially charged, fear-mongering imagery in mass media and the larger criminal justice system; which can fuel implicit bias.<sup>3</sup> The exploitation of racial fears in court cases involving Black people has often resulted in a term coined the 'Big Black Man' stereotype.<sup>30</sup> According to the United States Court of Appeals, the use of racial stereotyping can "violently affect a juror's impartiality and must be removed from the courtroom proceeding to the fullest extent possible. It negates the defendant's right to be tried on the evidence in the case and not on extraneous issues".<sup>10</sup> Racial stereotypes in media outlets and courtrooms inevitably prey upon the historical biases of race in America while simultaneously suggesting that the victims are to blame for their deaths.<sup>31-33</sup> All too often media coverage moves from reporting the facts of a case to making suggestive assumptions about why these incidents occurred to the victim. For example, in the Brown case, Michael Brown was depicted as a youth who had a history of being suspended from

school and was described as an "unstoppable, violent brute, who could kill [Wilson] in one punch", or in the Rice case it was noted that "Tamir Rice's father abused women", or in the Powell case headlines read "man was carrying a variable pump air rifle" and finally in the Garner case, Eric Garner was described as a "criminal" who sold loose cigarettes in the community.<sup>31-33</sup> Mass media has continually portrayed Black communities as aggressive, criminally inclined and the "collective antithesis of vulnerable and/or innocent".<sup>34</sup> These violent and biased views have been described as creating a symbiotic relationship between the mass media and the criminal justice system, causing serious negative outcomes for Black communities seeking justice.<sup>30</sup>

The continued replay of violent images and the negative narrative around Black lives brings one large issue to the forefront: how do these images impact communities of color? Although there is no clear line of research examining the impact of violent videos on the Black community, Norris (1992) posited that a traumatic event could be described as any experience by a person disturbing enough to cause symptoms of arousal, intrusion and numbing. Understanding this definition of a traumatic event, the frequent exposure to the shootings of Black people can cause trauma. This trauma has been coined 'race-based trauma' and it argues that people of color experience mental distress similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) when viewing police violence against Black communities. Recent research has found that people of color report high rates of stress, frustration, anger, and anxiety in response to mass media coverage of police violence.<sup>35,36</sup> These trauma responses can be heightened when dealing with and/or re-engaging with the perceived threat.<sup>37</sup> Although there is no research examining the impact of explicitly violent images on police officers perceptions, there is research that suggests that police officers have higher rates of PTSD due to vicarious trauma experienced on the job<sup>38</sup> and when the human brain is under stress, heuristics may dominate over more controlled decision-making processes,<sup>39</sup> possibly making it more difficult for police officers to engage in sound judgments.

## TRAINING NEEDS |

These examples, although only the tip of the iceberg, suggest that there is a significant need for the criminal justice system to become culturally competent. Specifically, there is a need for system professionals and decision-makers (e.g., law enforcement officers, judges, reporters, lawyers) to acknowledge, address, and learn from their individual biases and to understand how their personal beliefs and fears may impact their duties when working with Black communities and possibly perpetuating race based trauma in Black communities. Although the cultural training process has begun in some larger cities (e.g., Oakland, CA, USA and New York, NY, USA), there continues to be a vast majority of cities that have failed to address this training need in-depth.<sup>40</sup> Police officers should also continue to receive education and training on how mental health impacts behavior as well as tools to help identify symptoms of trauma and distress in the community. According to recent databases, approximately 25% of victims killed by the police suffered from some type of mental illness.<sup>41</sup>

Psychologists should provide trainings on topics of bias, discrimination, and prejudice to help minimize the impact of these cognitive based issues when working as staff in the criminal justice system. Psychologists should provide research-based understanding of how issues of cultural incompetence can impact job performance which may be able to enhance relationships between the police and the communities they serve while moving towards an effective community policing approach. Lastly, psychologists should provide education to system professionals on the concept of race-based trauma and what the subsequent trauma symptoms may look like in day-to-day life.

