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# Black Racial Stereotypes and Victim Blaming: Implications for Media Coverage and Criminal Proceedings in Cases of Police Violence against Racial and Ethnic Minorities

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*Posthumous stereotypical media portrayals of Michael Brown and other racial and ethnic minority victims of police violence have sparked questions about the influence of racial stereotypes on public opinions about their deaths and criminal proceedings for their killers. However, few studies have empirically investigated how the specific type of information released about a victim impacts opinions surrounding such incidents. Participants (N = 453) read about an altercation that resulted in a shooting death where the race of the victim and shooter (Black vs. White) was randomly assigned. Participants learned either negative, Black male stereotypic or positive, Black male counterstereotypic information about the victim. Next, participants appraised levels of fault and blame, sympathy and empathy for the victim and shooter, and indictment recommendations for the shooter. Findings suggest that the type of information released about a victim can significantly sway attitudes toward the victim and the shooter. Implications for media portrayals of racial/ethnic minority victims of police violence and its impact on criminal sentencing are discussed.*

> "Michael Brown, 18, due to be buried on Monday, was no angel . . . 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 . . . "
> *John Eligon, New York Times, August 24, 2014*

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The above quote from a *New York Times* article titled "Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks Grappling with Problem and Promise" was published just days after the shooting death of Michael Brown. He was an 18-year-old, unarmed Black teenager shot by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, MO. A similar characterization of Brown was replayed outside of print media on television and across social media as well. For instance, HBO talk show host Bill Maher commented, "I'm sorry, but Michael Brown's people say he is a gentle giant . . . He was acting like a thug, not like a gentle giant" (Chasmar, 2014).

But these types of descriptions are not an anomaly (see Reinka & Leach, 2017; Scott, Ma, Sadler, & Correll, 2017 for other perceptions of police violence). Take, for instance, posthumous characterizations of Eric Garner, a 43-year-old unarmed Black man killed in 2014 by New York City Police officer Daniel Pantaleo. New York Post editor Bob McManus described Garner as a "career petty criminal [who] experienced dozens of arrests, but had learned nothing from them." McManus blamed Garner for his own death, asserting that he was a "victim of himself . . . just that simple" (McManus, 2014). Alton Sterling, a 37-year-old unarmed Black man fatally shot by two Baton Rouge, LA, police officers, Blane Salamoni and Howie Lake II, in 2016 was similarly characterized. A *Baltimore Sun* article about Sterling's death begins with "Alton was not an admirable man. His rap sheet . . . is 46-pages long and includes convictions going back 20 years for illegal weapons possession, battery, carnal knowledge of a teenager (whom he impregnated), possession of stolen property, disturbing the peace, domestic abuse, and, just last month, failing to register as a sex offender" (Bishop, 2016).

Portrayals of racial and ethnic minority victims of police violence like the ones mentioned above have been criticized for their potentially damaging influence on public opinion. But what influence do these characterizations have on attitudes toward victims, their killers, and ultimately, criminal proceedings? To explore this question, we first review how race is portrayed in crime coverage both generally and when representing a victim. Next, in line with our specific research goal, we highlight some existing work on the role that stereotyping can play in victim blaming.

*Race and Crime Coverage*

Research has not only repeatedly shown that racial minorities are overrepresented as criminals or perpetrators compared to their White counterparts in the media, but also that this media bias promotes public hostility toward those groups (e.g., Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman, 1992; Russell, 1998). Relatedly, other work regarding the criminal justice system and sentencing suggests that harsher punishments are given for crimes involving racial and ethnic minorities compared to crimes involving Whites (e.g., Bobo & Johnson,

2004; Russell, 1998). Furthermore, content analyses have found that Blacks are also less likely to be depicted as victims than Whites (Bjornstrom, Kaufman, Peterson, & Slater, 2010; Dixon, Azocar, & Casas, 2003). Repeated exposure to the underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities as victims and overrepresentation of Whites as victims may alter viewers' perceptions of reality, ultimately, delegitimizing racial/ethnic minorities as victims and normalizing Whites as the archetypal victim.

However, when racial minorities are depicted as victims, they are often dehumanized, demonized, and criminalized. For example, Smiley and Fakunle (2016) argue that media depictions of Black male victims are microinsults and microinvalidations. Specifically, their content analysis of recent media coverage of the deaths of six unarmed Black males (Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Tony Robinson, and Freddie Gray) by law enforcement uncovered four major recurring themes: (1) fixation on victims' past and/or current behavior as criminal, (2) focus on victims' physical composition (e.g., large stature) and attire, (3) emphasis on the location where the victims were killed or lived as crime-ridden and impoverished, and (4) negative, stereotypical elements about the victims' lifestyles. Yet, to date, the broader impact these portrayals have yet to be experimentally investigated.

