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Processes of Racialization Through Media Depictions of Transracial Violence

Megan Allen

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Bridgewater State University

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Chapter 1: Abstract, Introduction, Layout & Methodologies

Abstract

In this honors thesis, I explore the process of racialization in media coverage of White-on-Black violent events (both crimes and incidents not recognized by the legal system as crimes) using a critical race theory framework. Recent years have seen a series of killings of and assaults on African American people that have become newsworthy, as they have been seen, often controversially, as unjustified. The controversy has largely broken down on racial and political lines, with minority Americans and the left seeing these incidents as evidence and example of ongoing racial inequality, with whites and the right, in particular right-wing whites, denying that race is a relevant category. By using critical race theory's understanding of race and racism as active social processes, I trace the assumptions, politics, and social consequences of media coverage across conservative, centrist, and left media outlets. The shooting and killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager from Ferguson, MO., by white police officer Darren Wilson and the coverage of the event were examined as a case study. Over 300 articles and videos from national, regional, and local media outlets covering the incident were compiled and analyzed based on their content. Additionally, interviews were conducted with students of the Bridgewater State University's Criminal Justice department to assess their perceptions of the incident and how those perceptions may have been influenced by exposure to specific media coverage.

From the content analysis (chapter 3) I conclude that the media did in fact racialize the shooting of Michael Brown and fueled racial tensions by creating two distinct narratives of events through the use of racialized language and frames. From the interviews conducted and

reviewed in chapter 4, I further conclude that the perceptions formed by my peers, based on their exposure to media coverage of the event, can be understood as racialized when examined through Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's four racial frames.

Introduction

Communicative technology has forever changed the way the public receives their news. Media outlets are continuously producing and sharing knowledge through platforms that are largely accessible to nearly every citizen of the United States. Individuals now have a wide range of options as to which platform they chose to receive their news from. Along this spectrum of politically and socially diverse media outlets emerges differentiating narratives of individual subjects. That is, in a fragmented market, different organizations are going to focus on different aspects, and use different frames of analysis in assessing the same real-world event.

Further, diverse media outlets hold significant social power as a result of the relationship between public perception, public policy agenda setting, and policymaking. Media outlets sometimes use this social power to impart certain messages, which can be implicit or otherwise subtle. For the subtler messaging, it is important to examine media stories and frames with a special lens. Critical race theory is one such lens through which intersections of power, framing and perceptions can be examined. Critical race theory views racism as a fundamental presence engrained in nearly every social and formal institution in the United States whether we chose to believe it or not (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Recent years have seen the media following incidents of police-on-civilian violence, specifically ones where the target of police attention, white police officers in particular, is an

African American male. Incidents such as these, and the presentation of these incidents to the public have fueled racial tensions and contributed to the rise in social unrest.

One of the more significant incidents explored by the media and the public was the shooting and killing of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, MO by (now former) police officer Darren Wilson. In the wake of Brown's death, not only was there extensive coverage of the incident, the parties involved, and the communities affected; but also of the subsequent protests, riots, and calls for change that resulted. The reactions to the death of Michael Brown and the perceptions of how well justice was administered has polarized the public and has seemingly pinned minorities and authority figures against each other along political lines.

This thesis seeks to analyze public attitudes, media, and racial frames in the overall discourse surrounding the death of Michael Brown and other racially fueled incidents. Central to this research is the determination of what form racism takes in contemporary society, how it is perpetuated, and what role it plays in the public attitudes towards diversity, policing, and justice. In contributing to a broader goal of identifying racism's role in society today, a primary goal of this research project is to understand the ways that racial frames in the media form narratives and how those narratives function in the minds of the public. This understanding is a crucial step toward linking perspectives on police violence and race to media frames.

Methodologies

This is a mixed-method research study. Two distinct methodologies were used in this thesis to examine separate samples of data, both of which will be discussed at length in later chapters. The first set of data examined was a database of articles and videos compiled from

national, regional, and local media outlets as well as from the popular video sharing website, YouTube. Due to time limitations, only web media was collected and reviewed. Each article and video was pulled from media websites using the same three phrases; “Michael Brown,” “Ferguson MO,” and “Darren Wilson.” The articles that corresponded with these search phrases were added to a spreadsheet including their URL and a brief description of the overall coverage and tone of the article.

The second set of data came from interviews with Bridgewater State University students. Data was collected through one-on-one interviews by the student investigator. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for further analysis. The questions asked of the research subjects sought to identify individual perceptions of the killing of Michael Brown, social unrest in Ferguson MO, and police violence. Both elements of this study assess qualitative data. The intention behind using these mixed methodologies was to present data on the use and impact of media framing on a large and small scale. The examination of media content reveals what information is largely being viewed by the general public of the United States, while the interviews reveal how the information was processed by the BSU community.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is broken down into chapters. This first chapter introduces the project, and gives overview of some of the main ideas, themes, and questions. Chapter 2 is a literature review; background will be provided on Critical race theory, Media Framing, Race in the Media, and Police Violence & Opinions. Chapter 3 consists of a media content analysis on the coverage of Michael Brown’s killing and the subsequent unrest in Ferguson, MO. The following chapter contains a separate study consisting of interviews with students of Bridgewater State University

and what the data revealed around their perceptions on the death of Michael Brown and the issue of police violence. Finally, there will be a chapter dedicated to discussion the findings, implications, and limitations of this research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review chapters will proceed in two parts. The first provides an overview of critical race theory, an analytic framework that is used in this thesis to assess the media output in chapter three, and the qualitative data produced through interviews in chapter four, as well as provide a foundation for final analysis in chapter five. The second part of this chapter proceeds as a more traditional review of the state of the scholarship on the issues related to the content of this study, including: Media Framing, Race in the Media, and Police Violence & Public Opinions.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is a framework, a movement, and an academic discipline which maintains that society is at all levels divided along racial lines (Delgado, 2012). Critical race theory is considered to have begun with the works of law school professor Derrick Bell in the 1970's. Bell sought to examine the intersections between power, race, and the law. Since Bell, critical race theory (CRT) has been used to examine similar intersections of race and power throughout history, education, the media, and in other political, social, and economic realms (Delgado, 2012). In this thesis CRT is used as a frame of analysis, its themes are used to understand both media and interview content.

Critical race theory was born from a need to further explain and acknowledge persistent racism in society. Even today, over 150 years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, racial minorities continue to remain disadvantaged compared to whites in nearly every area of social life. According to a study by social scientist Dr. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva,

“[blacks] are more likely to be poor than whites, earn about 40% less than whites, and have about an eighth of the net worth of whites” (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Additionally, studies have shown that people of color are more likely to receive an inferior education compared to whites, and will have less access to the housing market. Within the realm of the criminal justice system, people of color are consistently overrepresented at all levels including arrests, convictions, incarcerations, and executions (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). These alarming disparities, among many others, beg for an explanation. While some may still deny racism exists in our post-civil rights society, critical race theorists contend that racism not only still exists, but is a permanent fixture in the structure of our government and society (Delgado, 2012).

As a broad field of study, numerous scholars have identified varying approaches to applying critical race theory. In one of his books, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Richard Delgado loosely outlines 6 tenets of critical race theory. The first is *ordinariness*, which essentially states that racism is difficult to cure or address (Delgado, 2012). By this he means to say that colorblind or “formal” conceptions of equality can remedy only the most blatant forms of racism. The second tenet he refers to as *material determinism*. This element establishes that because large segments of the population are white or privileged, there is little incentive on their part to eradicate systematic racism purely out of self-interest (Delgado, 2012). The third tenet Delgado refers to as *social construction*, which holds that race and racism are products of social thought and relations. Race is not a result of biological or genetic coding, but rather social categories created out of manipulation and convenience (Delgado, 2012).

