Justice or Just Us: Media Portrayals and the Context of Police Violence

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Abstract

News media coverage is often dominated by crime stories. Extensive coverage of crime stories by news sources potentially heightens viewers' exposure to police misconduct. Numerous technological advances like cell phone cameras have resulted in greater public scrutiny of police. Claims of unfair police practices seem to have increased with the rise in media coverage and may affect public perceptions negatively. Excessive portrayals of police brutality may contribute to inaccurate public perceptions of how and why force is used. Few studies have assessed the context of police brutality with a focus on the way such events are portrayed by news media. Such assessments might reveal specific patterns or inaccuracies of portrayals by news sources. The current study fills this gap by analyzing YouTube video footage regarding police brutality. Findings reveal that videos of minority victims are more prevalent than White victims. Further, findings indicate that physical force is often unnecessary and used against suspects in custody or to resolve verbal exchanges during police/citizen encounters. The current analysis provides evidence of how negative perceptions and stereotypes, both among police and the public, are likely produced and perpetuated, thereby increasing the likelihood force being used during encounters.

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Introduction

Police brutality has become an increasingly popular topic in recent years. Several high-profile cases have effectively heightened the level of scrutiny surrounding the use of force during police encounters with citizens. For instance, the stories of Eric Garner (who died following a chokehold by police), LaQuan McDonald (fatally shot in the back while walking away from police), Walter Scott (fatally shot in the back while fleeing police), and most recently George Floyd, have sparked considerable debate among the public regarding the appropriate context in which to utilize lethal force. Unfortunately, the recipients of force by police are more often unarmed African American males much like the victims in the aforementioned, widely televised examples (Embrick, 2015; Emesowum, 2017; Nix et al., 2017). In the midst of these fatalities, numerous incidents have occurred in which use of force by police has been questionable and at times "shocking to the conscience." Despite the public outcry regarding these events (evidenced by numerous protests throughout the country), police officers involved in such questionable applications of force are rarely charged (Chaney & Robertson, 2015). To make matters worse, when officers are prosecuted, sentences imposed are generally lenient for the crimes committed when compared to civilians found guilty of similar crimes (Chaney & Robertson, 2015).

While numerous studies have examined police brutality, few (if any) have reviewed the context and content of police encounters involving the application of less-than-lethal force. The current analysis seeks to fill this void by conducting a comprehensive content analysis that examines the quality of police/citizen encounters involving the application of force. It is possible that a review of use of force incidents may reveal patterns specific to the context of police encounters involving the use of excessive force. Highlighting such patterns may help to inform policy choices regarding training and procedures for line officers.

Typically, the most detailed information concerning use of force incidents is derived from official government reports (Dixon et al., 2003). These reviews often occur in the aftermath of sensationalized cases and subsequent to numerous citizen complaints against law enforcement officers. The profession of policing is often criticized for the lack of independent oversight (Stinson, Sr. et al., 2010) which could potentially lead to biased reviews of misconduct. Stated differently, the lack of transparency and oversight accorded to police could serve to perpetuate misconduct through inadequate penalties (failure to charge perpetrators, non-indictments, and light punishments). Thus, much of what is known about the quality of police/citizen encounters may not be based on direct observations by independent researchers.

When federal oversight has occurred, the results have generally been unfavorable. In many instances, the general public is not privileged to the most egregious accounts of police brutality. It is not unusual for police departments to delay the release of reports and other video evidence in the aftermath of a high-profile death at the hands of police. Justifications put forth for withholding information in the aftermath of use of force incidents often include ongoing investigations, pending litigation, privacy concerns, and even statutory limitations (Freund, 2015; Todak et al., 2021; Tregel et al., 2020). Here again, this reluctance towards transparency wrought by delays in releasing details regarding use of force incidents may be somewhat advantageous to law enforcement officers thereby helping them to maintain a positive public image. Such practices may be somewhat justifiable as being necessary to ensure that accused officers receive a fair trial (whether in state courts or the "court of public opinion") that is unbiased by sensationalized media reports. One must also consider that scant literature exists to examine the complexities of crimes perpetrated by law enforcement officials. As noted by Stinson, Sr. and colleagues (2010), although "police officers commit an alarming array of serious crimes…surprisingly little is known about the[se] crimes…and no government entity collects data on criminal arrests of police officers in the United States" (pp. 413-414).

Prior research also suggests that a symbiotic relationship exists among law enforcement agencies and mainstream media sources (Hirschfield & Simon, 2010) which may in turn lead to biased media coverage of police/citizen encounters. This idea posits that mainstream news programs may be less likely to report on police misconduct since such programming relies heavily on law enforcement agencies for newsworthy content. Prior research (Dixon et al., 2003) suggests that crime stories frequently dominate news broadcasts as evidence of this assertion.

Throughout history, crime stories have been a common focus of media coverage. Prior research confirms that news coverage tends to rely more heavily on sensationalized stories that typically involve criminal activity (Dixon et al., 2003). As such, the police are likely to be subjected to criticism more frequently than other occupations since crime stories receive more media attention. Recent technological advancements have only served to increase the level of public scrutiny experienced by police. Technological advancements in the form of body cameras, dash cameras, and cell phone cameras have given the public a "birds eye view" of police encounters. Public scrutiny is exponentially increased when surveillance is coupled with the use of social media and other digital sharing services which make it easier to publicize police encounters. Viewed in this regard, news media (whether

traditional media or social media) can potentially affect individual perceptions of police conduct among the public and may even influence policy decisions with regards to police use of force (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012; Hirschfield & Simon, 2010; Miller & Davis, 2008; Pollack & Allern, 2014; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004).

The aforementioned points raise several questions worthy of examination. First, to what extent does the general public believe that minorities are the primary victims of police brutality? It is possible, albeit unlikely, that minorities are victims of excessive force exclusively. If one considers the history of racial tensions in the United States coupled with the fact that police departments in this country are mostly comprised of Caucasian officers (more than 80% on average nationally), then one might also willingly accept the notion of minorities as being non-compliant when detained or arrested by the police as a leading cause for applications of force. Second, to what extent do traditional news sources portray minorities as being the victims of police brutality? While police officers may engage in misconduct regarding excessive force evenly among races/ethnicities, it is possible that news sources broadcast media with a focus on racial differences most often. As a result, such portrayals might also contribute to inaccurate perceptions and stereotypes regarding the extent to which minorities are victims of police violence. Lastly, how do statistics vary among victims of police misconduct with regards to demographic variables? There is scant literature available with regards to victim/offender characteristics regarding race/ethnicity and sex. Further, little is known about the type of force used in such situations and the extent to which such force is regarded as excessive. It is possible that excessive force is applied equally against all races, but that the excessiveness of such force is greater when applied to minorities. If true, the focus on the severity of excessive force may explain why minorities might be portrayed as victims of police brutality more often. These observations led to the following research questions:

1. What is the context in which incidents of excessive force typically occur?
2. To what extent do media reports reveal non-Blacks as victims of police brutality?