*Victim Blaming*

One potential outcome of negative, stereotypical media characterizations of racial/ethnic minorities of police violence is that they serve as a rationale for blaming these victims for their own deaths. To our knowledge, no research has directly explored the impact of racial stereotyping on victim blaming murder cases experimentally. Much of empirical work regarding victim blaming has largely centered on rape incidents. Specifically, previous research has focused on whether a victim's social respectability (e.g., a woman having more sexual partners signaling less social respectability) directly influences attributions of fault and blame in rape cases. Much of this work suggests that less socially respectable rape victims are perceived to be more at fault for their own rape and that perpetrators of rape against less socially respectable victims receive less harsh punishments (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Hockett, Smith, Klausing, & Saucier, 2015). Merging rape victim research with racial group membership, stereotyping, and criminal research, more fault should be attributed to a less socially respectable shooting victim, which, in turn, would lead to a less harsh punishment for the homicide perpetrator. Here, we propose that negative stereotypes portrayed in the media about Black victims may decrease their perceived social respectability, and consequently, play a significant role in opinions surrounding the incident and criminal proceedings.

*The Current Study*

Despite the prevalence of research regarding racial bias in media coverage of crime, there is little empirical data to speak to how stereotypic portrayals of racial and ethnic minority victims might impact public opinions. This question is particularly worthy of exploration since criminal trials often occur long after a death, giving the media ample time with which to sway the view of the incident. Here, we examined how learning negative, Black racially stereotypic information versus positive, Black counterstereotypic information about a shooting victim affects attributions of fault and blame, sympathy and empathy toward the victim and shooter, and punishment recommendations for the shooter. Consistent with previous research on perceived respectability of victims and attributions of fault and blame, we predicted that participants given negative, Black male stereotypical victim information would attribute more fault and blame to the victim relative to those given positive, Black male counterstereotypic victim information. Likewise, we expected that participants would express less empathy and sympathy for negatively stereotyped victims. Finally, we predicted that participants would attribute less blame and fault, express greater sympathy and empathy, and provide more lenient punishment recommendations for shooters of negatively characterized victims relative to positively characterized victims. Given the emphasis placed on both victim and perpetrator race in previous media coverage research and in recent public discourse, we also wanted to investigate whether these same Black stereotypes also would negatively impact views of White victims. Therefore, victim and shooter race were also manipulated to examine the broader effects that may stem from the media endorsing negative, Black stereotypic criminal portrayals for victims regardless of racial background.

# Method

*Participants and Design*

A total of 475 participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk to take part in a study on juror decision making in exchange for a small payment. Participants ($n = 22$) who failed key manipulation checks were excluded resulting in a final sample of 453 participants (age range: 18–83 years, $M = 38.29$, $SD = 12.50$; 73% White; 48% female). Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (Victim Information: Negative, Black Stereotypic or Positive, Black Counterstereotypic) × 2 (Race of Victim: Black or White) × 2 (Race of Shooter: Black or White) between-subjects design.

## Materials

*Incident scenario.* Participants first read a brief account of a physical altercation between a victim and a shooter following a minor traffic accident. The scenario stated that the shooter "discharged a semi-automatic pistol several times, fatally wounding [the victim]" and that "a police investigation determined that [the victim] was unarmed." The scenario also included conflicting witness reports designed to resemble some of the ambiguity seen in the Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown cases (see the Appendix for the full prompt). Victim and shooter race were manipulated by using racially stereotypical names (e.g., Darnell Jackson as a stereotypically Black name and Neil Schwartz as a stereotypically White name) and their explicitly stated racial group membership. To isolate the role victim portrayals play, no images were shown since past work has demonstrated that skin tone can significantly impact perceiver's emotional discomfort and the memorability of both perpetrators and victims (Dixon & Maddox, 2005). This scenario was pretested by 14 research assistants (9 female; 8 White) who were blind to study hypotheses and goals, using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all,* 5 = *very much so*) assessing: believability ($M = 3.57$, $SD = .94$), realistic qualities ($M = 4.07$, $SD = .83$), and similarity to the Trayvon Martin ($M = 3.79$, $SD = .80$) and Michael Brown ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.01$) cases. One sample *t*-tests showed that these scenarios were above chance in their believability, realistic qualities, and their similarity to both cases (all $t$s > 2.19, all $p$s < .05, all $d$s > .59).

*Victim information.* Two short biographies adapted from previous research (Blair, Judd, Sadler, & Jenkins, 2002) were developed and contained either negative stereotypes or positive counterstereotypes of Blacks. To explore the role that the application of negative, Black male stereotypes has on shooting victims regardless of racial background, these biographies were used to manipulate the victim information for both White and Black victims (see the Appendix for full biographies). The same sample of research assistants listed above also pretested these biographies using the same 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much so*) assessing: levels of African American/Black stereotypicality, negative and positive valence, believability, and the realistic nature of the biography. The negative, Black male stereotypic victim biography description was rated as significantly more stereotypical of African Americans/Blacks ($M = 4.21$, $SD = .70$) than the positive, Black male counterstereotypic victim information description ($M = 1.57$, $SD = .65$), $t(13) = 9.14$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.44$. Likewise, the negative, Black stereotypic victim biography was rated as significantly more negative ($M = 4.36$, $SD = .63$) and less positive ($M = 1.50$, $SD = .52$) than the positive, Black counterstereotypic victim biography ($M_{neg} = 1.29$, $SD_{neg} = .47$; $M_{pos} = 4.57$, $SD_{pos} = .65$), $t_{neg}(13) = 12.65$, $p_{neg} < .001$, $d_{neg} = 5.52$; $t_{pos}(13) = 15.74$, $p_{pos,} < .001$,

$d_{pos} = 5.22$). There were no differences in perceived realistic qualities or believ-ability (all $ts < 1.61$, all $ps > .13$).