The fourth tenet outlined is *differential racialization*, which argues that a dominant society racializes minority groups at different times in response to shifting needs (Delgado, 2012). This would explain both slavery as resource for free labor and more recently the

stereotype and abuse of Mexican labor for agricultural advances. A fifth tenet refers to *intersectionality* and *anti-essentialism* as a way of explaining that no person has a single unitary identity. Instead, Delgado makes the argument that because individuals possess multiple backgrounds and characteristics, everyone has overlapping identities and loyalties (Delgado, 2012). For example, an African American may share their heritage with other African Americans, but that individual may also be Muslim, homosexual, or possess any number of combinations of identities. The final tenet outlined describes a *unique voice of color*. Though it slightly contradicts the previously mentioned tenet, this ideal asserts that experience with racism and oppression means a right to “legal storytelling.” In this way, Delgado argues that minority status brings with it a competence unparalleled by whites to race and racism (Delgado, 2012). This competence to which he speaks can be explained as a deep understanding of racism and racialized situations based on history, culture, perspective, and experience.

Another approach to using critical race theory as a tool of analysis was outlined by DeCuir and Dixson in an article published in the journal *Educational Researcher* (2004). In their article, they present critical race theory as a framework comprised of 5 tenets central to its own definition. The first tenet of this approach is called *counter storytelling*, which speaks to the legitimization of racial and subordinate experiences of marginalized groups. Counter storytelling aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises of race by the oppressors (DeCuir, 2004). This tenet is followed by *permanence of racism*, which holds that racism controls political, social, and economic realms. This tenet is central to critical race theory as it highlights racism as an inherent part of American civilization, privileging whites over minorities (DeCuir, 2004). The third tenet presented by DeCuir and Dixson is *whiteness as a property*. This tenet very simply describes whiteness as being a property of interest, something that allows the possessor a right to

use and enjoy it while using it as a tool to disposition and exclude those who do not possess it (DeCuir, 2004). The fourth tenet is similar to Delgado's material determinism but is here referred to as *interest convergence*. This tenet acknowledges that legislation, largely produced by the interests of the dominant race, protects the interests and benefits that race (DeCuir, 2004). The final tenet proposed by DeCuir and Dixson is the *critique of liberalism*. This area of critical race theory shares notions with liberal legal ideologies which include the notion of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law, and incremental change. Together, these concepts tie to make the argument that colorblindness acts as a mechanism that allows people to ignore racist policies which perpetuate social inequality (DeCuir, 2004).

Critical race theory and its multiple frameworks take many forms but in all, critical race theory asserts that America is, in many ways, permanently racist to its core. Consequently, the legal, political, economic, and social structures are not only racist, but are actively involved in perpetuating racism (DeCuir, 2004). Critical race theory seeks then not only to highlight the ways in which the law fails to be neutral but also possible explanations and remedies.

For the purposes of this thesis, critical race theory will be used primarily as a tool to analyze media frames. While CRT is often concerned with broader subjects such as the law and history of the United States, it will be used here to magnify the intentions behind selective coverage, verbiage and deliberate framing techniques as used by the media.

Media Framing

A crucial component to understanding racism as an active force in formal and informal institutions is to recognize the use of framing. We have established that through the lens of critical race theory, institutions such as schools, the criminal justice system, and the media

contribute to systematic racism by maintaining and supporting racial inequality. We also know that through positions of power, knowledge is easily created. Framing therefore is the vehicle through which knowledge may be transformed into a deliberate message. Not only does the framing of a particular situation allow the viewer to interpret or *misinterpret* reality, it also drives the formation of opinions and beliefs.

In regards to systematic racism and understanding any dominant racial ideology, social scientist Dr. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva developed four central frames largely used by U.S. society to both perpetuate racial inequality while denying it all together. The four frames of this “color-blind racism” are *abstract liberalism*, *naturalization*, *cultural racism*, and *minimization of racism* (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Through the use of these frames, Bonilla-Silva makes the argument that central elements of liberalism have been rearticulated in post-civil rights America to rationalize racially unfair situations (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

The frame of *abstract liberalism* involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (equal opportunity) and economic liberalism (choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). The use of abstract liberalism allows the dominant race to avoid tackling real race-related issues like the underrepresentation of minorities in high-paying occupations by standing behind phrases and practices such as “equal opportunity”. Rather than acknowledge historically and culturally significant reasons why minorities receive less pay and achieve lower net worth’s than whites, whites stand behind abstract liberal ideals. It is beneficial to explain these disparities in a way that allows them to avoid blame. By making claims that minority shortcomings result from a lack of effort or drive on their own behalf, whites avoid self-blame and the responsibility of identifying or rectifying the structural racism.

Naturalization is a frame that operates off the assumption that racial phenomena can be explained by suggesting they are natural occurrences (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). An example of this would be regarding the formation of racially homogenous neighborhoods as “natural” or based purely out of preference. In reality the segregation of neighborhoods has significantly more to do with structural racism within the housing and real estate markets than it does with any “normal gravitation”. This method of rationalizing what appears to be natural occurrences is one way of masking the underlying racism that exists in reality.

Cultural Racism relies on heavily on culturally based arguments to explain the socioeconomic standing of minorities (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). This frame utilizes stereotypes and assumptions of races to justify disproportionate social standing while protecting white superiority. This frame may seem to be the most blatant method of maintaining racial inequality however it can easily be presented in passive, seemingly harmless way. For example, making the argument that “black people are always late” allows others to rely on this as an explanation for why they don’t receive job opportunities at the same rate as whites. Not only does this reinforce negative perceptions of African Americans in society, but also prevents further examination of racism.

Minimization of racism, the final frame discussed by Bonilla-Silva, suggests that discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances. This frame, more so than any other, seeks to disregard racism as an existing issue in society. This frame allows the public at large to feed into the delusion that since blatant discrimination no longer exists, that racism too does not exist. Through this frame, whites and members of a higher socioeconomic status flip the use of excuses around on the minorities (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Minimization is used primarily when a minority experiences a form of attack or rejection based on their race and

they chose to speak out about it. Rather than accept the fact that discrimination transpired, whites will minimize the damages and claim that the minority is “using race as an excuse” to achieve some ulterior motive. Through this frame, the infamous “race card” is perceived to be played, and whites are more easily able to disregard the claims of racism.

The powerful explanations used by whites not only allow them to justify and ignore racism, but also maintain whiteness as a privilege. The ties that can be drawn between critical race theory and framing are best understood when examined through an institutionalized system which uses its powers to covertly support color-blind racism. As one of the most influential producers of knowledge and news, the media is fit for such an examination.

Crime Coverage in the Media

As previously mentioned, the increasing availability of technology has made accessing news as simple as turning on one’s television. Prior to the broadcasting of news, the only sources of crime news were in print. By broadcasting news, media outlets are able to communicate with the masses on a more personal level. For many households, watching the news, specifically crime news, has become part of a daily routine (Bing III, 2010). From broadcasts to cable to the Internet, the accessibility of news and crime investigations changed how up to date and involved Americans could be. As crime has become an intrinsic part of modern media coverage (one study found that crime can account for up to 50% of news coverage) it is important first to examine why there is such a focus on crime from media outlets before the content can be assessed (Schildkraut, 2012). One study conducted in 2010 aimed to analyze the media’s distortion of homicides in Baltimore.