The purpose of the current study is to examine the context of police brutality to better understand who is brutalized demographically, and the dynamics of police encounters that result in excessive force. It is possible that various contextual factors frequently emerge during police encounters involving excessive force. Such contextual factors are not only demographic but might also include (1) the number of officers present relative to the number of suspects, (2) whether a suspect is in custody, (3) the level of resistance by suspects versus the level of force applied by police, and (4) the extent to which necessary force is used excessively just to name

a few. In this regard, the current study is mostly focused on negative police encounters involving excessive force rather than use of force incidents in general. The current analysis also seeks to understand the implications of media portrayals regarding excessive force. In doing so, it is possible to uncover how various stereotypes of both police and force recipients are generated and perpetuated. This research is significant because few studies have examined the context of police brutality with a focus on less-than-lethal force. Further, the current study is unique in that video content is analyzed via Youtube. In doing so, this research systematically examines the problem in a way that the general public might typically experience forceful police encounters vicariously through the larger social media community. The implications of these experiences are discussed in closing.

Literature Review

The literature regarding police use of force is quite extensive. Prior research on police brutality diverges into two basic types: (1) analyses of factors that affect the likelihood of police brutality (Emesowum, 2016), and (2) analyses of media portrayals of police violence (Dixon et al., 2003; Miller & Davis, 2008; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Researchers have approached the issue from numerous viewpoints perhaps most notably focusing on fatal shootings by police officers (Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Nix et al., 2017; Shane et al., 2017). Although police killings are typically sensationalized issues that garner considerable public attention, this fact undermines the importance of studies devoted to non-lethal police violence. The current analysis is uniquely positioned to address this gap in the literature.

Empirical Studies of Police Violence

An overview of the literature reveals that the topic of police brutality involves numerous dimensions. The range of these dimensions include the following topics: policy choices and their influence on use of force decisions (Ferdik et al., 2014), the overrepresentation of minorities in police killings (Shane et al., 2017), news and mainstream media portrayals of police violence (Dixon et al., 2003; Erfani-Ghettani, 2015; Greer & McLaughlin, 2012; Hirschfield & Simon, 2010; Huspek, 2004; Lee et al., 2018), the effects of social media relative to perceptions of police brutality (Baker, 2014; Bejan et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2017; Freelon et al., 2018), and racial differences in support for reform (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). The majority of analyses have been quantitative in nature often seeking to explain factors that increase the likelihood of misconduct during police encounters (Bejan, et al., 2018; Legewie,

2016; Nix et al., 2017). This finding is not surprising since most research is generally quantitative in nature. On the contrary, a minority of qualitative studies exist which seek either to test theoretical propositions as to why police misconduct occurs (Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Reinka & Leach, 2018; Smith & Holmes, 2014), or instead focusing on the quality of news coverage and media reports (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Lee et al., 2018). These qualitative studies are most often content analyses which assess various types of latent content (Brown et al., 2017; Hirschfield & Simon, 2010; Lee et al., 2018).

Numerous methods have been employed to reach various conclusions regarding police brutality and/or the way in which perceptions are influenced by media sources. Such methods include experiments, content analyses, logistic regression, and mixed methods analyses. For instance, perceptions of police misconduct have even been examined artificially using hypothetical vignettes (Hurwitz & Peffley, 2010), but also more directly using secondary data from police reports and similar data archives (Chaney & Robertson, 2013). Other studies have addressed the issue using geospatial analysis to compare different jurisdictions or regions to both identify and predict where misconduct is most likely to occur (Emesowum, 2017). Finally, prior research has assessed the role of occupational factors, such as late-stage careers, and their effect on police crime in general (Stinson, Sr. et al., 2010).

Empirical Studies of Mainstream Media Effects

Several studies have examined the issue of police use of force by focusing on how such events are portrayed in the news media (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012; Hirshfield & Simon, 2010; Lee et al., 2018; Miller & Davis, 2008). In doing so, these analyses take a much different approach to understanding the effects of force (and/or excessive force) used by police upon public perceptions. For example, prior research has explored the quality of news coverage and the degree to which news reports reflect favorably on police whilst portraying recipients of force negatively (Dixon et al., 2003). Findings by Hirshfield and Simon (2010) indicate that news coverage of police killings generally portray law enforcement officials as behaving legitimately whereas victims are instead typically cast in a threatening manner. The study utilized interpretive content analysis to review 105 news articles between 1997 and 2000.

Similarly, Chiricos and Eschholz (2002) assessed three weeks of television news coverage from three television stations in Orlando, Florida to determine whether crime is a "Black phenomenon," and whether minorities "are disproportionately

portrayed as criminals" (p. 402). Findings reveal that Hispanics and Blacks are more likely to be portrayed as crime suspects than Whites, and more often are cast as violent aggressors in television news coverage. The study also points out that minorities are more likely to be portrayed as criminal suspects than as victims or positive role models. Although the data reveals that Hispanics are slightly overrepresented as suspects, the authors did not find support for the notion that Blacks are overrepresented as suspects on television news media in proportion to their population in one of the three cities examined (Orlando, Florida). Nonetheless, this study is important to highlight the way in which "TV news may contribute to the social construction of threat" commonly attributed to minorities (Chiricos & Escholz, 2002, p. 400).

Lee and colleagues (2018) conducted a content analysis of newspaper coverage involving high profile killings by police in three United States cities (Ferguson, MO; Charleston, SC; Baltimore, Maryland). The study sought to better understand temporal shifts in media coverage in terms of whether news coverage is more likely to favor police or civilians. Contrary to prior research, findings indicate that media coverage less often favors police in the aftermath of high profile, racially charged events. The authors note that this favoritism toward civilians (rather than law enforcement officials) represents a departure from practices in media coverage of past decades which typically favored police officers. This study is unique in that it highlights the dynamic nature of media coverage longitudinally and how such news coverage may be affected by public sentiments and criticism from stakeholders.

