POLICE SHOOTINGS IN BLACK AND WHITE: EXPLORING NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF OFFICER-INVOLVED SHOOTINGS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose − *This study set out to advance knowledge on the reporting of police shootings in print media. Media is the main source of information on criminal justice issues for most citizens. Thus, understanding the presentation of police-involved shooting incidents is important for determining the manner in which media might shape the opinions of readers.*

Methodology/approach − *The current study content analyzed relevant newspaper articles gathered from a large database of journalistic documents compiled by Lexis Nexis. Articles pertaining to police shootings published between January 1, 2014 and April 30, 2015, were identified and coded to document various dimensions of how these encounters are portrayed in print media.*

Findings − *Results indicate that explicit racialization of the stories was limited, which is contrary to what was expected. Neither the race of the suspect or officer was mentioned in most stories, making it difficult to assess explicit reporting bias of these incidents. However, results indicate that implicit bias might play a role in shaping the content portrayed in print news accounts of police-involved shootings.*

Originality/value − *The current study represents one of the first − if not the first − content analysis of news stories centered on police-involved shootings. Given the significant role media plays in delivering information about crime and justice topics to the citizenry, a working knowledge about the media's portrayal of these events is important for understanding how media consumption may shape citizens' opinions about police-involved shootings.*

Keywords: Police-involved shootings; newspaper coverage; media effects; framing

INTRODUCTION

The issue of police use of force has historically piqued the interests of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers alike. Although recent research in this area has primarily focused on the use of nonlethal force (see, e.g., Terrill & Mastrofski, 2002), pioneering scholars of policing devoted significant attention to the study of police use of deadly force. Indeed, prominent researchers such as Albert J. Reiss, Jr., James J. Fyfe, and James Q. Wilson, to name a few, contributed greatly to this area, helping society gain an understanding of the nature and extent of the issue. Although the use of deadly force is extremely rare (Pate & Friddell, 1993), these incidents resonate with the American public, and invoke national concern (Adams, 1999). Recently, consternation over police use of deadly has been swelling, reaching a crescendo after several high-profile police shootings in 2014 and 2015.

While all police deadly force incidents are serious, of central concern is the perceived racial disparity associated with these events. For example, Takagi (1974) reported that younger and older Black men were 15−30 times more likely to be killed, respectively, by police than their White counterparts. Wilson (1980) offered a similar assessment, suggesting young, Black males were the typical civilian victim of police shootings, and more

recently, Gabrielson, Jones, and Sagara (2014) reported that young, Black men are 21 times more likely than Whites to be killed by police according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) database that tracks such incidents, although these data are not without criticism. The historic disproportionality of Black men's involvement in police shootings led Takagi (1974) to claim "police have one trigger finger for Whites and another for Blacks" (p. 30).

Race as a focal point in much policing research stems from American policing's dark underbelly. It is well documented that one of the earliest forms of policing in the United States was slave patrols (Bartollas & Hahn, 1999; Walker, 1998; Walker & Katz, 2008), and while they formally ended nearly 200 years ago (Williams, 2007), viewing the history of policing through this lens helps contextualize issues of distrust with and fear of police among some minority communities, particularly African Americans. Although race-based social control is no longer state sanctioned, minorities continue to hold less favorable views of police (Barlow & Barlow, 2002), and more frequently experience impoliteness, aggressiveness, and unfair treatment by law enforcement (Gau, Corsaro, Stewart, & Brunson, 2012; Skogan, 2005; Tyler, 2005). Unfortunately, a majority of Blacks believe racism is very or fairly common among police officers (Weitzer & Tuch, 1999), suggesting minorities experience police much differently than Whites.