*Dependent Measures*

*Manipulation check.*    In line with the goals of this study, participants that either did not accurately recall that the victim did not have a weapon and/or the races of the victim and shooter were excluded from analyses ($n = 22$).

*Incident assessment.*    Using a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = s*trongly agree*), participants assessed attributions of fault (e.g., "The vic-tim/shooter is at fault in this incident") and their degree of sympathy and empathy with the victim and shooter (e.g., "I can sympathize with the victim/shooter," "I can understand why the victim/shooter behaved the way he did," "I would behave in a manner similar to the victim/shooter if placed in this situation"). Participants were also asked to provide percentage levels of blame on a sliding scale for both the victim and the shooter on one inclusive scale (i.e., no more than 100% of blame in the incident could be attributed across the victim and shooter).

*Indictment/sentencing recommendations.*    Participants were told: "The in-cident you read about previously is now being considered as a criminal case. As a juror, you are able to provide sentencing recommendations for the shooter." Par-ticipants were provided with definitions for first-degree murder, second-degree murder, voluntary manslaughter, involuntary manslaughter, and justifiable homi-cide adapted from FindLaw.com to use while providing an indictment/sentencing recommendation for the shooter. Using a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), participants assessed each of the previously mentioned sentencing options (e.g., "The shooter should be charged with first-degree murder").

*Individual differences measures.*    To control for levels of racial prejudice that could bias responses to the incident, participants completed the eight-item Symbolic Racism Scale (Sears & Henry, 2003). Participant ratings were averaged on this scale to form a composite ($\alpha = .89$). Additionally, participants reported their familiarity with and attitudes regarding the Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown cases (e.g., "I am very familiar with the _____ case"; "I think that the decision in the _____ case was fair"). Finally, participants provided basic demographic information (i.e., gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, and profession) and were debriefed.

## Results and Discussion

First, potential differences based on participant race/ethnicity (White/non-White due to sample size) as well as participants' gender and their familiarity with and attitudes toward the Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown cases were explored. No meaningful statistically significant differences were found on these factors, so analyses have been collapsed across these variables (all $ps > .33$). However, differences did emerge regarding participants' level of racial prejudice based on their responses to the Symbolic Racism Scale.[1] Consequently, racial prejudice was included as a covariate in all analyses. Therefore, a series of 2 (Victim Information: Negative or Positive) × 2 (Victim Race: Black or White) × 2 (Shooter Race: Black or White) between-subjects Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVAs) controlling for racial prejudice were conducted. Only findings related to the primary hypothesis regarding victim information and statistically significant interactions are discussed below.
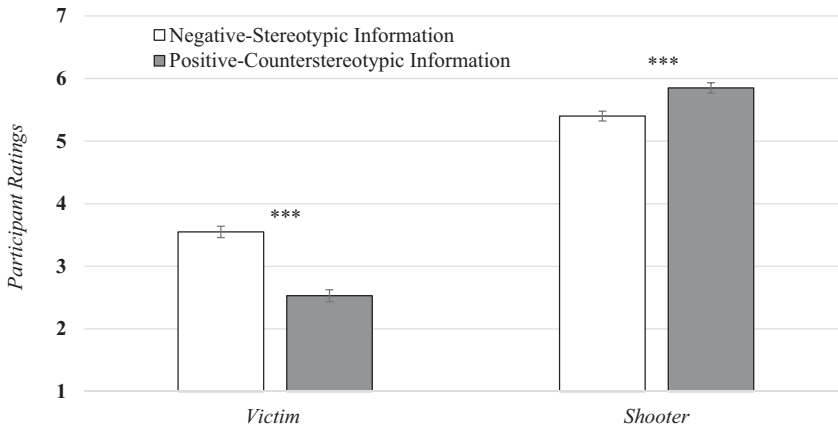
### Attributions of Fault and Blame

Results revealed a main effect of victim information such that the victim was viewed as significantly more at fault ($M_{neg} = 3.55$, $SD_{neg} = 1.38$; $M_{pos} = 2.53$, $SD_{pos} = 1.44$; $F(1, 444) = 57.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$) and significantly more to blame ($M_{neg} = 33.54$, $SD_{neg} = 20.26$; $M_{pos} = 19.65$, $SD_{pos} = 21.10$; $F(1, 444) = 49.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$) after participants read negative, Black stereotypic information about the victim compared to after reading positive, Black counterstereotypic information. Relatedly, the shooter was also viewed less at fault ($M_{neg} = 5.35$, $SD_{neg} = 1.15$; $M_{pos} = 5.85$, $SD_{pos} = 1.21$; $F(1, 444) = 13.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$) and less to blame ($M_{neg} = 66.46$, $SD_{neg} = 20.26$; $M_{pos} = 80.35$, $SD_{pos} = 21.10$; $F(1, 444) = 49.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$) after participants read negative, Black stereotypic information about the victim compared to reading positive, Black counterstereotypic information. There was also a main effect of victim race such that White victims ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.45$) were viewed as significantly more at fault than Black victims ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.53$; $F(1, 444) = 4.97$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$; see Figure 1).