Aside from the quality of news coverage, prior research has examined the effects of news coverage on public attitudes toward police and support for reform efforts. Weitzer and Tuch (2004) examine support for reforms among the public. Findings indicate that both perceptions of police and citizens' willingness to support reform efforts are each dependent upon the frequency of misconduct by police in one's neighborhood and the amount of media exposure a person observes relative to such misconduct. Stated differently, an individual's experiences with police (whether personal or vicarious) are transmitted through both neighborhood effects and the frequency and content of media exposure. Here again, these results underscore the influential nature of media content.

Miller and Davis (2008) reach a similar conclusion in their assessment of factors affecting perceptions of police. The authors examined various determinants of public perceptions about police using surveys distributed throughout the five boroughs in New York City, New York. Their findings support the notion that a combination of neighborhood effects, vicarious experiences, and media exposure

are each essential to understanding public attitudes regarding police. The authors note that "perceptions of police misconduct are more sensitive to media influences…than traditional measures of public confidence" (Miller & Davis, 2008, p. 9). This quote, again, underscores the importance of the media's role in reporting police violence in an unbiased manner.

International Media Effects Relative to Police Violence

Although much research has been devoted to police brutality in America, an abundance of research also exists that documents and examines these problems in other countries (Baker, 2014; Erfani-Ghettani, 2015; Greer & McLaughlin, 2011; Pollack & Allern, 2014). Similarly, these studies typically support the notion that media rhetoric substantially affects public perceptions of both victims and perpetrators. Such research underscores the fact that disparities in victimization rates resulting from police brutality are not simply an American phenomenon but instead may signal the existence of systemic problems for policing in general. Further, such findings may also reveal that news outlets are instrumental in framing ideas about police violence and influencing stereotypes of both police and victims (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Chiricos & Escholz, 2002; Hirschfield & Simon, 2010; Huspek, 2004).

Erfani-Ghettani (2015) points out the differential manner by which officers and victims are portrayed in the aftermath of custodial violence. This research utilizes a case study approach to examine news coverage in various British newspapers following the death of Joy Gardner while in police custody. The author notes that news outlets are rarely neutral or objective in their portrayals of police violence. Findings indicate that while victims are typically defamed and/or blamed for negative police encounters using offensive journalism, law enforcement officials are cast in a much different light. Following negative police encounters, recipients of excessive force are often defamed using inflammatory messaging that references immigration violations, drug abuse, and/or gang involvement. The author notes that such "character assassinations" are commonplace regarding excessive force by police (Erfani-Ghettani, 2015). On the other hand, police officers are typically cast as victims following instances of excessive force to highlight the hostile environments in which police officers must work. While the character of force recipients is attacked directly, police officers are quoted anonymously thereby protecting their reputation. If accused officers are identified or criticized directly, they are too often portrayed as "a few bad apples" using various rhetorical techniques. This research underscores the presence of biased media coverage which can be employed to obscure public perceptions of police violence.

Pollack and Allen's (2014) content analysis echoes similar sentiments regarding the focus on individual misconduct but contends that most portrayals are framed from a critical perspective of policing. The authors note that media coverage seldom highlights institutional wrongdoing. Instead, such miscarriages of justice are portrayed as individual misdeeds inconsistent with the norms and values of the larger institution of policing. Interestingly, the authors seem to suggest that the focus on "bad apples" is haphazard rather than a systematic attempt to deflect negative press. As such, this research posits that media portrayals are often focused on violent, event-driven cases which do not lend themselves to systematic inquiry at an institutional level. The study examines both television and print media from four major newspapers in Norway over the course of 45 months (January 2005 – September 2009). The study provides an explanation of how perspectives of police violence are framed. Additionally, the study confirms the presence of similar problems in policing and news media as those experienced in the United States.

While previous studies (Erfani-Ghettani, 2015; Pollack and Allen, 2014) highlight the way in which news media is used to insulate and protect the institution of policing, Greer and McLaughlin (2011) posit that news media is effective at framing discourses whether supportive or oppositional to policing. In this regard, the authors highlight the dynamic nature of news media and its ability to shift narratives as facts emerge. The authors note that such agenda-setting tactics are often indicative of "attack journalism" characterized by "journalistic distrust of institutional power" (Greer & McLaughlin, 2011, p. 274). Using such techniques, it is possible for news media to focus public attention towards institutional failures through "scandal amplification" in the aftermath of sensationalized events. The study involved interpretive content analysis of 777 articles in eight mainstream British newspapers of various political perspectives. The research centered on the case of Ian Tomlinson in 2009 who subsequently died because of injuries received during a police encounter while attending a protest in London. Findings reveal that news sources initially present a pro-police stance in support of the officer responsible for Tomlinson's death. However, as journalism continued, the stance of newspaper articles shifts to an oppositional tone reflecting a politics of outrage focused on institutional failures (Greer & McLaughlin, 2011). In the end, officers responsible for the death of Ian Tomlinson were charged. This study illustrates how portrayals of police violence not only affect public perceptions but can also have significant policy implications.

The Influence of Social Media

A growing body of literature is emerging that focuses on the effects of social media and its ability to drive narratives about police brutality (Baker, 2014; Brown et al., 2017). The majority of such analyses seems to focus on comments posted on Twitter. Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark (2018) posit that social media is a powerful tool that might be used to mobilize citizens toward collective action for protest. The authors analyzed Twitter data with a focus on 45 keywords relative to the social movement known as Black Lives Matter (BLM). Findings indicate that social media is in a unique position to attract political elites. As such, social media can potentially affect perceptions of police violence, but more importantly it can lead to social media activism (Brown et al., 2017). Similarly, Brown and colleagues (2017) suggest that social media is a powerful tool for social activism when used to amplify messages to mobilize interested parties. The study analyzed over 400,000 tweets with the hashtag #SayHerName to better understand how groups sustain collective identities relative to injustice.

Social media is an extension of traditional news media often leading to a ubiquitous cycle of news coverage that is available anytime, in real time as developments emerge, with continuous updates (Hanson & Haridakis, 2008; Paek et al., 2013). Further, social media is an extension of news media as it acts as another medium by which to disseminate information (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009). While traditional methods like television and newspapers involve intentional attempts by viewers to seek information by tuning in at a specific time and channel, social media often interjects stories from news media in manner that permits it to be stumbled upon, perhaps even unintentionally. For instance, even though users might only be interested in Facebook to connect with friends or share photos, their friends might also upload content about other topics of interest. In this way, news stories are able reach a larger audience of people that may have been disinterested in the news thereby increasing the number of viewers (Klobas et al., 2018).