Recent high-profile police encounters with Black citizens has reinvigorated this discussion on the national level, and sparked public outcry in many instances. For example, within the last two years, several highly publicized police shootings across the United States led to a fever pitch that ignited public discourse over perceived biased police practices (e.g., Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott). These events generated nationwide concern that manifested in demonstrations, protests, and in some instances, riots, and culminated with President Obama calling for police reform and then-Attorney General Eric Holder describing police-citizen relations in some communities as polarizing, distrusting, and hostile (Remarks by the Attorney General, 2015; Remarks by President, 2014). Although the role race played in any of the incidents is difficult to know, the public's perception is that police practices are not race neutral. Importantly, the media plays a large role in delivering these stories to the public because the vast majority of the citizenry were not directly affected by the incidents. That is, while many people were directly impacted by these events (e.g., family, friends, co-workers) or the aftermaths (e.g., protestors, victims of looting), a more substantial portion of the public (domestically and internationally) lived out these shootings (and aftermaths) through media accounts.

Because most Americans are not directly affected by crime and criminal justice-related issues (Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright, 1996), understanding the media's portrayal of these events, including police shootings, is extremely important because the general public's understanding of these issues is primarily influenced by mass media accounts (McNeely, 1995; Meyer, 1975). Although print newspaper readership has declined considerably over the last two decades, a sizable percentage of the public still access information from newspaper sources either in print or electronic format (Pew People & The Press, 2012). The current study carried out a content analysis of headline stories centered on police-involved shootings to understand potential differences in reporting based on the suspects' race/ethnicity. In the next section, we briefly describe the literature on the media's portrayal of crime and justice issues and the associated effects on consumers' perceptions. Subsequently, we describe our study methods, followed by the results. Finally, we conclude with some parting thoughts on the media's portrayal of police use of deadly force.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media outlets devote a significant amount of time (television news) and space (print news) reporting on crime-related stories. Indeed, Poindexter, Smith, and Heider (2003) reported that more than 1/5 of local news stories airing on television news programs across 26 different stations (coverage for 12 cities) were devoted to crime. Similarly, Chermak's (1994a) analysis found that crime stories were most likely to appear in the first two sections of the paper, and ranked 4th among total space/time dedicated to news stories across both mediums. Given the significant amount of attention paid to these types of stories, an extensive literature investigating how crime and criminal justice-related events are portrayed in the media has emerged. And, there is a general consensus that mass media's depiction of these issues is inaccurate; in fact, Surette (2007, p. 202) maintains their accounts are often the "opposite of what is true."

As an example, violent crime is overrepresented in the media relative to its proportion of all reported crime (Peterson, 2014). Thus, media outlets devote more attention to crimes such as murder and rape than official statistics indicate that they occur. Liska and Baccaglini's (1990) examination of newspapers across 26 cities highlights this point. They found that murder was the most frequently reported crime (see also Chermak, 1994b

who found that nearly 25% of stories focused on murder), despite the fact that murders account for less than 1% of all crimes reported to local law enforcement agencies across the country (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). Interestingly, this trend is also evident in entertainment media (Donovan & Klahm, 2015) and reality television (Surette, 2007) platforms, suggesting that information pertaining to crime and justice issues across mass media platforms is more likely than not misinformation. Of particular interest for this study is whether media reports of police-involved shootings are consistent across incidents involving Black and White suspects because extant research demonstrates the media's portrayal of other aspects of crime and justice issues is often racialized.

Racialized Media Coverage of Crime and Criminal Justice Issues

Research investigating how suspect race influences media reporting of crime and criminal justice processes has yet to explore the issue within the police use of force context. However, there is a large literature base focused on how the media portrays suspects, offenders, and victims in crime-related news stories. For example, Dixon and Linz (2000a), using data derived from content analysis of Los Angeles and Orange Counties' local news programs and Criminal Justice Profiles published by the California Department of Justice, found that Blacks were overrepresented as offenders in news stories compared to their representation in official reports. Similarly, research has demonstrated that Whites are more likely to be portrayed as victims compared to minorities (Black and Hispanic) in television news stories (Dixon & Linz, 2000b). According to Gilliam et al. (1996) media characterize criminals as nonwhite, thereby contributing to racial stereotypes and feeding the fallacy that crime is linked to race.