Researchers Jaclyn Schildkraut and Amy Donley identified three main reasons why the media would place such special attention on crime. First, the majority of the public's general understanding of crime comes from the media, making it continually important for the media to produce more cases of crime. In fact, it has been reported that mass media accounts for 95% of the general public's source for information on crime (Schildkraut, 2012). This supports the widely held misconception that crime is interracial, due to the overwhelming focus by the media of "black on white" or "white on black" crime. The overall prevalence of crime depicted by the media has less to do with actual statistics and more to do with what makes for a good story. Violent crimes tend to take up more than 40% of crime stories despite the fact that they are the least common (Schildkraut, 2012). In this way the media holds the power to create the public's knowledge or understanding of crime.

Secondly, the media has the power to use crime reporting as a tool for swaying public opinion since it is so closely relied upon. Not only does public interest propel the selection of news stories, but it also possesses the power to influence policy decisions (Schildkraut, 2012). As an example inspired by Richard Wright's work on the impact of media and public perception on sex crime policy: if ABC news produces a story on a child who became a victim of sexual assault by a stranger, the public's reaction will be both predictable as well as uninformed. Not only has the news station succeeded in capturing the attention of the public with a rare incident of a sex crime, but they will have framed it in a way that will lead the public to demand a swift response from the criminal justice system so these "prevalent" crimes can be prevented in the future. The demand will most likely be met by local legislators writing up a bill that does little in the way of responding to the central issues of sex crimes. Instead the bill will focus on creating

harsher penalties for unlikely offenders and due to the lack of attention paid to empirical data on sex crimes, will be unsuccessful in actually preventing crime (Wright, 2015).

Finally, the media is able to create an unbalanced understanding of crime by presenting “a world of crime and justice that is not found in reality” (Schildkraut, 2012). Past research has found that victims’ race and gender statuses shape crime news story decision-making (Gruenewald, 2013). As previously mentioned mass media accounts of crime drive misconceptions about the prevalence, and nature of crime as it occurs within communities across the United States. By allowing victim’s and offender’s characteristics to drive newsworthiness not only makes the selection process arbitrary, but it also supports racial stereotypes and racial tensions in the United States.

From this research and literature we are able to identify: (1) that beliefs, understandings, and perspectives on events and realities can be influenced based on the information and how that information is being presented. (2) That there are distinct frames, on large and small scales, which can be used to perpetuate racial injustices by ignoring significant historical disparities, minimizing responsibility, and reinforcing inaccurate stereotypes.

Race & Media

Beyond the public getting inaccurate information about crime, the information is often also racialized. Scholars have examined a range of ways that news media output skews public understanding of race in the United States-both in general and as related to criminal justice. Scholars have further identified numerous motivations for the media to selectively portray African Americans as offenders more often than as victims. In fact, one study by Gruenewald et al (2013) found that racial-ethnic minorities are more likely to appear as crime suspects than

victims, and that black crime participants are more likely linked to violence and danger in television nightly news compared to whites (Gruenewald, 2013). There is a general lack of information about successful African Americans whose contributions to society are great (Bing III, 2010). The distorted image of African Americans taints the view of black culture and fuels misinformation and racial tensions. This negative frame of African Americans falls in line with Bonilla-Silva's argument that whites have developed powerful explanations which have ultimately become justifications for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate them from any responsibility for the status of people of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Whites easily rationalize African American's perceived lack of successes as a product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, or their "cultural limitations" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Racialized Media Coverage

Framing is an important aspect of news coverage because it transforms information into knowledge. Frames are a negotiated product of the competing interests and biases of journalists, government officials, and other political actors (Cook, 1998). These frames are deliberately used to influence or sway public perceptions and understandings of events. While the more obvious speculation for the media sensationalizing and twisting stories may be to gain and retain viewers, scholars of critical race theory see these framing practices as intentionally racist. Through the lens of critical race theory, it is possible to identify some of those interests and biases as systemic racism. Analyzing the content of news media requires careful and close examination.

A prominent example of identifiable racism in the media came from the coverage of the tragic devastation that resulted from Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The framing of the white survivors differed greatly from that of their black counterparts. Much of the coverage focused on the damage caused by the storm and ways survivors sought relief. During this time both white

and black survivors were exploring destroyed stores in search for medical supplies and food. Media coverage displayed clear discrimination by showing more white victims in a positive light by coupling their images with captions such as “Two residents waded through chest-deep water after *finding* bread and soda from a local grocery store.” In the other images, African Americans are shown in nearly the exact same situation but the caption reads “A young man walks through chest deep flood water after *looting* a grocery store in New Orleans” (Haider-Markel, 2007). Critical race theory allows us to identify this frame as *cultural racism*. We label the behavior of seeking and taking life-saving supplies as *looting* because we identify African Americans as thieves and rely on this false stereotype as a means of explaining their behavior while separating them from whites engaging in the same activities.

Another study examined CNN broadcasts and found that the network broadcast video clips of looting exclusively of African Americans. The news reporting on the crime and violence was later found to be erroneous and exaggerated although it was easily accepted by viewers (Voorhees, 2007). From a critical race theory perspective, this reflects the use of cultural understandings of race to interpret events (Warren, 2012). Assumptions that link violence and lawlessness to African Americans were reinforced by the repeating images.

The criminalization of the African American evacuees was not the only notable racial undertone found in media coverage of the hurricane. Another study examined media coverage and found that news coverage often engaged in blaming the victims, criticizing the African American residents’ failure to evacuate prior to the storm (Warren, 2012). This argument neutralizes other reasons for why the residents were unable to evacuate –lack of resources being a significant reason for why many were unable to evacuate- and instead clings to the notion that they were unable to evacuate due to their “lacking of rationality” or their “inability to act in their

own best interest” (Warren, 2012). Here we see Bonilla-Silva’s *Naturalization* frame taking effect, where whites avoid responsibility for racial phenomena by suggesting that the victims were to blame for their “natural” response (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Several studies were also conducted in the wake of Katrina, which examined how police and military specifically responded to both the incident and to the media coverage. There were heightened levels of both police and military presence in New Orleans after the storm. One study found that the Department of Defense and other governmental agencies relied heavily on media coverage to inform them of conditions in order to determine proper responses to incidences (Fjord, 2007). The same study found there was a focus on maintaining social order over humanitarian aid. Implications of the coverage included reduced empathy for evacuees and reinforced prejudices and negative stereotyping of African Americans (Warren, 2012). Much like DeCuir outlined in the 5 tenets of her critical race framework, permanence of racism is preserved through supporting prejudices and stereotypes (DeCuir, 2004). While the coverage of Katrina is well-examined by scholars, there is also no reason to think that Katrina coverage is qualitatively different from coverage of other major events. Thus, these kinds of issues may also appear in coverage of cases like that of the killing of Michael Brown and the events that followed.

Another area of race examined in the media apart from violence is the prevalence and support of interracial couples in television, film, and other forms of new media. One study used critical race theory as a framework to examine media representations of interracial couples. Researcher Catherine Luther begins her research by stating, “Mainstream mass media can be viewed as cultural narratives that are playing critical roles in maintaining myths and taboos associated with intimate relations between Blacks and Whites” (Luther, 2013). Through this statement she reinforces the power media possesses in influencing cultural understandings of

race and racism. Through content and discourse analyses, Luther examined the microstructural elements of media segments by selection of words, quotes and metaphors. Through these methods, the texts became a major source of evidence for grounding claims about social structures, relations and processes (Luther, 2013).