A series of interactions also emerged reflecting a pattern of victim information continuing to influence attributions of fault and blame. A marginal

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[1]Racial/ethnic group and gender differences were observed in racial prejudice levels ($F_{race}$ (4, 447) = 4.75, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$; $t_{gender}$ (449) = 2.12, $p = .04$, $d = .20$). White ($M = 24.45$, $SD = 9.91$) and Asian participants ($M = 25.90$, $SD = 8.07$) were higher in Symbolic Racism than Black ($M = 18.45$, $SD = 8.63$), Latino ($M = 20.22$, $SD = 8.54$), and multiracial participants ($M = 20.36$, $SD = 8.13$). Male participants ($M = 24.73$, $SD = 9.26$) were higher in Symbolic Racism than female participants ($M = 22.81$, $SD = 10.04$).
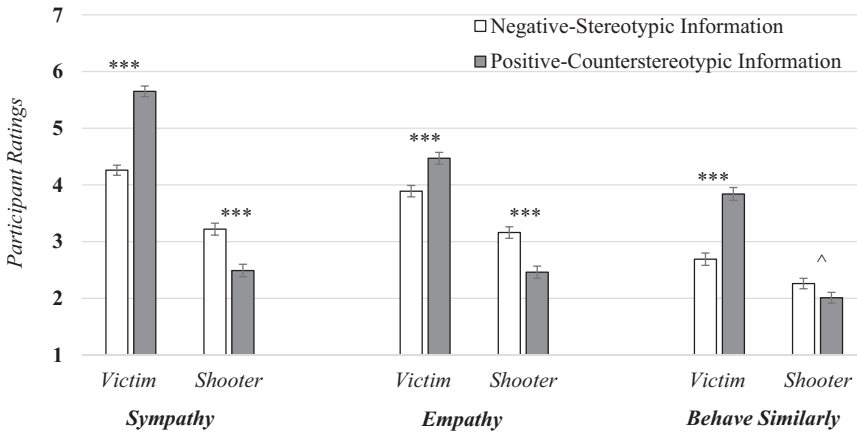
**Fig. 1.** Attributions of fault for the victim and shooter as a function of victim information (*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$). Error bars represent $\pm 1$ SE.

Victim Information $\times$ Shooter Race interaction on shooter fault ($F(1, 444) = 2.97$, $p = .09$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$) revealed the Black shooter being viewed as marginally more at fault ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 1.17$) than the White shooter ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 1.24$) when positive, Black counterstereotypic victim information was presented, $t(215) = 1.66$, $p = .10$, $d = .22$. No differences in fault were observed when participants read negative, Black stereotypic victim information ($M_{Black} = 5.35$, $SD_{Black} = 1.15$; $M_{White} = 5.45$, $SD_{White} = 1.28$, $t(234) = .60$, $p = .55$). A significant Victim Information $\times$ Shooter Race interaction on victim blame ($F(1, 444) = 4.42$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$) emerged with positively, Black counterstereotyped victims being perceived as less to blame when there was a Black shooter ($M = 16.55$, $SD = 18.88$) than when there was a White shooter ($M = 22.85$, $SD = 22.81$, $t(215) = 2.22$, $p = .03$, $d = .46$). There was no difference when participants read negative, Black stereotypic victim information ($M_{Black} = 32.38$, $SD_{Black} = 19.13$; $M_{White} = 34.64$, $SD_{White} = 21.44$), $t(234) = .66$, $p = .51$.

In sum, these results suggest that when negative, Black racially stereotypic information is provided about the victim, the victim (regardless of race) is viewed as being more at fault and more to blame during a shooting incident. Additionally, these findings suggest that when positive, Black counterstereotypic victim information is provided, Black shooters may be viewed as more at fault and more to blame than White shooters, which is in line with Black criminality stereotypes (e.g., Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Entman, 1992). We also show that White victims are perceived as more at fault than Black victims. Although this finding is somewhat surprising, it is consistent with some studies on victim blaming in rape cases that suggest that more socially respectable victims are seen as more

**Fig. 2.** Levels of sympathy, empathy, and how similarly one would behave for the victim and shooter as a function of victim information. ($\hat{\ }p = .11$, $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$). Error bars represent $\pm 1$ *SE*.

at fault for placing themselves in dangerous situations (Jones & Aronson, 1973). Additionally, social desirability concerns may be at play since previous research shows that Whites in particular may want to display more egalitarian approaches to race and stereotyping (e.g., McConahay, 1986; O'Brien et al., 2010). Therefore, additional work is needed to explore these possibilities.

*Sympathy and Empathy with the Victim*

Analyses revealed a main effect of victim information on participants' sympathy for the victim ($F(1, 444) = 111.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$), on participants' understanding of the victim's behavior, $F(1, 444) = 14.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, and on participants' agreement that they would behave in a manner similar to the victim ($F(1, 444) = 53.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$). Participants expressed less sympathy for the victim ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.52$), less understanding of the victim's behavior ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.51$), and reported wanting to behave less in a manner similar to the victim ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.65$) after reading negative, Black stereotypic information compared to reading positive, Black counterstereotypic information about the victim ($M_{sympathy} = 5.65$, $SD_{sympathy} = 1.23$; $M_{understand} = 4.47$, $SD_{understand} = 1.56$; $M_{behave} = 3.84$, $SD_{behave} = 1.70$; see Figure 2).