Social media departs from traditional news media with its ability to mobilize viewers toward collective action. Users are not only able to participate by viewing stories but can also interact by commenting and sharing content (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017). Thus, traditional media encourages passive participation (i.e., watching and reading) whereas social media facilitates active participation (i.e., sharing content, commentary, and assembly) in some cases.

Social media can also draw attention to issues that are not addressed by traditional news sources. Social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and/or YouTube seem to be less accountable for their content and are less affected by public scrutiny and liability risks as traditional news sources. Consequently, social media

can present numerous alternative representations which may not be available through mainstream media. Research conducted by Baker (2014) reveals that perspectives purportedly held by a minority of social media participants were also "shared by a much larger majority" of users (p. 13). Thus, digital online information can have a real effect on people's social life offline (Baker, 2014).

Finally, one might argue that social media permits participants to assemble freely in a "digital" space (rather than a physical place) thereby facilitating a similar ability to disseminate information, exchange ideas, and mobilize collective action. Viewed in this regard, social media permits users to interact in ways that are not possible through traditional news media. Thus, the effects of social media can have greater ramifications than traditional news media.

Summary of Prior Research

For the most part, studies that examine use of force through the lens of media portrayals tend to support the notion that both racialized images and news coverage, whether favorable or unfavorable toward police, affect public perceptions of both perpetrators and recipients of force (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Dixon et al., 2003; Dyson, 2017; Embrick, 2015; Miller & Davis, 2008; Reinka & Leach, 2018; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Stated differently, the media has the potential to influence pre-conceived stereotypical perceptions of both law enforcement personnel and civilians which may have some effect on the outcomes of police/citizen encounters. The primary advantage of social media is that it enhances traditional news media by providing a medium that enables information to be viewed and shared by a larger audience.

Methodology

The current analysis is a review of video data involving incidents of police brutality available on YouTube.com. Why YouTube? YouTube is a website that permits users to share video content via the internet. The website archives videos submitted by users across the globe. There are few restrictions placed on the type of content that users can submit. An internet search for video content (MP4 files) using almost any search engine (e.g., Google.com) most often seems to reveal video clips accessed through YouTube's website. For many viewers, YouTube has become an extremely popular and frequently used application for sharing video content on the internet (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017; Hanson & Haridakis, 2008; Jung & Lee,

2015; Klobas et al., 2018). In fact, Paek and colleagues (2013) note that YouTube is regarded as "the most visited video-sharing site and the second most popular website" (p. 227). As such, YouTube.com is likely to be the "first choice" for viewers to gain access to visual content concerning recent events especially if users were unable to view such content when it was initially broadcast. Further YouTube includes a variety of informative content such as formal educational videos and "how to" videos in addition to its entertainment content (Klobas et al., 2018). In fact, most mainstream news companies even have a dedicated YouTube "channel" where the company's content and past broadcasts are immediately archived and instantly available to users.

Although other social media platforms are available that permit content sharing among users, YouTube is perhaps the oldest and most widely used. Moreover, prior research indicates that YouTube users are unique, often choosing to share news related content as a means of interpersonal expression (Hanson & Haridakis, 2008). Thus, people that use YouTube may be more inclined to share videos as a form of self-expression, while those that are less inclined to share content are merely seeking information or entertainment (Hanson & Haridakis, 2008). Regardless of the reasons, the empirical research suggests that YouTube is perhaps a better option for the current analysis than other social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Not only is YouTube more widely accessible, but the motivations of YouTube's users are perhaps less ambiguous.

Viewed in this regard, YouTube may prove to be an effective source to reveal the context in which police brutality generally occurs. The dissemination of media using applications like YouTube has led to new ways in which people access information. While traditional mediums like television and print media (e.g. newspapers) were once very prominent, viewing preferences for news media have continually shifted toward online sources in recent years. As such, the current study uses an exploratory approach to sample video media content that displays instances of police brutality.

Sampling Procedure

The sample utilizes convenience sampling to obtain video clips using Youtube.com over a five-year period (January 1, 2014 – January 1, 2019). Cases are derived from a keyword search involving words/phrases commonly associated with police brutality. Three specific keywords are used to conduct a search of YouTube's video archives. In all instances, a specific keyword/phrase is linked with various network names (police brutality fox, nbc, etc.). This choice ensures that the search is

primarily limited to video files that have been authenticated by professional new organizations rather than websites or sources solely committed to negative or unfavorable portrayals of police use of force. Further, an initial assumption was that there may be notable differences in force applications broadcast among news agencies. The following keywords are used in the search: excessive force, police brutality, and police violence. The search is limited to these terms because it is assumed that these words are commonly used by people wishing to learn more about police brutality. Thus, anyone using YouTube's archive is likely to begin their inquiry based on these terms. Further, these keywords are less likely to result in cases that reveal legitimate applications of force. It is worth noting that the current study is focused on excessive force (police brutality) rather than use of force in general. Finally, a limited range of keywords reduces the likelihood identifying duplicate videos. Each of these terms is then paired with the names of major news networks to conduct the search. The following network names were utilized in the current analysis: NBC, MSNBC, CBS, FOX, and ABC.

To better manage and/or narrow the range of potential cases, two filters are introduced to constrict the results more effectively. These filters include (1) the duration of the video (<4mins) and (2) the date that the video was uploaded to YouTube. This approach is useful since mainstream news outlets are less likely display video clips that are extremely long in duration. The latter filter also had the effect of ordering videos sequentially in terms of those most recently uploaded to the oldest. This approach might also prove to be more useful in future research since it may help to examine trends occurring over extended time periods. The sample is limited to videos which display visible applications of force by police officers in the United States.

Excluded Cases

Any videos that do not directly indicate observable force applications by police are excluded from the sample. Video clips which only show events subsequent to force are excluded as well. Video content of poor visual quality is not included in the sample. Compilations portraying numerous instances of police brutality are mostly excluded from the sample. When used, such cases are recorded as one specific encounter relative to the main topic of the news story. Finally, because riots and other forms of organized protests are inconsistent with typical police encounters, such large-scale contexts are beyond the scope of the current analysis.

The goals of the current analysis

- Determine whether news sources disproportionately portray minorities as recipients of force used by law enforcement officers.

- Determine the quality of police encounters involving the use of force.

- Determine the demographic characteristics of both victims and perpetrators of excessive force.

- Determine the frequency of force applications against suspects already in custody.