Many of the findings that resulted from Luther's research were consistent with critical race theory. In one content analysis of 40 U.S. films that included interracial couples, 100% of the white couples were successful while only 38% of the interracial couples were successful. From her overall examination of multiple forms of media, one of her main conclusions reached was that interracial relationships tend to either be made invisible in entertainment media, or if presented, tend to be shown as problematic and unnatural. In other cases, interracial relationships were portrayed as dysfunctional or dangerous (Luther, 2013). In another examination of past shows that centered on interracial couples revealed that the pairs seldom materialized, or the shows themselves were all together cancelled despite positive reviews (Luther, 2013). Again we see *Naturalization* used to explain away the lack of successful interracial couples. Although this could be viewed as racist, the overwhelming representation of successful same-race couples as opposed to interracial couples is overcome by suggesting that these preferences are almost biologically driven and typical of all groups of society (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Critical race theory reveals a number of realities about the findings that Luther and her colleagues reached. The presentation of interracial relations in mass media forms a powerful framework through which the public understands race and the effects of racism on a daily basis. The images of failed or awkward interracial couples contribute to the maintenance of race-related subordination. Not only did the media's portrayal of the couples stigmatize interracial relations, but also reflected an inability of whites to see blacks as emotional or social equals

(Luther, 2013). Through the social construction of race, we continue to view blacks and whites as different beings with unequal capacity. Critical race theory can thus be seen as an analytic frame with broad utility – applicable to news, entertainment, etc. For these reasons, CRT proved to be an appropriate paradigm with which the news and interview data could be assessed.

Police Violence & Public Opinion

Having control over framing situations gives the media the power to put any given situation in perspective for the general public by sticking to only one narrative of the events. Some scholars speculate that this is to maintain discriminatory mindsets and practices to keep white social and economic privilege intact (Stabile, 2006). This argument also asserts that these narratives support racist stereotypes, and construct scenarios where white fear and anti-black violence are justified. “Mass media representations of black and white criminals and black and white victims gave new life to forms of institutionalized racism and reinvigorated an array of racist narrative practices that had lain dormant for a decade” (Stabile, 2006). Other scholars argue that it is an effort to support a racialized caste system in the United States that not only equates racial minorities with poverty, but also discriminates against them as a result (Alexander, 2011)

Racial tensions in the criminal justice system are largely denied by law enforcement but the clear overrepresentation of African Americans throughout the criminal justice system argues otherwise. Despite representing only 13% of the total population of the United States, in 2010 African Americans made up 37% of jail populations. In 2009, African Americans represented 30% of those on probation, and 37% of those on parole. Finally, in 2010 blacks represented over 53% of all citywide arrests, where whites represented only 44% (Gabbidon, 2013).

These statistics and racial tension create a general distrust between African American citizens and police officers. According to the NAACP statistics, 1 in 6 African American men have been incarcerated as of 2001. If current trends continue, 1 in 3 African American males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime (NAACP, 2015). Between 2002 and 2011 overall confidence and satisfaction with the police across the country was gauged and recorded based on demographic information. On a scale on 0-100% (100 being completely confident and satisfied) whites reported a range of 60-70% confident, while blacks reported a range of 22-49%. As part of the same survey, individuals who claimed an annual income of \$20,000 or less reported confidence between 43-60%, while those making \$75,000 or more ranged between 65-72% (Gabbidon, 2013). This disparity in perceived reliability of law enforcement is indicative of differential treatment within any given community based on race or socioeconomic status.

From 2003 to 2009 the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported a total of 4,813 arrest-related deaths, 1 in 6 of which (2,931) were classified as homicide by law enforcement personnel (The Department of Justice, 2011). Of those homicides, 42% of victims were white and 32% of victims were black or African American. Thirty-two percent is a high representation considering whites comprise 75% of the total population of the United States where African Americans make up less than 13% (The Department of Justice, 2011). This occurrence of police related homicides and police brutality in general has been rising slightly over the past 20 years (Gabbidon, 2013).

Putting the Pieces Together

From the literature, we have learned:

- Critical Race Theory teaches us how to observe racism in society

- Critical race theory is a framework, a movement, and an academic discipline which maintains that society is at all levels divided along racial lines
- Delgado (2012) outlines 6 tenants to CRT:
 - Ordinarity
 - Material Determinism
 - Social Construction
 - Differential Racialization
 - Intersectionality/Anti-Essentialism
 - Unique Voice of Color
- The legal, political, economic, and social structures in the United States are not only racist, but are actively involved in perpetuating racism
- Critical race theory helps us understand what's happening in the media
 - Framing therefore is the vehicle through which knowledge may be transformed into a deliberate message
 - Bonilla-Silva (2014) outlines 4 frames used to ignore and perpetuate racism:
 - Abstract Liberalism
 - Naturalization
 - Cultural Racism
 - Minimization of Race
 - Schildkraut et al (2012) tells us:

- The majority of the public's general understanding of crime comes from the media, making it continually important for the media to produce more cases of crime
- The media has the power to use crime reporting as a tool for swaying public opinion since it is so closely relied upon
- The media is able to create an unbalanced understanding of crime by presenting a world of crime and justice that is not found in reality
- Other studies examined indicate:
 - African Americans are more likely to be depicted as suspects/offenders than they are as victims by the media
 - African Americans are disproportionately represented throughout the criminal justice system, from arrests to incarcerations
- Other scholars have traditionally used critical race theory to examine law, history and education, but for the purposes of this thesis, it will be used to examine media framing and how media frames influence the public's understanding and perceptions of events

Chapter 3: Media Analysis

Introduction

As previously mentioned, coverage on the shooting and killing of Michael Brown as well as the subsequent social unrest, protests and riots dominated media and the public's attention for months. This media frenzy gave rise to the two narratives that divided the public's support and sympathies toward either the bereaved community or to law enforcement. With tensions rising and impassioned opinions turning into hateful rants, the public seemed almost over inundated with this "us vs. them" scenario seemingly intended to divide the nation.

With so many voices relentlessly arguing the same two perspectives, I began to wonder how much the media's often slanted and framed reporting had to do with this binarism. I was motivated to discover how many narratives were present in news media, and whether those narratives would align with the media outlet's political agendas, and whether those narratives reflected concepts of CRT. I hypothesized first that national news outlets, which are already identified with a political orientation, would be the most blatantly opinionated. I predicted that right-wing sources such as FOX News would focus on defaming Michael Brown and his supporters while presenting the narrative that the shooting was justified. I further predicted that left-wing sources such as CNN and NBC would throw their support to Brown and his community while maintaining that the shooting was not justified. Overall I expected regional and local media to be for the most part aligned with the left-wing media outlets and offer more opinions pieces. Finally, my expectations for the YouTube search were that they would yield a fairly even split of right and left wing news pieces and footage clips.

In order to maximize the breadth of the study, I focused on media coverage that could be found online. This method of searching and locating articles proved to be advantageous for two reasons: 1.) I was able to collect a large number of sources, and 2.) I was able to systematically categorize links into an electronic spreadsheet based on key search phrases. By using these key phrases, I was quickly able to identify certain framing techniques being used across articles and across media outlets. The importance of identifying these frames was the first step in understanding how the media was able to manipulate public perceptions to fit into these pre-determined stances.