Media accounts of specific, high-profile criminal events are not immune from claims of racialized reporting practices. Research suggests that the race of the suspect involved in a school shooting will likely influence how the story is depicted by the media. Conscience or otherwise, reporting practices of some of these events have been highlighted as biased. For example, Leavy and Maloney (2009) reported that the suspect's race and class played a key role in the media's coverage of the Red Lake Senior High School (RLHS) shooting in Minnesota, while these factors were largely ignored by the media when presenting the Columbine High School (CHS) shooting in Colorado. The shooter at RLHS was a Native American, from an impoverished background, whereas the shooters at CHS were White and upper

middle-class. Similarly, Holody, Park, and Zhang (2013) found that national newspapers (*New York Times* and *USA Today*) were more likely to focus on the Virginia Tech shooter's race than the local newspaper (*The Roanoke Times*).

Although there are certainly exceptions (see, e.g., Dixon, 2015), the preponderance of evidence suggests that many media accounts of crime and criminal justice-related issues are "framed" in a racial context. It is well established that media frames are used to emphasize certain aspects of stories at the expense of other information pertaining to the account (Binder, 1993). As Entman (1993, p. 52) suggests:

> Framing essentially involves *selection and salience*. To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described. (emphasis in original)

Importantly, research finds that framing affects how consumers think about a particular issue and their ability to recall specifics about the storylines (Valkenburg, Semetko, & De Vreese, 1999). It is also worthy of mention that race is not the only frame used by the media when reporting on criminal justice-related issues. Surette (2007, p. 92) identifies several additional crime and justice frames, including the "good cop" and "bad cop" frames, although this not an exhaustive list. Regardless of the frame used, the important point is that media has the ability to shape public perceptions about criminal justice-related events, and there is empirical evidence to suggest perceptions of police are not immune to media effects.

Media Effects

There is a rich literature indicating that the public's perception of policing is influenced, in part, by media consumerism. Chermak, McGarrell, and Gruenewald (2006), for example, maintain that media coverage of police is typically positive when centered on general crime and criminal justice issues. However, they suggest that celebrated cases of misconduct (e.g., excessive force, corruption) are portrayed very differently than general crime-related news involving police. When examining media effects researchers have typically focused on news coverage of several types of issues, including corruption, excessive force, verbal abuse, brutality, and unjustified stops (Chermak et al., 2006; Weitzer, 2002; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004, 2005).

Studies exploring the impact of media exposure on perceptions have examined rates of general exposure, as well as exposure to specific incidents. For example, individuals who read or hear more about police misconduct incidents generally believe that police engage in unjustified stops, verbal abuse, excessive force, and corruption more frequently than those exposed to fewer media accounts of such incidents (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Weitzer and Tuch (2005) reported similar findings with regard to satisfaction with police, but only for Black respondents. That is, media exposure did not affect Whites' assessments of police services, but consuming media accounts of police misconduct reduced satisfaction with police among Black respondents.

Also of interest is how independent, high-profile incidents might sway public perceptions of police. Chermak et al. (2006) reported that viewership of a highly publicized incident of police misconduct involving off-duty officers in Indianapolis, Indiana (e.g., the "Downtown brawl"), did not significantly affect respondents' general perceptions about police efficacy or concerns about police harassment. However, media consumption was associated with a greater belief that the officers were guilty. With regard to police use of force, Weitzer (2002) found celebrated cases of corruption and use of excessive force in New York City and Los Angeles affected perceptions of police misconduct and overall job performance, although the effects on attitudes varied by respondents' race. Similarly, Kaminski and Jefferis (1998) reported that viewing a violent police arrest affected perceptions of use of force for Black respondents, but not Whites. Lastly, Tuch and Weitzer (1997) found lower levels of support for police at the local and national level following three separate high-profile police brutality cases (e.g., Alicia Vasquez & Enrique Flores; Eulia Love; Rodney King) that occurred in the Los Angeles, California, area. While all respondents indicated lower support subsequent to each event, the effect was more pronounced for Blacks and Hispanics, and minorities' attitudes toward police were slower to improve, too.