- Determine the intensity of force used in each category (1 – 4). For example, one shot versus 16 shots.

Key Concepts

Several concepts require clarification. Analyzing video content presents a host of challenges that can lead to ambiguous conclusions. What follows is a description of numerous terms conceptualized for purposes of the current analysis.

The term "force" is limited to physical force and does not refer to verbal force in any way. As such, the use of profane language or other derogatory terms often regarded as verbal force are not regarded as an application of force for the current analysis. Similarly, the term "use of force" is limited to the physical application of force and does not include threats of force by police. Stated differently, neither verbal (audible) threats directed at a suspect nor actual (visual) threats like pointing a gun at a suspect are regarded as force applications in the current analysis. The level of force is measured based on the dynamic resistance response model (coded 0 – 3). It includes four categories of force (0=No force; 1=Passive Force; 2=Aggressive Force; 3=Deadly Force). Instances of no force are not included in the current study. Passive force involves control/submission holds or firm grabs at pressure points on the body. Aggressive force involves non-lethal force such as hand to hand combat, body slams or take downs, and other non-lethal weapons like pepper spray, police batons, or tasers. Deadly/lethal force involves the use of lethal weapons or tactics typically intended to kill someone like firearms.

"Resisting arrest" is defined as a suspect who aggressively attempts to evade or escape capture or detention by police, or intentionally attempts to injure an officer. Resisting arrest is coded dichotomously (0 = no resistance; 1 = resistance). This variable is assessed with regards to the level of resistance displayed by a suspect at or about the time that physical force is applied. Thus, justifiable force, which

typically results from resisting arrest, is likely to have occurred in close temporal proximity to any resistance displayed by a suspect.

   In practice, police officers may view suspects' unwillingness to obey commands as resisting arrest. For purposes of this analysis, a suspect's inability or unwillingness to obey commands is not regarded as resisting arrest. The reason for this approach involves researchers' inability to measure the extent to which commands are understood by a recipient. For instance, a suspect may fail to obey commands ("get down on the ground" or assume the prone position) without aggressively attempting to evade capture by police. It is possible that a suspect's inability to comply with an officer's commands may be due to a medical emergency or mental deficiencies that hinder one's ability to understand and/or comply with commands rather than intentional disobedience. Additionally, numerous videos include no audio thereby resulting in an inability to assess the dialogue among participants in each encounter. As such, assessing the nature of communication between parties is beyond the scope of this assessment. It should also be noted that a suspect who merely refuses to place their hands behind their back (a typical command) similarly is not regarded as resisting arrest for purposes of this analysis. This latter example is more indicative of passive resistance rather than an aggressive attempt to evade capture. The decision to exclude instances of passive resistance is consistent with the aforementioned explanation that verbal commands cannot always be assessed in some cases. This researcher feels that this choice is justified since a suspect might be handcuffed and/or detained briefly for purposes of officer safety rather than as a result of a law violation or probable cause to arrest someone. Viewed in this manner, resisting arrest is more specifically focused on instances involving aggressive resistance. It is possible that suspects do not perceive themselves to be resisting arrest especially if no crime has occurred.

   "Police brutality" or "excessive force" is conceptualized as the unnecessary and/or disproportionate application of force by law enforcement personnel to either gain compliance or inflict pain on a suspect. Instances in which the infliction of pain appeared to be minimal or out of view are excluded from the current analysis. Examples might include handcuffs that are too tight, strikes to suspects that seem to be unintentional or accidental, physical battery that is obstructed due to poor lighting or poor camera angles, etc. Excessive force is an assessment of whether the level of force applied is consistent with the level of resistance displayed by the suspect. For instance, using force on an individual in handcuffs

typically is not warranted as the individual is already in custody. Excessive Force is measured dichotomously (0=Appropriate Force; 1=Excessive Force).

"Intensity" refers to the extended or continued use of force following the initial application of a specific type of force beyond that which is seemingly necessary to gain compliance. Officers may need to resort to hand to hand combat or a takedown to gain compliance. While the initial application of physical force may be justified, attempts to further punish or injure suspects beyond the necessary or proportionate threshold required to gain control is regarded as excessive intensity. For instance, one punch or kick may be necessary to gain compliance, but ten punches would exceed the necessary level of intensity mandated by the situation. Intensity is measured dichotomously (0=appropriate intensity; 1=excessive intensity). Thus, force may be warranted, and the level of force used may be proportionate initially, but the quantity of force (1 punch versus 10 punches) may be unnecessary or unreasonable, and therefore inappropriate.

The "quality" of police encounters is determined by a combination of the following three measures: excessive force, intensity of force, and the quantity of officers present in comparison to suspects present. Applications of force should consider the level of force necessary to avoid excessiveness, the quantity of force tactics reasonable to prevent excessive intensity, and the number of officers on the scene to assist relative to the number of suspects and bystanders. Forceful encounters that adhere to these criteria are regarded as justifiable force applications.

The current analysis also examines the extent to which force is used against suspects that are defenseless. "Custody" refers to whether a suspect is substantially restrained by law enforcement officers. Custody is measured dichotomously (0 = no custody, 1 = custody). For instance, a handcuffed suspect is clearly in the custody of law enforcement personnel and is substantially restrained from escape or retaliation. Similarly, a suspect that is physically restrained by several officers is deemed to be in-custody especially if the individual is not struggling with officers or resisting arrest in any visible manner. In such instances, the current analysis identifies the number of encounters involving suspects in police custody.

With regards to "Race," White is the default category for race selection in any circumstance in which there is uncertainty about the race or ethnicity of either suspects or law enforcement officials. This researcher realizes that this choice may slightly skew results with regards to White victims and/or White law enforcement officials as perpetrators of excessive force. Although this approach may lead to a slight overrepresentation of Whites both as perpetrators and victims, and

concomitant to an underrepresentation of minorities, it is assumed that the resulting measurement error is minimal. Because non-Hispanic Whites constitute an overwhelming majority in the United States (roughly 62% of the population of Americans), and since minorities of lighter skin tones (Hispanics, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders, among others but excluding Blacks) constitute less than 25% of the American population, it is likely that any uncertainties regarding race/ethnicity will be accurately categorized as White more frequently under the current framework. Additionally, Blacks have a much lower likelihood of being mischaracterized as White due to more pronounced differences in physical characteristics (hair, skin tone, etc.). For these reasons, uncertainties with regards to race/ethnicity are perhaps best regarded as White.