Methodology

To illustrate the impact of framing by the news media, I chose to compare and analyze coverage of a single incident of transracial violence. The shooting and killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, MO in August of 2014 dominated media outlets for months. Due to the overwhelming coverage and varying opinions that arose from the death of Michael Brown, I chose to examine not only coverage of the incident, but also of the subsequent protests. I began by creating a database of articles and other forms of media coverage totaling 298 pieces from 9 different media outlets. The media content examined was found entirely using online sources, all of which are available to the public.

I began by collecting articles, videos, and images from national media outlets including NBC, ABC, CNN, and FOX news. I chose to begin with national media outlets because the coverage of the events were well documented and reflected information that the public was likely to have viewed. The number of documents I archived from these four national news providers

totaled 91. Of these media sites ABC yielded the fewest number of articles covering the incident totaling only 6, half of which were interviews with former Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. NBC, CNN, and FOX alternatively had extensive article and footage coverage ranging from the date of the incident, August 9, 2014, up until the articles were collected over the course of the summer of 2015.

From national broadcast outlets I moved to more traditional, and somewhat regional news sources including the New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The San Francisco Chronicle, and the Atlanta Journal Constitution. These five newspapers provided a significant portion of the total number of articles collected, 207. Similar to the national media outlets examined, most of the newspapers maintained a timeline of events and coverage of Ferguson ranging from the date of the incident in the summer of 2014 until the time of collection in 2015.

It was important to include both national and regional news sources to increase the scope of coverage that was created in the wake of the incident. It was also crucial to the findings of this research that the scope included sources from conservative, centrist, and leftist media outlets. From each of the sources listed above the same method of collection was used. Each site was searched using the same key words and phrases “Michael Brown”, “Darren Wilson”, and “Ferguson, MO”.

I was also interested in seeing which pieces of the incident reached the most amount of people. To do this, I ran a search on the popular video sharing website, *YouTube*. I selected the phrase “Michael Brown Ferguson Missouri” to use as a search tool which yielded just under 10,000 videos. I then sorted the results based on the view count and recorded the video information of the top 20 most viewed videos in my article database. The dates of the videos

ranged from August 2014 to July 2015. The view count ranged from 247,180 to 2,952,506 individual views.

It was my goal that by collecting these articles and examining them through a Critical Race lens, that I would be able to trace assumptions between the politics and social consequences of media framing. I was particularly interested in what the primary focus of the articles produced by individual sources would reflect. Therefore I went back into my article database and categorized each piece based on the focus of the narrative. Each piece was then labeled with key words and phrases used by the article, and used to describe the tone of the article. Words and phrases recorded included: murdered, killed, Brown, Wilson, left, neutral, right, protest, riot, protestors, rioters, looters, destruction, peaceful, force, police, national guard, Obama, funeral, community, pepper spray, guns, violence, justice department, etc. These labels allowed me to have a clearer overview of not only the content of each article but also an insight into which themes dominated each media outlet.

The findings of this content analysis of coverage and the assumptions that can be traced about those media sources will be discussed in the next section. The section will be broken up into three sub-sections that will explain the findings of the national coverage, local coverage, and YouTube content examined.

Findings

National Broadcast Sources

Of the national media outlets examined there was a clear divide in the overall tone of the articles that coincided with the political background of each outlet. As previously mentioned, ABC News yielded the fewest number of articles and videos (6). For the most part this content

leaned toward the left by focusing on issues of civil rights, and the impending consequences of the fatal confrontation. Another notable focal point of their content was how the officer involved, Darren Wilson, seemed unharmed by the incident, identifying the minimal damage done to his body and his complete lack of involvement with the public in the wake of the incident.

The content produced by NBC was possibly the most liberal of all the national sources reviewed. While some of the content remained neutral by objectively reporting on key timeline events such as the autopsy report, the federal investigation, and other civil investigations, much of the content focused primarily on the community and the peaceful protests. Out of 22 articles pulled from NBC's website, 15 (68%) focused on or mentioned the community and the protests. The overall tone and framing of the protests was supportive. Rather than focus on violence or destruction of property, the site reported on Michael Brown's funeral, his family, his community and their cry for justice.

Of the 4 national media sources examined, CNN appeared to be the most neutral in tone and verbiage used. The majority of the articles were objectively focused on all ongoing investigations, the Justice Department, arrests made, the autopsy report, the grand jury, witness testimony, etc. The use of the word "protest" or "protestor" was used in 10 of the 36 articles collected (28%). The use of the words "riot," "rioters" or "violence" was found in 12 articles (33%). CNN's site seemed to produce a balanced view of Ferguson by poking holes in any and all evidence brought to the public's attention.

FOX News, a right wing conservative media source focused its coverage around violence, destruction of property, the surveillance tape of Michael Brown stealing cigars from a convenience store prior to the incident, and surprisingly President Obama. Out of the 4 national media outlets I examined, FOX was the only site to show the surveillance footage of Michael

Brown stealing from the convenience store prior to his death. From 28 articles and videos collected, Michael Brown was referred to as a thief, a thug, a gangster, and was accused of being a violent person. There was additional discussion from some of these articles about the rap music he listened to, his marijuana use, his history of drinking alcohol under aged, and his supposed status as a “robbery suspect” at the time of his death. One article stated that he stole a \$50 box of cigars, while further research revealed that he grabbed a handful of loose Swisher Sweets, a brand of cigarillos that typically cost \$1 or less a piece.

Another commonly used frame found in many FOX articles was the strong and prevalent opinion that the shooting was justified, and that the aggression toward police in that community was unfounded. In 12 separate articles (43%) FOX correspondents made statements supporting the police’s decisions around the incident. In many of these 12 articles there were authoritative statements made around a lack of evidence and the unlikelihood that Officer Darren Wilson would be indicted well before that decision was passed down. Other oppositional statements to the civil rights activists included content that argued, “hands up don’t shoot” as being a false narrative or a hoax. A final significant finding pulled from the FOX news content was the overwhelming attention paid to President Obama. Many of the article scrutinized Obama’s response to the incident, accusing him of picking and choosing which incidences of violence to care about. Additionally, Obama was accused of turning his back of law enforcement, ignoring murders perpetrated by immigrants, jumping on political opportunities in Ferguson, and supporting “phony stories,” false narratives and witness testimonies.

Regional Media Sources

Unlike the national broadcast outlets, the regional sources examined were for the most part objective and unbiased, especially from The New York Times, The Washington Post, The San Francisco Chronicle, and the Atlanta Journal Constitution. Overall the tone of the coverage was sympathetic toward the community of Ferguson. Much of the coverage focused on Michael Brown's funeral, the schools, the witnesses, and the community's involvement with both the protestors and the rioters. Many of the local media sources made a clear distinction between "protestors", "opportunists" and "rioters".

The Wall Street Journal's coverage of Ferguson stood apart from the other local newspapers as it focused almost entirely on the businesses affected by the destruction. From their website I recovered only 14 articles which referenced either Michael Brown or Ferguson, MO. In these 14 articles there was no mention of protestors or demonstrators, only of violent rioters, looters, and opportunists. The topics covered included possible legislation reform in local court fines and fees, damages done to the city, and new police policies and practices in the wake of the incident.

YouTube

The most watched videos on YouTube yielded a fairly split list of results. While some of the videos were posted by official media outlets (one by CNN, one by FOX, others by smaller media organizations) many of the videos were produced by unaffiliated individuals. Out of the 20 videos, 9 of them were strictly opinionated pieces about the evidence and the investigation. While the content seemed to split evenly along polarized lines, the footage was extreme. The most viewed videos contained footage of Michael Brown's body lying in the street, footage of the police responding to the scene of the incident recording residence's reactions, the

surveillance video, and raw footage of looters destroying cars, business, and interactions with police. Two of the videos showed police standing by while rioters destroyed property. The surveillance tape was shown in 5 of the 20 videos. Surprisingly, there was more footage of witness accounts and reactions than there was of any protesting or rioting.