With a substantial body of literature showing the influence that media has on shaping citizens' perceptions of the police it is important to understand how the media reports on cases of police use of force. It is particularly important to understand how stories focused on cases of police use of deadly force are told because these cases are the most likely to incite feelings of anger, distrust, and fear into the hearts of citizens. Moreover, it is important to gain an understanding of this because of the possible impact that public outrage might have on the police themselves. That is, when legitimacy in authority is questioned, citizens' willingness to cooperate with

and support police is diminished (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003a, 2003b). Thus, it is important to understand if the media portrays these situations in a manner that might lead to citizens' challenging the legitimacy of police.

CURRENT STUDY

The current study involved content analyzing newspaper articles focused on incidents of police use of deadly force. Specifically, articles detailing police-involved shooting incidents were gathered using Lexis Nexis' newspaper database repository, which has been used in extant research focused on understanding how print media portray storylines (see, e.g., Holody et al., 2013). A comprehensive and scientific methodology was instituted to identify relevant articles. Multiple advanced Boolean headline searches were created from a combination of words/phrases, such as "officer involved shootings," "police use of deadly force," and "police shootings" (see Table 1 for specific search criteria). Lexis Nexis' advanced search functionality allows researchers to search for key terms within a certain number of words from one another. For example, the search term "police w/1 involved w/1 shooting" will return headlines that include "police involved shootings" (i.e., the word police is within 1 word of involved, which is within 1 word of shooting). This functionality allows for increased specificity in search criteria.

The research team, which consisted of three members, developed a coding scheme to systematically document certain elements of each newspaper article analyzed. The coding rubric was designed to elicit information pertaining to the newspaper of publication, suspect, officer, incident, and consequences of police-involved shootings.

Table 1. Lexis Nexis Newspaper Archive Records Search.

	2014	2015[a]	Search Criteria
Officer-involved shootings	146	70	Headline (officer w/1 involved w/1 shooting)
Police-involved shootings	21	23	Headline (police w/1 involved w/1 shooting)
Police use of deadly force	13	4	Headline (police w/5 use w/5 deadly w/1 force)
Officer use of deadly force	8	2	Headline (officer w/5 use w/5 deadly w/1 force)
Police shooting	517	235	Headline ("police shooting")
Total returns	705	334	

Duplicate option was set to omit returns with high similarity.
[a]Through April 30 2015.

Data

Article headlines with the aforementioned search criteria were gathered using the Lexis Nexis database for news stories published between January 1, 2014 and April 30, 2015. As indicated in Table 1, there were 1,039 articles returned for this time period. Initially, 10 articles were selected to serve as the pilot test for the study. All three research team members coded the 10 articles to determine the internal consistency of coding across the three assessors. To measure inter-rater reliability Cohen's Kappa (k) was computed. Although designed to test for reliability across two raters, Light (1971) recommends using the mean of N coders when there are more than two. The pilot test results indicated a substantial level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977) among the three coders, as the mean $k = .86$. Upon completing the pilot test, the remaining articles were assigned to the coders, with raters 1 and 3 coding 346 articles each and coder 2 content analyzing 347 news stories.

Table 2 lists the number of stories returned through Lexis Nexis' database falling into the 11 categories differentiating their central themes. Despite using the duplicates option in Lexis Nexis' database, which supposedly omits returns with very high similarity, the research team noted 27 instances in which articles were duplicates. Of the remaining 1,012 articles returned, 398 articles focused on a single incident in which a police officer shot a suspect. These incidents are the focus of our content

Table 2. Focus of Articles.