Findings

Finding #1: *Body cameras reveal excessive force least often*.

The final sample is comprised of 75 cases in which video footage shows direct physical force by law enforcement officers against civilians. The original sources of video clips include the following methods: cell phone cameras (33.3%), mounted surveillance either inside or outside buildings (32%), dash cameras (17.3%), and body cameras (14.7%). Among video clips obtained using mounted surveillance, 9 of 72 (12.5%) are positioned inside law enforcement agencies. Such examples typically involved civilians recently booked or otherwise confined in jail. The sample includes cases occurring in a total of 21 states (42% of the country). The bulk of cases are found in Florida (19 cases) and California (9 cases). The location of 3 cases (4% of the sample) are undisclosed.

Victims

Finding #2: *Juveniles and women are sometimes recipients of unnecessary force applications*.

With regard to victims, the overwhelming majority of cases involve only one victim of police brutality (96%). Two victims are present in three cases. The ages of victims range from 13 to 57 years (n=24). The median age is 28.7 years but should be interpreted with caution since less than half of all cases disclose the ages of victims. Five cases (6.7%) involve juvenile victims (<18 years of age), whereas two cases (2.7%) involve elderly residents (>50 years of age). The vast majority of cases (61) involve male victims (81.3%).

Females are recipients of force in 14 cases (18.7%) including three cases involving female minor children. Two of those 14 cases are justifiable since the female suspect in each case resists arrests by failing to yield to lawful commands given by a School Resource Officer. Three cases involving female suspects (21.4%) reveal violent force used against women in the custody of law enforcement officers. Among female victims, 42.9% of cases display two or more officers present at the time that force is used. One case involves as many as four officers present while using violent force against a woman in custody. A female officer is present in three cases (21.4%) involving female recipients of force.

Finding #3: *Minorities are recipients of excessive force most frequently*.

Suspects' race/ethnicity reveals marked differences in media portrayals of excessive force. Findings indicate considerable variation among races victimized by excessive force. Minorities are overrepresented in the sample as Blacks are involved in 39 cases (52%) while Hispanics are victimized in 14 cases (18.7%). Taken together, minorities are victimized in a total of 53 cases (70.7%). Whites are victimized in 22 cases (29.3%). Black females are also overrepresented as recipients of force as more than half (57.1%) of cases involving women appear to be African American (n=14). White females are somewhat underrepresented as recipients of force in 42.9% of cases. Hispanic females were not represented among the sample. These findings should be interpreted with caution since there is no way to verify the racial or ethnic characteristics of each victim involved. As mentioned previously, the race of individuals of lighter skin tones is counted as White for any case in which the victim's race is not reasonably suggested as otherwise either by observable characteristics or verbal descriptions contained in the news report. Viewed in this regard, it is possible that the number of cases involving Hispanic victims is underestimated. Conversely, this possible discrepancy would also result in an overestimation of White victims since the quality of video clips and the time of day/lighting affects one's ability to accurately assess physical characteristics. It is further acknowledged by this researcher that while physical characteristics are typically used to identify and/or distinguish racial identities, such characteristics are inadequate to accurately determine race/ethnicity (Walker et al., 2018). It should be noted that typical viewers of social media are likely to engage in casual observations of video content (which are often less attentive to small details) to form opinions about police use of force. Thus, casual observations are less rigorous than analyses conducted by trained researchers and are not likely to involve systematic efforts to review data.

Finding #4: *Non-lethal force can result in fatalities albeit infrequently*.

In nine cases (12%), the result of the encounter with police is fatal. The methods involved in these nine fatal encounters include the following: discharge of lethal firearm (6), discharge of non-lethal tasers (1), choke hold around the neck (1), and non-lethal hand-to-hand combat (1). In two of these fatal encounters, victims are handcuffed at the time non-lethal force is applied (taser and hand to hand combat) subsequently resulting in death. In fact, not only was the suspect handcuffed while being tased, but the intensity of the encounter was quite "shocking to the conscience" as officers reported used the taser on him more than five times despite being in the back of the police car while cuffed. On the contrary, two of these nine fatal encounters are somewhat justifiable. One case involves a suspect violently resisting arrest while visibly armed with a firearm. The second case involves a suspect that appears to comply with the officer's commands but suddenly reaches behind himself as if to brandish a weapon. However, the news report does not indicate whether a weapon is subsequently found on or near the suspect to further justify the use of force.

Officers

Finding #5: *Officers typically outnumber suspects present during forceful encounters.*

In all cases, the number of law enforcement officers present during an encounter is equal to or exceeds the number of suspects. The number of officers present in each case ranged from one (1) to as many as nine (9) officers on the scene during encounters involving force applications. By and large, use of force encounters involve multiple officers (two or more officers present) in 84% of cases. Two officers are visible in 33.3% of cases. In 32% of cases, four officers are present during the altercation. These findings suggest that officers may typically act as bystanders if not directly involved in an altercation, and rarely intervene on behalf of victims during use of force encounters. As well, these findings beg the question as to whether the level of force is necessary given the fact that officers generally outnumber suspects. In ten cases (13.3%), female officers are present at the time that excessive force is applied. It is commonly asserted that female officers are more effective at de-escalation than male officers. However, female officers did not attempt to intervene nor de-escalate forceful encounters in any of the cases examined.

Finding #6: *Too often, violence occurs against people that are in custody and/or restraints*.

In 25 cases (33.3%, n=75), force is used against individuals in custody of law enforcement. Of those 25 cases of custodial force applications, 20 of them involve individuals that are visibly handcuffed behind their backs. Of those 20 cases of suspects in handcuffs, six suspects are handcuffed while face down on the deck when force is applied. Most instances of custodial force applications involve punches and/or kicks (9) while in custody. Several instances of custodial force applications involve officers slamming suspects to the ground or wall either while in handcuffs or while not displaying physical resistance nor combative behavior. The locations for such force applications while in custody range from homes (1), precincts/jails (10), police cars (2), with the majority occurring on the street (11). At least four cases involve suspects that are in custody inside a jail facility at the time force is applied upon seemingly non-resistant suspects. Additionally, six more cases occur within the precinct in what appears to be booking or early intake procedures. Taken together, approximately 10 cases of custodial force occur within police precincts where additional support personnel are usually available. Two instances of police violence occur while victims are handcuffed in the back of a police car. Only one instance of custodial violence might be excused as justifiable since the suspect kicks an officer in the groin while handcuffed face down during intake procedures within the precinct. The officer responds with one punch to the face in retaliation. This example illustrates an understandable reflexive or impulsive response. Even though the officer's reaction is retaliatory, the officer displays enough restraint to prevent excessive intensity of the force application. As such, the force applied is warranted and arguably justifiable.