One of the most disturbing findings of the video content analysis was how popular some of the opinion pieces were. It became evident to me while viewing that some of the facts being presented to the viewers by the many “political crusaders” online were untrue, exaggerated, or had changed since the posting of the video. Even still, comments were being left in support of the inaccurate information. While official news reporting outlets are required to uphold a certain level of standards in the information they produce, there are no such requirements on the information shared between individuals online, regardless of how many millions it may reach.

Discussion

The death of Michael Brown was perhaps the most prominent crime related event occurring in 2014 and the coverage dominated all media outlets for months. President Obama spoke out about how tragic Brown’s death was, but warned communities to protest peacefully: “There is undoubtedly going to be some form of negative reaction and it will make for good TV, throwing bottles or smashing cars will not solve the underlying mistrust and genuine problems still facing African Americans” (Swaine, 2014).

Media reports revealed high profile involvement in Ferguson with attention on the presence of Attorney General Eric Holder, other members of the Obama administration, and dozens of FBI agents. Reporters interviewed social justice activists, Reverend Al Sharpton,

members of law enforcement, and St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney Robert McCulloch (Botelho, 2014).

The attack on Michael Brown's character was perhaps the most egregious move taken by media outlets. Without giving any time for his family or community to sufficiently grieve their loss, the Ferguson police department released footage of Brown stealing cigars from a convenience store to local and national media. Rather than focus on his age, his ambitions, and his ties to the community, television and online media began screening the footage and just as quickly much of the public wrote him off as another thug who was undeserving of their sympathies. Rather than focus on the way this young man's body was left in the street for hours, the public focused on pictures of him looking like the stereotypical thug they wanted to believe he was so that his killing could be more easily justifiable.

Tensions fueled by the death of Michael Brown led to massive congregations of people in Ferguson. Media coverage switched from the investigation, to Wilson, to a combination of protests and riots. When the grand jury declined to indict Officer Wilson on the evening of November 24th, the rioters went from angered to outraged.

While print news focused on the investigation and new developments of law enforcement, online and social media sources continued to produce violent images of looters and militarized police forces aggressively pushing back crowds. The events surrounding the crowds and "protestors" soon became the focal point of media attention. The nation watched as the media aided in creating an "us vs. them" scenario between the people and law enforcement.

News reporters stayed on site in Ferguson everyday for nearly 6 months. The issue of race was central to almost every report. Video footage was captured and archived on national new websites. The focus was predominantly on violence. CNN was instrumental in providing

national coverage and produced moment-to-moment updates in a single news article, which can still be accessed online. The articles produced daily dramatized the situation by showing images of every fire, broken window, flaming car, vandalized building, smoke bomb, and pepper-sprayed protestor (Basu, 2014). What was not seen on CNN among other national news providers were the many protestors who were in fact peaceful.

Further searching on the Internet, specifically right-wing oriented sites, will yield footage of the protests in which rioters, not protestors, were engaging the police in aggressive, violent ways including screaming in their faces and throwing rocks and other objects at them. These were the same rioters who engaged in looting, vandalism, and other criminal activity. These individuals who were not there to speak against civil rights or social injustices not only took the attention away from those that were, but they also stole much of the media attention.

In all, national news providers such as CNN, NBC, FOX, and ABC supplied the majority of TV and mobile news coverage with special attention paid to the protestors being aggressively pushed back by law enforcement. Opinion pieces were more likely to be found in offbeat print media such as newspapers, magazines, and blog websites.

As previously mentioned, the public is quick to scrutinize victims of violent crime. In order for most people to offer their sympathies or attention to a victim they must feel that the victim is deserving of it. The portrayal of victims by the media is instrumental in forming those perspectives by the public. Typically, younger white female victims are the most likely to receive media attention as well as public sympathies, while adult African American males are among the least likely (Stabile, 2006).

When it comes to dissecting this significant frame in the media, that is, the selective portrayal of African American males as villains rather than victims, and the racialization of

“victim worthiness”, we must look to critical race theory. Explanations may be provided by certain intersections of CRT tenets here. To illustrate this point, I will walk through just one combination of CRT tenets from which assumptions of racialization in the media can be traced.

To review, critical race theory tells us that society is divided at all levels along racial lines. Decuir and Dixon’s tenet *permanence of racism* further asserts that racism controls political, social and economic realms, and that racism is an inherent fixture of American civilization. In this example, racism is controlling the media. As previously reviewed, the past few decades have seen a rise in governing bodies “cracking down” on crime rates as well as a rise in crime news coverage. In order to show the public how well crime prevention efforts were being handled, the media increasingly racialized crime coverage by selectively reporting on crimes where the offenders were African American. What’s happening here can be explained by the intersection of two additional CRT tenets.

The first is Delgado’s *differential racialization*, which argues that a dominant society racializes groups at different times based on shifting needs. Here, the need is to report on more criminals being apprehended by law enforcement for breaching relevant legislation. At the same time, if we look to DeCuir and Dixon’s *interest convergence*, which essentially states it is in the best interest of a dominant race to protect the interests and benefits of that race. Based on this tenet, we can further acknowledge that it has been in the best interest of whites to represent themselves more as victims and African American’s as criminals. The final tenet that is playing out among *permanence of racism*, *differential racialization* and *interest convergence* in this example is Delgado’s *social construction*. This CRT tenet explains that race/racism is a product of social thought or social creation. By disproportionately presenting images and stories on African American criminals or criminal suspects the media is creating a racialized perspective

that African Americans commit or are more prone to commit criminal acts, certainly at an alarmingly higher rate than they are to be reported as the victims of crimes. This racialized frame creates a dangerous social construction of how people view race as well as how they view African Americans within the context of the criminal justice system. These frames present a narrative of crime that does accurately represent reality. By using critical race theory as a framework, we are able to trace something as broad as why many people had a hard time seeing Michael Brown as a victim rather than a thug, back to systemically racialized processes.

Conclusions

Central to this thesis is the idea that narratives are formed based on how information is presented. The use of language and frames has the power to create an intended perception of an event or belief. Critical race theory contends that it is in the best interest of a dominant race to maintain a separation socially and formally from minority groups. Using this tenet of critical race theory, among others outlined in this thesis, I have drawn 3 central conclusions from my media content analysis. The first is that the most powerful media outlets focused on specific language and frames to create polarizing narratives around race while distracting attention from other extremely complicated questions that arose in the wake of Michael Brown's death.

One of the first observations I made when I came in contact with coverage of the incident was the language used to separate the two parties involved in the shooting; a "black teenager" was fatally shot by a "white police officer". Additionally, the use of the words "protestors" and "rioters" were deliberately used, sometimes interchangeably, to describe the individuals present in Ferguson in the wake of Brown's death. The yearlong coverage that followed revealed strong images of angry African Americans pinned against a militarized and predominantly white police

force. Only two questions seemed to matter to media; was the shooting of an unarmed *black* teenager by a *white* police officer justified? And, was *this* incident racially motivated? The answers to these questions seemed to be answered in tandem by the Justice Department's investigation report, which found that the shooting was justified.