A Victim Race × Shooter Race interaction also emerged on behaving similarly to the victim, $F(1, 444) = 5.54$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Participants identified more with behaving similarly as a White victim when there was a Black

shooter ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.74$) compared to when there was a White shooter ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.76$), $t(214) = -2.00$, $p = .05$, $d = .27$. The same pattern did not emerge with a Black victim ($M_{Black} = 3.00$, $SD_{Black} = 1.84$; $M_{White} = 3.32$, $SD_{White} = 1.71$, $t(235) = 1.39$, $p = .18$).

In sum, sympathy and empathy for the victim were significantly impacted by whether positive, Black counterstereotypic versus negative, Black stereotypic information was presented. Although not conclusive, these data also suggest that the incidences with a White victim and Black shooter may have stronger effects.

*Sympathy and Empathy with the Shooter*

Analyses also revealed main effects of victim information on participants' sympathy for and empathy with the shooter such that participants expressed more sympathy with the shooter after reading negative, Black stereotypic information ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.66$) than positive, Black counterstereotypic information ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.60$) ($F(1, 444) = 21.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$). Participants reported understanding the shooter's behavior to a greater degree ($M_{neg} = 3.16$, $SD_{neg} = 1.65$; $M_{pos} = 2.46$, $SD_{pos} = 1.54$) ($F(1, 444) = 21.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$) and wanting to behave in a manner similar to the shooter marginally more after reading negative, Black stereotypic victim information ($M_{neg} = 2.26$, $SD_{neg} = 1.47$; $M_{pos} = 2.01$, $SD_{pos} = 1.40$) ($F(1, 444) = 2.54$, $p = .11$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$; see Figure 2).

Victim information also interacted with other factors in its influence on empathy for the shooter. There was a marginal Victim Information × Shooter Race interaction regarding wanting to behave in a manner similar to the shooter, $F(1, 444) = 3.15$, $p = .08$, $\eta_p^2 = .007$. Participants were more likely to report wanting to behave similarly to the White shooter ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.51$) compared to the Black shooter ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 1.26$) after reading positive, Black counterstereotypic victim information, $t(215) = 2.06$, $p = .04$, $d = .28$. There was no difference after reading negative, Black stereotypic victim information regarding behaving similarly to the shooter ($M_{Black} = 2.23$, $SD_{Black} = 1.50$; $M_{White} = 2.29$, $SD_{White} = 1.74$), $t(234) = -.30$, $p = .76$.

Victim and shooter race also influenced participants' sympathy and empathy with the shooter. There was a marginal Victim Race × Shooter Race interaction on sympathy with the shooter, $F(1, 444) = 3.66$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Participants expressed more sympathy with the White shooter ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.70$) compared to the Black shooter ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.63$) with a Black victim, $t(235) = 2.08$, $p = .04$, $d = .26$; no differences emerged when there was a White victim ($M_{Black} = 3.03$, $SD_{Black} = 1.61$; $M_{White} = 2.88$, $SD_{White} = 1.70$), $t(214) = -.69$, $p = .49$.

A marginal main effect revealed that the shooter's behavior was also understood to a greater degree when there was a White victim ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.64$) compared to a Black victim ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.62$), $F(1, 444) = 3.51$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. A marginal main effect of shooter race also surfaced such that the behavior

of a White shooter ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.70$) was understood to a greater degree than that of a Black shooter ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.56$), $F(1, 444) = 3.81$, $p = .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. These effects were qualified by a marginal Victim Race × Shooter Race interaction, $F(1, 444) = 3.53$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$. Participants understood the behavior of the White shooter ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.67$) more than that of the Black shooter ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.52$) when there was a Black victim, $t(235) = 2.69$, $p = .01$, $d = .35$. There was no difference when a White victim was involved ($M_{Black} = 2.97$, $SD_{Black} = 1.56$; $M_{White} = 2.96$, $SD_{White} = 1.74$), $t(214) = -.07$, $p = .95$.

Additionally, there was a marginal Victim Race × Shooter Race interaction regarding wanting to behave in a manner similar to the shooter, $F(1, 444) = 3.13$, $p = .08$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Participants reported wanting to behave more similarly to the White shooter ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.49$) compared to the Black shooter ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 1.27$) when there was a Black victim, $t(235) = 2.30$, $p = .02$, $d = .30$. There was no difference with a White victim ($M_{Black} = 2.26$, $SD_{Black} = 1.48$; $M_{White} = 2.13$, $SD_{White} = 1.52$), $t(214) = -.61$, $p = .54$.

Overall, sympathy and empathy for the shooter were also significantly influenced when positive information was presented about the victim. However, when examining the role that shooter and victim race played, participants were more likely to endorse the shooter's behavior when the shooter was White compared to when the shooter was Black. This was particularly true when there was a White shooter and Black victim. Although our participant sample was primarily White, this data converge with previous findings, demonstrating that Whites are more often seen as a true victim compared to Blacks (Bjornstrom et al., 2010; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).