Finding #7: *Descriptions of events in news reports are often inadequate to justify force used*.

Media portrayals are often vague regarding details that justify officers' actions. For instance, reports might suggest that a suspect is under the influence of drugs or alcohol but fail to mention any actions by the suspect that warrant the use of force. Reports often fail to state the type of resistance posed by a suspect (non-compliance, combative, passive resistance, etc.), but commonly mention senior officials' willingness to defend the actions of junior officers. In these instances, while the video fails to support officers' claims, news reports sometimes lack the details needed to adequately suggest that officers' actions are somehow justifiable. News reports that portray events in this manner seem to take a pro-police stance that is blindly supportive of law enforcement officers. Although the verbal details provided by news reports are beyond the scope of the current analysis, future

research should examine the extent to which news broadcasts provide vague or inadequate depictions of facts surrounding police brutality.

Conclusion

The current study analyzes police brutality from two distinct viewpoints of demographic and contextual factors. Demographically, the current analysis focuses on race and sex of both police and civilians. When possible, age is taken into consideration as a demographic characteristic. The context of police brutality is assessed with regards to the quality of police encounters, intensity of force applied, whether weapons are found, suspects resisting arrest, and whether suspects appear to reach for a weapon (or make similarly unpredictable spontaneous movements). Additionally, contextual factors are assessed in terms of victim/offender dynamics with a focus on the number of officers present in comparison to the number of suspects, racial dynamics of officers versus civilians, and the level of force used by police relative to the level of resistance displayed by civilians.

RQ #1: *What is the context in which incidents of excessive force typically occur?*

Although police brutality is generally a rare phenomenon, the current analysis reveals several notable findings with regards to the context of police brutality. With regards to the current sample, typically excessive force applications occur during instances in which the number of officers present exceeds the number of suspects involved in the encounter. Thus, police brutality occurs most often among multiple officers that outnumber suspects, with violence directed towards seemingly undeserving, unarmed, and often non-resistant victims. This begs the question of whether officers should feel threatened (especially if suspects are unarmed) during these encounters given that the police typically outnumber suspects and are better equipped (with both lethal and non-lethal weapons) to deal with violent situations.

    As well, force is seemingly unprovoked at times and used against individuals that are unarmed. Several forceful encounters with police seem to result from verbal exchanges with suspects. Even worse, many of these instances involve suspects that are in the custody of law enforcement officials and adequately restrained by handcuffs or other measures. As such, custodial victims of police brutality are unable to protect themselves from bodily harm. This point causes concern because it may naturally result in attempts to escape or avoid injury which might be perceived as a failure/refusal to comply with officers' commands, thereby

encouraging an escalation of force by officers. In other words, the act of getting punched in the face (or otherwise attacked) may make it difficult to yield to commands or otherwise indicate a wiliness to comply (or stop resisting). Given that suspects typically find themselves outnumbered and outgunned, fleeing the scene may simply reflect natural responses to threatening and/or coercive tactics by police officers consistent with "fight or flight" instincts. Viewed in this regard, physical force that exceeds reasonable parameters is more likely to be counterproductive as it may induce resistance. Perhaps it is time for policy-makers and stakeholders to consider whether such tactics reasonably encourage or discourage compliance.

RQ #2: To what extent do media reports reveal non-Blacks as victims of police brutality?

Violence is most often perpetrated by White male officers against minority male suspects. However, in relatively few cases, minority officers and female officers are also guilty of excessive force. It should be noted that with one exception, female officers are merely present when excessive force is used. Nonetheless, attempts to de-escalate force applications are not revealed among the cases examined. The current analysis confirms that minorities are overrepresented as victims of police brutality. These results are consistent with prior research and frequently held perceptions about police brutality. This finding provides evidence as to why many people might hold negative perceptions of Blacks as dangerous or violent. It is possible that such perceptions might also reinforce negative stereotypes among the public of minorities being regarded as more deserving of force applications. To the extent that such perceptions become commonplace, then the quality of negative police encounters is less likely to be scrutinized by consumers of such media coverage. Stated differently, the proportion of media coverage on any given topic may serve to perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes about some groups and may even be a catalyst for unconscious bias. For instance, minorities, especially Blacks, may be perceived more frequently as dangerous as more than half of the sample involved African Americans as recipients of force applications. Further, police officers might be more frequently stereotyped as racist given that the majority of cases reveal interracial encounters between police officers and suspects of minority racial/ethnic groups.

Though it is beyond the scope of this manuscript to determine which of the aforementioned perceptions is true most often, these points illustrate the way in which negative vicarious experiences can lead to preconceived assumptions about a particular group. Once such preconceptions take root, biases are less likely to be debunked vicariously. This fact highlights the difficulty of repairing

police/community relations. To the extent that media coverage influences public perceptions and stereotypes resulting from vicarious experiences (to include news broadcasts and social media), it becomes more difficult to alter such perceptions using the same means for numerous reasons. First, positive encounters/interactions with police are far less likely to be reported to and aired by television news broadcasts. Police work typically involves duties that are perceived negatively by the community (e.g., receiving a citation, loss of freedom through arrest, etc.), events that are perhaps more "newsworthy" due to shock value. Further, the volume of positive personal/direct experiences with police are not substantial enough to compete with the vast number of vicarious experiences people are likely to hold. In other words, to the extent that positive direct experiences are needed to alleviate or debunk negative vicarious experiences, this phenomenon seems unlikely to catalyze a change in overall perceptions among the public.

A few points deserve mention with regards to media portrayals of police use of force. The current analysis seeks to better understand the context of police brutality through lens of media portrayals by mainstream news networks. Prior research indicates that use of force encounters are rare occurrences (Shane et al., 2017). However, the rarity of these events may increase the likelihood of both being publicized and subsequently sensationalized by the media. In fact, incidents of excessive force may involve greater publicity because they are "out of the ordinary." As such, legitimate applications of force by police officers may be regarded as less "newsworthy."