Focus	N	%
Single incident	307	30.3
Prosecutor investigation of single incident	83	8.2
Federal investigation of single incident	8	.8
Federal investigation of police department	5	.5
Demonstrations (includes protests and riots)	173	17.1
Summary of multiple police shootings	54	5.3
Policy implications	96	9.5
Court case(s)	92	9.1
General statistics about police shootings	39	3.9
General shooting (not a police-involved shooting)	40	4.0
Other	115	11.4
Total	1,012	100

27 duplicate articles were not coded.

analysis. While analyzing the remaining eight themes would be interesting, the objective of the current study is to understand how media report on incidents involving a police shooting. Several of the categories were omitted for obvious reasons (e.g., general shootings, general statistics about police shootings, demonstrations, and investigation of a police department), however, the omission of others might not appear clear. Summaries of multiple police shootings were not considered because these articles lacked specificity about each incident. Articles focused on court cases, which were almost exclusively civil cases, were not coded because they either lacked important information about the event or were not based on a single incident. Similarly, reports centered on policy implications (e.g., introducing body worn cameras, an oversight board) were not considered because of a dearth of information about the actual incident leading to the proposed policy change. Lastly, articles classified as "other" focused on topics that were not usually connected to a single event (e.g., United Nations panel condemns handling of police shootings, nine officers suing the city of Cleveland, OH, for disproportionate punishments for involvement in police shootings, and Mayor De Blasio's willingness to support efforts to investigate future police shootings). While interesting, these stories were focused on aspects of police-involved shootings that were beyond the scope of the current study.

The final factor determining inclusion in the sample of articles to code was the article's classification. Opinion pieces and letters to the Editor were not considered because there is no expectation of objectivity associated with these types of stories (Tuchman, 1972). News briefs were not coded due to the brevity of these articles, which ultimately resulted in a lack of pertinent information. Of the 398 articles focusing on a police-involved shooting, 364 were deemed appropriate for content analysis (see Table 3).

Table 3. Type of Article.

Article Type	N	%
Newspaper	306	76.9
Newswire	58	14.6
Opinion	8	2.0
Letter to the Editor	2	.5
Brief	24	6.0
Total	398	100

Findings

Unfortunately, and surprisingly, of the 364 articles coded, only 62 identified the race of the person shot by police (see Table 4). Although suggestive that 82% (51 of 62) of the articles in which the suspect's race was mentioned he or she was Black, 62 cases hardly make for an interesting or meaningful analysis. Nonetheless, the failure to explicitly identify suspect race is probably the most important finding, though it presented a significant challenge given that our primary interest was to understand if these events are reported on differently based on the suspect's race. Moreover, lacking a robust national database that tracks and consolidates information pertaining to police shootings (Lowery, 2014), the research team was forced to find alternative sources to identify the race of the person shot in the articles for which race was not mentioned. Naturally, this shifted the focus from explicitly different reporting practices to implicit ones. After much consideration and exploration, two independent, grassroots efforts (e.g., Killed By Police and Fatal Encounters) that have been cited as some of the best estimates of police killings in the United States (McCarthy, 2015) were used. Indeed, Senator Blumenthal of Connecticut introduced an article to the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary that highlighted the importance of one of these databases (see Blumenthal, 2014). These data sources only document incidents in which police shot and killed the person involved.

Of the 302 cases for which race was not mentioned, 187 of the suspects who were shot also died, and of those 149 had their name mentioned in the article. Using the Killed By Police and Fatal Encounters databases the research team searched for the names of the deceased to determine if a racial classification was listed in either of these data sources. This yielded an additional 130 articles for which the suspect's race could be identified. Race could not be determined for 19 incidents using the alternative

Table 4. Race of Person Shot by Police.

	Initially Identified	Identified by Alternative Databases	Total
White	4	62	66
Black	51	42	93
Hispanic	6	20	26
Other	1	6	7
Not mentioned/listed	302	172	
Total race identified	62	130	192

databases, and the forthcoming results for the content analysis pertain to
192 articles for which race was acknowledged or could be verified using the
secondary data sources.

Table 5 lists the key elements coded for this analysis and the number
(and percentage) of coded articles that mentioned each characteristic.
The themes coded focus on the characteristics of the individuals involved
and the incidents, as well as factors not directly related to those involved

Table 5.   Percent of Articles Presenting Information on Core Dimensions
($N = 192$).