*Indictment/Sentencing Recommendations for the Shooter*

Analyses also revealed a main effect of victim information on participants' indictment/sentencing recommendations for first-degree murder, second-degree murder, and justifiable homicide recommendations (see Figure 3). Participants were more likely to recommend a first-degree murder recommendation after reading positive, Black counterstereotypic victim information ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 1.43$) than when negative, Black stereotypic victim information ($M = 1.55$, $SD = 1.13$) was presented, $F(1, 444) = 6.47$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Similarly, participants were more likely to make a second-degree murder recommendation after reading positive, Black counterstereotypic victim information ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 2.39$) than after reading negative, Black stereotypic victim information ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 2.12$), $F(1, 444) = 17.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$). Relatedly, participants were more likely to recommend justifiable homicide when negative, Black stereotypic victim information ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.98$) was presented than when positive, Black counterstereotypic victim information was presented ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.62$), $F(1, 444) = 22.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. There was no main effect of victim information
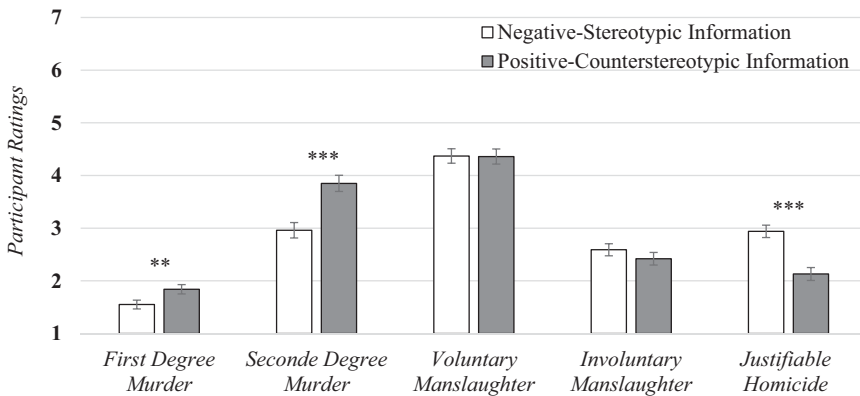
**Fig. 3.** Indictment recommendations as a function of victim information (*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$). Error bars represent $\pm 1$ *SE*.

for voluntary manslaughter ($M_{pos} = 4.37$, $SD_{pos} = 2.91$; $M_{neg} = 4.36$, $SD_{neg} = 2.00$, $F(1, 444) = .02$, $p = .90$) or involuntary manslaughter ($M_{pos} = 2.42$, $SD_{pos} = 1.73$; $M_{neg} = 2.59$, $SD_{neg} = 1.79$, $F(1, 444) = .83$, $p = .36$).

Analyses also revealed a marginal Victim Information × Shooter Race interaction on second-degree murder recommendations, $F(1, 444) = 2.43$, $p = .12$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. There was a marginal difference regarding the likelihood of the Black shooter receiving a second-degree murder recommendation relative to the White shooter when positive, Black countertstereotypic victim information was presented, $t(215) = 1.38$, $p = .17$, $d = .18$; however, no difference emerged when negative, Black stereotypic information was presented, $t(234) = .82$, $p = .41$. There was also a Victim Information × Shooter Race interaction on involuntary manslaughter recommendation, $F(1, 444) = 4.43$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Participants were marginally more likely to recommend involuntary manslaughter for a Black shooter than a White shooter after reading negative, Black stereotypic victim information ($t(234) = 1.84$, $p = .07$, $d = .24$), but there was no difference after reading positive victim, Black counterstereotypic information, $t(215) = 1.11$, $p = .27$. Finally, there was a marginal Victim Information × Shooter Race interaction on justifiable homicide recommendations, $F(1, 444) = 3.48$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Participants were more likely to recommend justifiable homicide for the White shooter than the Black shooter after reading positive, Black counterstereotypic victim information ($t(215) = 2.74$, $p = .01$, $d = .36$), but no difference occurred after reading negative, Black stereotypic victim information, $t(234) = .18$, $p = .86$ (see Table 1 for means).

Finally, victim and shooter race also impacted indictment/sentencing recommendations. Analyses revealed a Victim Race × Shooter Race interaction on

**Table 1.** Indictment Recommendations as a Function of Victim Information, Victim Race, and Shooter Race

| | Victim information | Black victim | White victim | Black Shooter | White shooter |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **First-Degree Murder** | Negative | 1.62 (1.34) | 1.47 (.85) | 1.55 (1.17) | 1.54 (1.09) |
| | Positive | 1.83 (1.46) | 1.85 (1.40) | 1.89 (1.48) | 1.79 (1.38) |
| **Second-Degree Murder** | Negative | 2.92 (2.21) | 3.01 (2.02) | 2.85 (2.10) | 3.08 (2.51) |
| | Positive | 3.70 (2.36) | 4.02 (2.43) | 4.07 (2.41)[a] | 3.63 (2.36)[a] |
| **Voluntary Manslaughter** | Negative | 4.32 (2.05) | 4.41 (1.95) | 4.28 (1.96) | 4.45 (2.04) |
| | Positive | 4.56 (2.19) | 4.17 (2.19) | 4.28 (2.24) | 4.47 (2.14) |
| **Involuntary Manslaughter** | Negative | 2.44 (1.71) | 2.75 (1.87) | 2.80 (1.90)[b] | 2.37 (1.65)[b] |
| | Positive | 2.33 (1.72) | 2.51 (1.74) | 2.29 (1.67) | 2.55 (1.79) |
| **Justifiable Homicide** | Negative | 2.82 (1.96) | 3.08 (2.00) | 2.97 (1.91) | 2.92 (2.05) |
| | Positive | 2.14 (1.73) | 2.12 (1.50) | 1.84 (1.36)[c] | 2.43 (1.81)[c] |