Once these questions were answered in a manner that seemed satisfactory to much of the public, the vandalism, destruction of property, and looting of businesses became the next focus of the media's attention. The public watched an exchange of rocks, Molotov cocktails, smoke bombs, and pepper spray being hurled over racial lines. Ferguson became a site of violence and as quickly as activists arrived to demonstrate their frustrations peacefully, a narrative of aggression, violence, and lawlessness was produced.

While this narrative of anger, hate, and violence took hold of the incident, other questions remained largely untouched by news reporters. In my content analysis, I found that many of my own questions remained unanswered or all together untouched. One of the few that I did find in a small number of articles inquired as to the presence of racial tensions in Ferguson and surrounding communities prior to the death of Brown. However, there was no discussion of *why* residents were so hurt, so angry, so frustrated. There was no discussion of the effects of strain, social disorganization, or labeling on a community, and how academic disciplines such as crime theory or critical race theory might be used to examine and validate those feelings. Rather than present questions that seek to highlight systematic reasons why the unrest exploded in the way that it did, the media presented the unrest in frames that guided the public's perceptions into one of two narratives. As the opposing narratives received more attention and support, additional factors and explanations were lost.

The second conclusion reached by this study is the media's use of language and frames to perpetuate racial tensions while denying responsibility. This was most evident by those sources who painted a negative image of Brown after he was shot. As previously mentioned, African Americans are more likely to be depicted as offenders than they are as victims in the media (Gruenewald, 2013). While some media outlets released photos of Brown in his graduation cap and gown, others released the surveillance tape of him stealing cigars. By shifting the focus of the investigation onto Brown's criminal history, the rap music he listened to, and associating words such as "thug", "brute" and "violent man" with him, many began to form the narrative that he precipitated his death by failing to carry himself as an outstanding citizen. It should be noted that from the present study this narrative was most prevalent from right-wing media outlets.

Similarly to the defamation of Michael Brown's character as a means of shifting blame, the focus on the looters and rioters amongst the protests in Ferguson allowed the media to pin the violent reactions to the incident entirely on African Americans. The narrowed frame of chaos and destruction from the small set of rioters distracted from real and prevalent issues of oppression, inequality, and disenfranchisement. Had these issues been highlighted, there would have been a greater call for society to take accountability for the social unrest. Instead, any real issues of race were minimized or naturalized by the media, much like Bonilla-Silva outlined in his book, *Racism without Racists*.

The final conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that there is an overall lack of accountability taken for racism as it exists in America today. As a producer of knowledge and perceptions, the media must take its responsibility for creating accurate, balanced, and unbiased coverage of events seriously. As consumers, we must take on the task of receiving, filtering, and understanding news equally as serious. If we are ever to eradicate racism from our social

institutions, we must be readily willing to understand and accept responsibility for the many subtle forms racism takes. We must hold our formal institutions responsible to the highest level of confronting racism. Only when every member of society is ready to accept responsibility for the existence and perpetuation of systematic racism, can we achieve the equality so many have sought for generations. The powers that seek to maintain racial dominance in this country will cease to hold the incredible influence over social processes of racialization only when *true* equality becomes the goal of our society.

Chapter 4: Interviews

Introduction

The previous chapter discusses the racial frames and narratives used and created by the media in its coverage of the death of Michael Brown. The goal of this section of research was to understand the ways in which racial frames, as articulated by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, function in the minds of BSU students as they analyze individual cases of police violence. The focus of the following chapter is on viewing police-community relations in addition to the shooting and killing of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson, within the context of these racial frames. Bonilla-Silva argues that in contemporary discourse, racism often functions through coded frames, thus allowing “racism without racists”, or the perpetuation of unequal systems of power without individuals appearing to pursue clearly racist agendas.

In an effort to understand how BSU student receive, interpret, and respond to these media frames, a structured interview was drafted which sought to identify factors such as: which media outlets students are watching, how often students watch the news, political perspectives, experiences with and opinions on law enforcement, and perceptions on the justification of Michael Brown’s death.

I was largely motivated to gain this insight into my peer’s perceptions due to an overwhelming amount of discussion over Ferguson, MO and Michael Brown in the wake of his death. For the better part of a year news media and social media were saturated with coverage and strong-willed, passionate opinions. It was difficult to ignore that almost all opinions being defended fell into one of two narratives that felt somewhat extreme; either the shooting was

justified and law enforcement was deserving of the utmost respect and support, or the shooting was murder and law enforcement was in desperate need of reform.

After months of observations and research, I began to develop hypotheses on how my peers came to their perceptions on the incident. In an effort to identify possible connections between the data collected and the assumptions outlined by Delgado's tenants on critical race theory, I focused my hypotheses on the participant's capacity to view the world around them as critical race theory might ask of them; with an open mind to the possibility of systemic racism. I also wanted to take into account the participant's exposure to media, including any skewed frames.

My first hypothesis was that subjects would believe the death of Michael Brown was justified if they also reported: (a) they identified as conservative, (b) they prefer/frequently view right-wing media, (c) their parents are conservative, (d) they have had positive experiences/perceptions of law enforcement. My second hypothesis was that subjects would believe the death of Michael Brown was not justified if they also reported: (a) they identified as liberal, (b) they prefer/frequently view left-wing media, (c) their parents are liberal, (d) they have had negative experiences/perceptions of law enforcement.

I further hypothesize that based on the information I collect, I will be able to outline clear examples where the perspectives maintained by participants can be tied into the four frames of racialization as outlined by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. I hypothesize that regardless of the participants' position on whether or not they believe the shooting and killing of Michael Brown was justified, many of their perceptions and beliefs can be traced back to either naturalization, cultural racism, minimization, abstract liberalism, or any combination or overlapping of the four frames.

While the sample size of this portion of the study is relatively small due to time and participation limitations, the advantages to conducting these interviews were certainly worthwhile for the purposes of this thesis. Through this qualitative data collection, I was able to uncover not only direct opinions, but also detailed explanations.

Methodology

The data collected for this chapter consisted of 12 one-on-one interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes. Most interviews took place in the BSU Maxwell Library. Students were recruited to participate in the study by request. I first approached criminal justice professors prior to their classes and asked if I could make a brief announcement and pass out a sign up sheet. Students were informed that they could receive \$20 on their student Connect Cards if they agreed to sitting down with the interviewer at a time convenient for them.

Only myself, the student investigator, had contact with interview subjects. Prior to engaging in these interviews I was trained, throughout my major, to engage in one-on-one discussions in an appropriate and ethical manner. Additionally I completed a Human Subjects Research training through the NIH Protecting Human Research Participants program. Approval was granted through the IRB and an informed consent document was drafted. All subjects were given copies of the informed consent document prior to the interview and were informed throughout the interview that they could end the interview at any time without penalty.

All interviews, where consent was given by the subjects, were audio recorded. Of the 12 interviewees, only 2 declined allowing me to audio-record the interviews. No deception was used. Audio files were stored in a password protected file on a flash drive which was kept locked in the Primary Investigator's desk when not in use. Once audio files were later transcribed by the

student investigator, they were permanently destroyed. Once the data was transcribed it was analyzed by both the student and principal investigator.

Findings/ Discussion

In my analysis of how participants viewed the shooting of Michael Brown, and how they rationalize current discourse between police and communities, specifically minority groups, I use Bonilla-Silva's four media frames. By breaking down the total responses into these four frames, I illustrate how each perception can be explained as a result of media influence. I will then include a section discussing other notable findings of the interviews and data provided by participants.