	N	%
Individual characteristics		
Suspect sex		
Male	183	95.3
Female	2	1.0
Not mentioned	7	3.6
Suspect age		
<20	32	16.7
20−29	49	25.5
30−39	40	20.8
40−59	31	16.1
≥60	7	3.6
Not mentioned	33	17.2
Mental illness mentioned		
Yes	20	10.4
No	172	89.6
Criminal history mentioned		
Yes	50	26
Not mentioned	142	74
Possessed weapon mentioned		
Yes	113	58.9
No	79	41.1
Officer race mentioned		
Yes	30	15.6
No	162	84.4
Officer sex mentioned		
Male	92	47.9
Female	1	.5
No	99	51.6
Incident characteristics		
Provided context		
Yes	166	86.5
No	26	13.5

Table 5. (*Continued*)

	N	%
Officer wrongdoing mentioned		
Yes	58	30.2
No	134	68.2
Investigation mentioned		
Yes	156	81.2
No	36	18.8
Factors not directly related to incidents/individuals		
Community response mentioned		
Civil unrest	25	13.0
Demonstration	4	2.1
Protest	16	8.3
Riot	3	1.6
Not mentioned	144	75
Other police shooting mentioned		
Yes	57	29.7
No	135	70.3
Race mentioned in relation to other police shooting		
Yes	30	15.6
No	162	84.4
Perception of reporting		
Article slant		
Favored officer	3	1.6
Favored suspect	44	22.9
Neutral	145	75.5

or the incident itself. The research team also coded their perceived neutrality of the reporting. With regard to characteristics of individuals involved, each article was coded for mentions of suspect age, race, sex, mental illness, criminal history, weapon possession, and officer race and sex. Articles were also assessed to determine if the context surrounding the shooting was provided, officer wrongdoing was mentioned, and whether or not the story discussed an investigation of the incident. We were also interested in understanding how certain factors that were not directly linked to the incidents were portrayed in news stories. For example, articles were coded for mentions of civil unrest, demonstrations, protests, and riots that occurred as a result of the shootings. Moreover, we were interested in whether news reports mentioned other police shootings in the story or if the shooting was presented as an isolated event. Relatedly, stories were coded for mentions of race in relation to other police-involved shootings. That is, whether the race of the person shot by

police in the other shooting was discussed. Lastly, coders documented whether the article was written in a manner that favored the officer or suspect.

Table 5 suggests that few of the key elements of police-involved shootings that were coded were reported on consistently. For example, more than 80% of the articles coded indicated the suspect's sex and age, contextualized the event to detail factors precipitating the encounter, and discussed the investigative body examining the shooting. The remaining characteristics pertaining to the individuals, events, or aftermaths were mentioned in some articles, but not others. As an example, few articles addressed the issue of mental illness or whether the suspect(s) had a criminal history. More than half of the stories indicated whether the suspect possessed some type of weapon. With regard to officer characteristics or the wrongfulness of his/her behavior, less than half of the coded articles addressed these points. Also of interest is the fact that less than 1/3 of stories mentioned other police shootings in their report, and even fewer mentioned race of the person shot during those encounters, which is not so surprising given the scant attention paid to suspect race in the articles. Just under 76% of the articles were neutral, meaning not written to favor the officer's perspective or suspect's.

To understand if news stories reported on these themes differently based on the race of the person shot by police, difference of means tests were estimated. Table 6 lists several factors surrounding police-involved shootings that were reported on differently when the suspect involved was a minority. This was particularly true when the individual was Black, although the difference in some instances might be surprising. For example, when the suspect was Black, news stories were significantly less likely to mention criminal history and a weapon being involved. Interestingly, despite this, shootings involving Blacks were also less likely to receive mention of a formal investigation.

The race of the shooting officer and wrongdoing were more likely to be discussed when the suspect was Black. Similarly, stories were more likely to reference other police shootings and the race of the person shot when detailing police-involved shootings of Black suspects. Moreover, the community's response to the shooting incident was more likely to be discussed when the person shot was Black. Lastly, when the person shot was Black the article was more likely to be written in a tone that was favorable to the suspect. Several of these results were similar when comparing the stories of other minorities to Whites.