*Note*. Standard deviations are in parentheses; all values reflect 1–7 ratings. Means with the same superscripts indicate significant or marginally significant differences when comparing victim information conditions.

justifiable homicide recommendations, $F (1, 444) = 4.43, p < .04, \eta_p^2 = .02$. Participants were more likely to recommend justifiable homicide for a White shooter ($M = 2.87, SD = 2.06$) than a Black shooter ($M = 2.10, SD = 1.58$) when there was a Black victim, $t(235) = 3.23, p < .001, d = .42$; no difference emerged when there was a White victim ($M_{\text{White}} = 2.45, SD_{\text{White}} = 1.80; M_{\text{Black}} = 2.76, SD_{\text{Black}} = 1.87, t(214) = 1.22, p = .22$).

Here, we see a third type of evidence demonstrating that the type of victim information also shapes criminal proceedings and the level of punishment for the shooter. In general, positive, Black counterstereotypic victim information resulted in harsher sentencing outcomes. Additionally, there were also some interactions between shooter and victim race suggesting that Black shooters are more likely to get harsher punishments compared to White shooters, particularly when positive, Black counterstereotypic victim information is provided.

## Conclusions and Implications

In sum, these results highlight the powerful impact that the media can have in not only shaping how the public feels about a shooting victim, but also how blame is attributed and punishment is recommended for the shooter. When negative, Black stereotypical information was given about a victim, it significantly colored those victims as being more at fault for their own deaths compared to when positive, Black counterstereotypical information was provided regardless of the victim's race. Even views of White victims were overshadowed by the application of negative, Black racial group stereotypes demonstrating how detrimental such

portrayals can be for any victim, let alone for racial/ethnic minorities. Furthermore, this same negative, Black stereotypic information about a victim also made the shooter less at fault and to blame which supports past work regarding perceived social respectability and rape victims (e.g., Grubb & Turner, 2012; Hockett et al., 2015).

It is important to note that when race was held constant in the shooting altercation (i.e., White shooter, White victim or Black shooter, Black victim), the differences regarding levels of perceived fault and blame were not as strong. This suggests that while victim information clearly impacts perceptions of both the victim and the shooter, the interracial nature of shooting altercations has a particularly strong effect on shaping how shooting incidences are viewed and the levels of blame that are applied. Additionally, the present study did not manipulate victim and shooter gender or the type of stereotypical information. Previous work has demonstrated that Black stereotypes are not applied to Black men and Black women equally (Dukes, 2012; Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). Consequently, additional work is needed to examine incidents where the race and gender of the parties involved and specific stereotypes are varied.

Finally, although the current study did not explicitly examine police violence against racial and ethnic minorities, these data still provide some insight into how victims may be viewed in light of the type of background information released about them within police interactions. However, the relative social status and perceived authority police officers have may actually exacerbate the impact of negative victim information. At the same time, law enforcement has also had negative stereotypes painted about them (National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, 2016). Therefore, future research should investigate the effects of media portrayals regarding law enforcement. Additionally, the application of other stereotypes, the role that photos, videos, and imagery may play in these incidents, and how positive versus negative representations shape attitudes long term are also essential future directions.

We caution readers in concluding that all victims should be portrayed positively since in some cases, shooters are not at fault and victims really are to blame. However, these data suggest that if the media were to at least balance their descriptions of racial and ethnic minority victims with nonstereotypical details or positive traits and attributes, it could lead to fairer trials (e.g., Blair, Ma, & Lenton, 2001; Rudman, Ashmore, & Gary, 2001). Additionally, although the present study only manipulated victim information, these data also imply that positive versus negative information about a shooter could significantly shape perceptions of the shooter as well.

Consequently, we propose that new guidelines and social policies should be created to limit the types of information that can be released about cases, especially in the early stages of investigation. These guidelines could be an extension to existing ones like the Society of Professional Journalist Code of Ethics that

states that journalist should "avoid stereotyping," "balance the public's need for information again potential harm," "show compassion for those who may be affected by new coverage," and "expose unethical conduct in journalism (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014)."

Relatedly, new guidelines should also push reporters to avoid vague, biased, or inflammatory terminology when describing the incident to allow the public to form an opinion (McBride, 2013; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). Only information pertinent to the actual incident itself should be released. Guidelines should also clearly state not to include superfluous details such as what the victim was wearing, where they were, or details about the victim's social life and their past that are irrelevant to the incident itself (Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls and Young Women, 2012; Global Protection Center, 2013). New training protocols regarding the neutrality of reporting could also aid in curtailing stereotypes often introduced during investigations.