## COMMUNITY NEEDS

Community policing emerged as a response to conflicts between police and mostly non-White and disadvantaged communities in the 1960s and 1970s, which spoke to a disconnect in police-community relations.<sup>5,42</sup> Although the concept of community policing is diverse, according to the literature it is best described as a plan to reduce crime using more effective and efficient police services by building authentic relationships with the community and developing resources aimed at changing crime-causing conditions.<sup>43,44</sup> These services include but are not limited to neighborhood watch, police foot patrols, joint police-community patrols, and community meetings. Community policing aims to make communities not just consumers of police services but partners in crime fighting and emphasizes decentralizing authority in decision-making, problem-focused strategies, and empowering citizens to take an active role in identifying public safety concerns and preventing crime in their own communities.<sup>5,42</sup> Shifting focus to community policing has the opportunity to enhance relationships between police and the citizens of the communities that they serve.<sup>45</sup> Community policing practices have demonstrated improvements in the perceptions of, satisfaction with, and confidence in the police as well as decreased crime-related problems.<sup>42</sup> Through a community policing approach, a greater level of accountability for police officers is fostered as well as collaboration in decision-making between officers and the community.<sup>46,47</sup> Following the incidents of violence against Black men, women, and children, the concept of community policing has been brought to the forefront. Many community supporters and police agencies have discussed ways to strengthen community policing programs using body cameras, expanded training, and increased federal support for police department reform with the sole purpose of increasing community trust.<sup>48</sup>

Community policing has had some success in several communities stretching back to the 1980's such as Flint, Michigan; Houston, Texas; Charleston, South Carolina; Los Angeles, California; and Aurora, Colorado.<sup>49</sup> However, there is a lack of evidence on its specific impact on stereotyping, and racial bias. Given that community policing improves police-community relationships through a working alliance, and stereotyping and racial bias can be combated with more understanding of and cultural competence in interacting with people with different backgrounds (i.e. improved relationships), it stands to reason that community policing may offer some benefit in resolving these problems as well. Furthermore, contact theory suggests that affective and cognitive changes

can occur with positive intergroup contact if there is cooperation, common goals, support from authority figures and status is equal.<sup>50,51</sup>

Psychologists are optimally positioned to conduct needs analyses and program evaluations, support implementation of programs, assess outcomes, and apply these to troubleshooting problems. Research suggests that if the public perceives police behavior as just and fair, they are more likely to view their authority as legitimate<sup>52</sup>; thus, transparency in police procedure and cases of police brutality are imperative in restoring public confidence. Through the use of research and program development psychologists can assist criminal justice policy makers in developing positive working relationships between the community and the police.

## CONCLUSION

Traditional and nontraditional media use has recently been utilized to shift the national conversation regarding the relationship between the criminal justice system and the Black community.<sup>1-4,9</sup> In order to achieve a positive relationship between the criminal justice system and the Black community, there must be a broader discussion on how bias, racially charged language, and stereotyping are used in media and the criminal justice system.<sup>3</sup> Although there is no quick fix, this is an opportunity for psychologists to use their platforms to advance the cause of social justice. Through the use of research, psychologists are keenly aware of the impact that violence has on the brain and how vicarious trauma impacts communities of color. Psychologists are also aware of how education and training on topics of implicit bias and race based trauma can shift interactions through community policing practices.

Psychology does have a role in developing more equitable social and political institutions<sup>53</sup> and through graduate and continuing education,<sup>12</sup> psychologists can make strong contributions to help mend the relationships between the Black community and the criminal justice system. By engaging in research and advocacy, psychologists can provide training to both the Black community and police departments on how violence, cognition, and media impact our mental health and relationships. Due to the diverse and varied education that psychologists receive, they are in a unique position to simultaneously provide the necessary training around the underlying issues between the criminal justice system and communities of color; while also providing counseling to address the complex feelings that these issues bring up for communities and police departments. This is a formal call to action for all of psychology to stand up and advocate for the advancement of the Black Lives Matter movement.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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