Table 6. Difference of Means Tests Results ($N = 192$).

	White	Black	t	Other Race	t
Individual characteristics					
Suspect sex	.94	.97		1.0	
Suspect age	.83	.82		.85	
Mental illness mentioned	.15	.08		.06	
Criminal history mentioned	.32	.18	−1.984*	.37	
Possessed weapon	.72	.56	−2.181*	.39	−3.63***
Officer race mentioned	.00	.32	5.571***	.00	
Officer sex mentioned	.50	.52		.36	
Incident characteristics					
Provided context	.89	.83		.91	
Officer wrongdoing mentioned	.11	.43	4.680***	.33	2.848**
Investigation mentioned	.88	.74	−2.138*	.88	
Factors not directly related to incidents/individuals					
Community response	.14	.33	2.875**	.24	
Other police shooting mentioned	.17	.45	3.909***	.12	
Race mentioned in relation to other police shooting	.00	.30	5.298***	.06	2.043*
Perception of reporting					
Article slant (suspect)	.06	.35	4.577***	.21	2.299*

* = .05, ** = .01, *** = .001.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study set out to gain an understanding on the content of the media reporting on police-involved shootings. The purpose of the study was to determine whether reporting on police shootings disparately emphasized a particular race of the victim and/or officer and to explain the nature of print media's portrayal of these storylines. Discussion of this topic is particularly timely because of the heightened attention being given to police shootings in the media born out of certain high-profile cases involving White officers shooting and killing minority suspects. These incidents have led to national protesting, calls for police reform, and the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement. Understanding the way media outlets portray these incidents is important for our understanding of how news stories might shape public perception regarding police and their use of force, particularly, deadly force.

Findings of the content analysis of written media published between January 1, 2014 and April 30, 2015, indicate some surprising results. In general, explicit racialization of these stories did not appear to exist, which is at odds with the media's traditional approach of racializing crime and criminal justice-related issues. Traditional racialization of crime in the media suggests that news stories centered on criminal justice issues portray racial minorities in a different light compared to their White counterparts (Gilliam et al., 1996). With regard to criminal involvement, media outlets have traditionally overrepresented minorities as wrongdoers (Dixon & Linz, 2000a), while disproportionately portraying Whites as victims (Dixon & Linz, 2000b). However, explicit racialization did not appear to be at play with regard to coverage of police-involved shootings. Thus, the primary finding born out of this content analysis is that newspaper reporting of these events appears to be aracial (i.e., as in not focused on race; Weinberg, 2011).

We come to this conclusion regarding explicit racialization based on the fact that of the 364 articles coded, only 62 articles mentioned the race of the individual that was shot by police. An analysis based solely on these articles would not be instructive, so we were forced to find an alternative method to identify the race of the suspects involved in the shootings. Of course, this changed the focus of our inquiry from examining explicit forms of racialization to implicit ones, and the resulting analysis highlighted implicit reporting differences based on the race of the suspect involved in the shooting. Intentional or otherwise, certain elements of police shootings involving Blacks were reported on differently compared to encounters in which the suspect was White, but, again, the potential biases are implicit rather than explicit.

Several interesting themes emerged from this content analysis, but perhaps most notably, officer wrongdoing was mentioned more often for cases in which the suspect was Black. This suggests that the media is more likely to use the "bad cop" (Surette, 2007) frame when reporting on incidents involving Black suspects. Implying wrongdoing leads readers to believe that the officer's actions were inappropriate, yet it is doubtful that reporters have the legal or organizational expertise to make such claims. Moreover, there was a general trend for stories to be written in favor of the suspect when he or she was Black. Again, this suggests that the media tends to frame the shootings of Blacks in a manner that tells a different narrative than when the suspect is White.