On the contrary, negative portrayals of police violence seem somewhat counterintuitive to news networks since law enforcement agencies are a constant and generally reliable source of "newsworthy" information/content. Bad publicity might negatively affect established relationships and thereby diminish information sharing between the police and reporters. Perhaps this point helps to explain why news content more often portrays police violence against minorities since people of color have typically been marginalized throughout American history. Consistent with conflict theory, minorities may find it more difficult to oppose the interests of the racial majority. These interests include, though are not limited to, a blind acceptance of police legitimacy, well-entrenched negative stereotypes about certain groups, and ubiquitous deference to officers' integrity despite the absence of transparency in some cases. As such, one might argue that police violence against minorities reflects not only the status quo, but also the normal efficient functioning of the criminal justice system. If this is plausible, then media portrayals may serve

to support and perpetuate racial inequalities and reinforce cleavages between the public and the police that have too often characterized American history.

Prior research has highlighted the negative stereotypical effects of media whether fictional or non-fictional. To the extent that news media is blindly supportive of policing, favorable portrayals of law enforcement may further contribute to negative stereotypes about victims of police violence. In doing so, it is possible that police violence is further normalized and legitimized publicly thereby perpetuating excessive force. Media portrayals that blindly support police use of force make it more difficult to scrutinize questionable applications of force. This point is potentially problematic since any attempt to reform policing, for instance by enacting more stringent use of force policies and penalties, will likely be stimulated by the public's disapproval rather than the dismay of police officers and politicians. On this point, media portrayals may effectively obscure the magnitude and complexity of excessive force by failing to comment on the appropriateness of such applications of force. This point is not to suggest that such media coverage should be eliminated. Rather, it is to suggest that the volume of coverage and the perspective of coverage (which most often favors police officers) can have negative effects on public perceptions. Perhaps it is time that media outlets consider whether blind deference and support to the law enforcement community is likely to discourage police misconduct. It should be noted that neither the objectiveness nor impartiality of news agencies is assessed in this study.

The current analysis begs the following questions: What should a person do when a law enforcement officer violently grabs their spouse by the throat, who just happens to be pregnant? Does one file a complaint or resort to violence to protect one's spouse? Similarly, what is the appropriate response by a parent that witnesses an officer using violent physical force (punches, kicks, body slam, or choke hold) against their minor child? Interestingly, spouses and parents are not typically permitted to use physical force against their children to gain compliance. These concerns are not intended to question the necessity of force in some instances to gain compliance but rather to suggest that such force by police may be contrary to "the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society" (*Trop v. Dulles*, 1958). Such force against loved ones is likely to diminish police/community relations especially if said force is applied hastily without any consideration for less violent alternatives. These unnecessary or questionable applications of force are likely to contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy of distrust, fear, and violence thereby perpetuating negative encounters among residents and officers.

Implications

The current analysis is important because it sheds light on the typical nature of police encounters that one might find while casually perusing the internet. These findings also illuminate several contexts that typify police misconduct. Such contexts include the presence of multiple officers on the scene, the way in which seemingly non-threatening verbal exchanges often precipitate or excite force applications, force applied to suspects in custody, the unwillingness of fellow officers to intervene when present during questionable or grossly disproportionate applications of force, and the overwhelming disparity among races as recipients of force applications. Several policy implications should be considered. Although there is no panacea to remedy such atrocities, police administrators should take precautions to address these challenges to further enhance legitimacy and restore public confidence in policing among those communities most negatively affected. Additional training may be necessary to inform officers about the ramifications of "force intensity" and restraint after initiating force. Greater restraint is certainly warranted in situations involving juveniles whenever possible. If policies and procedures remain ineffective, then more severe penalties are necessary to discourage misconduct and reassure residents that officers are not permitted to offend with impunity. Police administrators and legislators should press for criminal charges for officers that engage in malicious acts of violence against unarmed, non-resistant suspects in handcuffs. Given that body cameras are least prevalent as video sources in the sample, police administrators should work to ensure that such footage is more accessible to the public. These actions, though inadequate to remedy police brutality, would constitute good faith efforts to enhance transparency and thereby restore trust among community residents and police. Future research should examine whether policies implemented to encourage intervention by officers are effective and the extent to which such policies exist among all departments. Future research should also examine the role of police violence in other challenging contexts like public protests. As the riots at the United States capitol revealed on January 6, 2021, it is possible that protesters receive differential treatment by police based on their race.

Shortcomings

This analysis is ill-equipped to comment about the contextual circumstances that preceded many of these use of force incidents. As such, there is no way to guard against possible bias on behalf of either party (suspects or officers) regarding

subjective assessments of whether such force is warranted. Nonetheless, given that in some cases, official reports by police officers have been wrought with inaccuracies and outright lies, researchers cannot discount the possibility that accusations by victims may have considerable merit. Thus, the results of this analysis should be interpreted with caution since it is plausible that circumstances not captured by the video may potentially justify the level of force used. Similarly, one should also exercise caution to realize that the circumstances which are not captured by any given video may similarly indicate wrongdoing/misconduct on behalf of the officers involved.

As well, the current results should be received with caution since the data collection method does not exhaustively review all cases of police brutality. Rather, the current study samples only those available instances of police encounters that include visible applications of physical force. As such, the current sample may not be representative of the larger body of forceful encounters between police and residents. It should be noted that prior research typically reveals racial disparities in police encounters as minorities more often experience negative interactions than non-minorities (Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Nix et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2018).

Another shortcoming involves two potential threats to internal validity. Selection bias constitutes a potential threat to internal validity in the current study since cases are not randomly selected. To mitigate possible invalidity, all cases are selected based on specific objective criteria to minimize bias as much as possible. Finally, the current study is focused on cases involving excessive force to better understand both the context of police brutality and the way in which media portrayals might also affect public perceptions. As such, the full range of forceful encounters is not of interest in the current study. Thus, any selection bias that might occur regarding force applications whether favorable or unfavorable to police is less likely.

A final threat to internal validity involves history. Throughout the period from which videos are sampled (2014 -2019), numerous instances of police violence occurred, many of which were sensationalized by news media. The widespread attention to such events may have affected the behavior of police officers resulting in fewer instances of excessive force. Similarly, such attention may have emboldened suspects to be non-compliant or uncooperative more frequently. On the other hand, the ubiquity of such events may have contributed to a rise in media portrayals of police violence, thereby resulting in more frequent coverage of less serious applications of excessive force. Nonetheless, it is assumed that the popularity of police brutality had little effect on the police violence or the frequency of media portrayals since applications of excessive force persisted throughout this

period eventually culminating in the death of the George Floyd on May 25, 2020. Either way, it should be noted that the current sample of cases precedes the murder of George Floyd by police, an event which marks a substantial turning point in the history of police violence.

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