Additionally, other work has shown that pretrial exposure to both television and other forms of media can significantly sway jury member attitudes regarding legal policies and verdict endorsements (e.g., Daftary-Kapur, Dumas, & Penrod, 2010; Greene, 1990; Ogloff & Vidmar, 1994; Studebaker & Penrod, 1997). Given the media's potential to influence criminal proceedings (pretrial evidence), a closer look at the interface between media and the criminal justice system may be necessary. Take, for instance, California's Victims' Bill of Rights Act of 2008: Marsy's Law that mandates that victims "be treated with fairness and respect for his or her privacy and dignity, and to be free from intimidation, harassment, and abuse, throughout the criminal or juvenile justice process." How might the media be held accountable for unethical reporting that influences criminal proceedings?

These recommendations are not a call for limitations on freedom of the press or freedom of speech. To the contrary, we assert that balanced press and balanced speech is the fairest approach for all individuals involved. Due to First Amendment rights, we acknowledge that policies such as these likely cannot be implemented fully. Rather a system such as "naming and shaming" that describes the practice of either an internal or external group publicizing that an organization has behaved in an unacceptable way may be an easier way to increase accountability and fair reporting. This approach is often employed in international law and corporate actions such as environmental emissions (e.g., Kelley, 2017; Konar & Cohen, 1997) and has shown promise to positively shape behavior and change within those organizations. It would be essential for these new standards to be shared widely and for media outlets to make a public pledge to uphold the new standards. News sources could then take it upon themselves to monitor the behavior of each other or external groups could spark discussions on fair reporting to aid in eradicating media victim blaming. Further, as consumers of mass media, the general public also has a tremendous power to hold the media accountable for their actions by calling attention to biased reporting using personal social media.

In sum, past research highlights that Blacks are more likely to be shown as criminals than victims, are more likely to be pictured being physically restrained more often by law officials, and are displayed in the media more frequently for violent crimes (e.g., Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Entman, 1992). It is clear that these biased media portrayals are adding to the equation of wrongfully "blamed" individuals in our society. Knowing that the media can positively sway the public's opinion regarding how much aid is needed for minority victims of natural disasters such as after Hurricane Katrina (Davis & French, 2008), the media should also have the power to positively sway the perceptions of racial/ethnic minority victims across other domains. We argue that a cultural shift toward encouraging media outlets to ensure that their portrayals of racial and ethnic minority victims are balanced, could lead to less biased responses from individuals across society—those in the public, those serving on juries, and even those in police forces—leading to hopefully more balanced treatment of cases violence against racial/ethnic minorities, perpetrated by civilians and law enforcement alike, and equitable justice.

## Appendix

*Incident Scenario*

On the night of Monday March 24, 2014, at approximately 8:15 pm [victim], a 20-year-old [victim's race] male and [shooter] a 24-year-old [shooter's race] male were involved in a minor traffic accident at the intersection of Wesley St. and Templeton Ave. Both [victim] and [shooter] pulled into the parking lot of a nearby gas station to examine damage to their cars and exchange insurance information. While examining the damage, a heated exchange began between the two. This exchange escalated into a physical altercation during which [shooter] discharged a semiautomatic pistol several times, fatally wounding [victim]. [victim] was pronounced dead at the scene.

Witnesses to the altercation provided varying accounts of the physical altercation, some stating that [victim] was on top of [shooter], punching him repeatedly, when the shooting occurred. Others stated that [shooter] was dominant in the altercation and that [victim] did nothing to prompt [shooter]. [shooter] stated that he fired his weapon in self-defense. [shooter] believed [victim] had a weapon and feared for his life. The police investigation determined that [victim] was unarmed.

*Victim Information*

*Negative, Stereotypic Biography.* According to several news sources, [victim], a 20-year-old [victim's race] male, was raised by his grandmother in a housing project. He did not know his father and his mother was in and out of jail for dealing

drugs. The family was on and off of welfare throughout his childhood. A high-school dropout, [victim] had been in trouble with the law several times including violations drug and weapons possession. He was recently arrested for robbery. For this latest offense, [victim] spent 3 months in the state prison. Since his release, he was supposed to meet with his probation officer every Tuesday at 9 am, but often did not show up. In a court session, [victim] told a judge that his job caused him to miss the meetings. The judge later learned that he was fired from his job because of a fight with another employee. Friends described him as a generally good guy but noted his tendency to be very moody and his quick temper. When things went wrong, as they frequently did, he often became aggressive and even violent. The evening of his death, [victim] was on his way from playing basketball at a neighborhood court.

*Positive, Counterstereotypic Biography.* According to several news sources, [victim name], 20-year-old [victim race's] male, grew up in a middle-class suburb. His father is an investment banker and his mother teaches English at a liberal arts college. The family has a long tradition in the community of supporting the arts, such as the theater and opera. An honors student in high school, [victim name], was accepted to a number of universities. He decided to attend a very prestigious university and continued to excel in college as a biology major. He planned to go on to medical school and had been invited to do an internship at a local hospital this summer. [victim name]'s friends described him as generally good guy noting his calm and kind nature. He was involved in a number of extracurricular activities in addition to keeping up with his classes, including serving as the president of the biology club and a regular contributor to the campus newspaper. The evening of his death, [victim name] was on his way to a reception following the performance of a visiting string quartet from London and was planning to write an article for his campus newspaper about the event.

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