Also of interest is the finding that criminal history was less likely to be mentioned in connection to the shooting of Black suspects. Of course, it is possible that Whites who were shot were more likely to have a criminal

past, but this is unlikely given that research indicates Black males are more likely to have experienced an arrest, and thus have a criminal record, by the age of 23 than their White counterparts and that arrest rates between Black and White females do not significantly differ (Brame, Bushway, Paternoster, & Turner, 2014). Relatedly, stories were less likely to mention the possession of a weapon when the suspect was Black. Again, it is entirely possible that Black suspects shot by police were less likely to possess weapons, however, research indicates that the rate of fatal and non-fatal firearm violence for Blacks is higher than the rate for any other race/ethnic group (Planty & Truman, 2013), making it difficult to believe that the lack of reporting this element for stories involving Black suspects is completely explained by the absence of a weapon.

Unlike traditional media practices that implicate minorities' wrongdoing in connection with crime stories, Blacks appear to escape the media's demagoguery in this context. That is, it appears that reporting of police-involved shootings attempts to present a particular narrative when it involves a Black suspect. The portrayal of the shootings involving Black suspects seems to lead readers down the road of impropriety on behalf of the officer. If not explicitly stated, the omission of criminal history and weapon possession associated with articles detailing the shootings of Black suspects plants a seed of doubt regarding the legitimacy of the shooting. This notion is further supported by the fact that articles mentioning a community response were more likely to emerge in stories centered on the shooting of a Black suspect. Thus, even if the article did not mention officer wrongdoing, these stories tell them the community perceived the shooting was not legitimate.

The media's seeming shift in blame placing when documenting police-involved shootings has been recently discovered in other areas of crime and justice media coverage. A similar change in trend of television news reporting was noted by Dixon (2015). He found that news coverage of Black offenders was commensurate with their representation in official data. In totality, the aforementioned findings suggest that media might have veered away from explicit, overt forms of racialization that place minorities, particularly Blacks, at the center of wrongdoing. This is not to suggest, however, that these events are completely race neutral. In fact, racialization seems to have taken a different form in the reporting of police-involved shootings. Primarily, it seems to have shifted from a theme of placing Black suspects at the center of wrongdoing to a theme of implicating a "bad cop" frame.

Even though this study produced some interesting and unexpected findings, they should be taken with a few limitations in mind. First, the majority of news stories coded did not identify the race of the suspect explicitly,

which was the focus of the study. This required the research team to turn to alternative sources of information to gather details about many of the suspects' race. Although the additional databases that were referenced are believed to be robust sources of information on police shootings, the veracity of these data cannot be verified. Relatedly, because the majority of suspects' race classifications were gathered from the alternative databases, this shifted the focus from explicit bias to implicit bias. It is also important to acknowledge that this study only focused on newspaper articles published between January 1, 2014 and April 30, 2015, a time during which several high-profile killings occurred. Thus, there is much left to be known about media published outside of this time frame, as well as how reporting will occur as we move forward. Also, this study only looked at print media, leaving out all media broadcast on TV, which might differ from newspaper coverage of these incidents. Lastly, our exploratory study only included bivariate analyses.

Notwithstanding these limitations, we found newspaper coverage of police-involved shootings exhibited several themes and generally follow an unexpected, nuanced, and racialized storyline. Stories involving Black suspects were more likely to mention officer wrongdoing and be written in favor of the suspect, but less likely to mention criminal history and/or whether he/she possessed a weapon. Each of these themes either explicitly or implicitly lends to the questioning of the legitimacy of the officers' actions. When police are not viewed as legitimate, citizens are less likely to cooperate with and support them, not to mention report lower satisfaction with their services (McClusky, Mastrofski, & Parks, 1999; Skogan, 2005; Skogan & Frydl, 2004; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003a, 2003b; Wells, 2007). Future work in this area should consider how other forms of media portray police-involved shootings and employ multivariate analysis to inform whether the themes identified here significantly differ based on race net other factors. Although the story being told in newspaper coverage of police shootings is different than expected, it is still likely being told in Black *and* White.

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