Naturalization

This frame occurs when racial phenomena is explained away by suggesting it is a natural occurrence. For example, the fact that within the community of Ferguson, MO African Americans account for 85% of traffic stops, 90% of tickets, and 93% of all arrests while they represent only 67% of the city's population and only 11% of the states population (Department of Justice, 2015). It can be argued that attempting to explain this phenomenon as anything other than resulting from racialized processes would be falling under the fallacy of naturalization. These alarming statistics along with the controversial killing of Michael Brown prompted the Department of Justice to investigate the Ferguson Police Department. Upon the completion of their investigation it was determined that the Fergusson Police Department was routinely violating the constitutional rights of its black residents, and that racial bias was firmly engrained amongst city officials. The report further describes the city's police department using its force

almost exclusively against African Americans, regularly stopping them without probable cause (Department of Justice, 2015).

Similar overrepresentations of African Americans exist in stop, arrest, and incarceration rates across the country. As the media begins to tell the story of these racial disparities throughout the criminal justice system, two narratives are formed. On one side, you have people who believe that the disproportionate representation of minorities, particularly African Americans, is a result of systematic racism at the core of the criminal justice system. On this side you tend to see minority groups and those who lean left. The alternative account for these phenomena is “that’s just the way it is”. This narrative, a perfect example of naturalization, explains these alarming disparate rates as a natural occurrence. This “it is what it is” explanation is the logic that is being employed by those naturalizing racialized content. As part of this process, those who are falling into this frame are knowingly or unknowingly ascribing criminality to African Americans. Those who tend to believe this also tend to be those who attempt to minimize the emotional and organized response to injustices similar to the death of Michael Brown. This minimization will be discussed further in future sections.

In tandem with this minimization, many people are quick to naturalize the organizing and shared perspectives of African Americans under the opposing narrative by asserting that all black people are joining together now “just because they can and will”. This position naturalizes African Americans becoming mobilized by arguing that black people will simply agree with other black people because that’s what they do, rather than acknowledge that these movements toward change are organized by individuals who rationally and reasonably agree that racism is the cause of their oppression. It is far easier to say, “of course this situation broke down along racial lines, blacks are going to side with blacks and whites are going to side with whites”, as one

participant put it, than it is to acknowledge or own responsibility for systemic racism. A possible explanation for this belief that people of color “flock” together as a result of some sort of biological and cultural magnetism, as the naturalization frame would suggest, is that the media rarely depicts images of diversity amongst protestors. Typically, what is portrayed in media coverage of these social justice protests are all-black protestors standing opposite of a line of all white police officers.

Beliefs stemming from this frame were articulated by multiple participants when addressing the Black Lives Matters movement. On some occasions, participants made statements that very clearly expressed naturalized racial bias, for example one participant stated, “blacks love when they get any race-bait, it means that they can all jump on the bandwagon and flip out and steal TV’s.” However, more implicit statements that may still be interpreted as a naturalizing frame were also present, “I don’t think its right that everyone turns around so quickly against police, they all bash the police now because Black Lives Matters and Hands Up Don’t Shoot are trending right now but what happens when someone breaks into their house and the police don’t show up?”; “All my black friends on Facebook are crying race and shit.” Almost every participant mentioned the Black Lives Matters movement, but few elaborated on what the movement stood for or any other defining information about the mission of the movement.

A final example of how naturalization came through in the interviews was when subjects were asked about police duties and their right to exercise deadly force. Every participant at one point or another in their interview made some sort of supportive statement toward police. When asked specifically about the discretion to exercise deadly force, most participants prefaced their response with a justification. Some examples of responses were: “It should be a last resort but if they have to they have to.”; “They’re put in a tough position but if they feel threatened they have

every right to shoot.”; “If you run from the police, if you’re a criminal, then yeah the police have to do what they have to do.”; “The cops are trained to point and shoot, if he felt threatened then he did his job.”; “You don’t get to talk back to police...all he had to do is submit and he would have been fine.”. In my analysis of these responses I could not help but wonder why so many believed that in order to avoid being fatally shot, it is required of you to fully submit to the requests of police officers even in the absence of perceived probable cause. It was as if each participant had naturalized this type of policing as appropriate, reasonable, and constitutional. To many, this type of police interaction, especially one involving an African American is “just the way it is.”

Possible explanations for this could be the fact that in many ways, the stopping and questioning of African American males has become so routine that it is almost expected. The very existence of the aforementioned statistics involving the stopping, ticketing, and arresting of African American males in that community speaks to a routine or standard that is being set. This regular stopping of African American males and the assumption that the police are valid in these practices means that many of us have accepted this as normal and failed to fully acknowledge it as having racialized origins.

Minimization

Minimization was possibly one of the most common frames that could be identified from participants responses in regard to whether or not the death and coverage of Michael Brown were racialized. This frame suggests that discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances. In other words, this frame asserts that racism is no longer a relevant category because racism in its most blatant forms (i.e. lynching, de jure segregation, slavery) are

no longer practiced. The use of this frame in the media and general knowledge production was reflected in a number of the participant's perceptions on the relevance of racism in today's world, particularly within the context of the death of Michael Brown.

A common response by participants when asked if they believed if the shooting of Michael Brown was justified was that "sometimes police make mistakes". What was surprising about this statement was the ease with which people were able to qualify the killing of the unarmed black teenager as a mistake. Some common phrases that arose from the interviews were: "Police have a job to do."; "Police are trained to shoot to kill if they feel threatened...they deserve to go home to their families."; "We cant control every action of the police...they're put in some tough situations."; "Police do a lot of good."; "Some police just get bad media." Overall, there was a strong focus, by every participant, on the general difficulties that face police officers, specifically those that faced Darren Wilson in the seconds that lead up to his killing Michael Brown.

Bonilla-Silva's minimization frame might suggest that while these participants were absorbing information about this case, they failed to acknowledge any role discrimination might have played. For most participants, there was no attention paid to the context of racial discrimination in the community of Ferguson, specifically within their police department, and how those racialized practices may have played a role in Officer Wilson's stopping, questioning, and aggressive interaction that lead to Michael Brown being shot. There was also no mention of the Justice Departments investigation into the Ferguson police department in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death, where it was confirmed that there were racial practices occurring. By failing to acknowledge the persistence of racism within the context of the incident allows viewers to minimize racism as a relevant factor and attribute the excessive force exercised by the

police officer as a reasonable measure taken. In this way they are able to normalize the death of the unarmed, but “demonic” teenager as just another day in the line of police work.

Another example of how minimization played a role in the participants’ understanding of the incident was how many interpreted the emotional response by the African American and other sympathetic communities in the aftermath of the shooting. During my interviews, every participant at one point or another brought up the subsequent riots that resulted from Michael Brown’s death. This came as no surprise to me due to the overwhelming amount of coverage that was dedicated to any and all protests/riots in Ferguson as well as in communities across the nation. What did surprise me was the tone in which many participants described the emotional response and position the African American community took as a result of Michael Brown’s death. It was as if many participants, both those who believed the shooting was justified and those who did not, felt that the reaction of the black community was an overreaction.

Some statements made by participants in regard to this aftermath included: “I don’t know why that Black Lives Matters campaign became the center of everything.”; “the emotions just escalated too quickly.”; “the whole thing was blown way out of proportion...the media magnified it and shouldn’t have.”; “I think the riots...it was all just an overreaction.”; “There’s no reason why you should be blocking off streets just because one person was shot.”; “blacks today weren’t a part of slavery, they need to get the fuck over it.”; “the media’s just playing off of peoples emotions.”; “black people are just using this as race-bait...any chance they get to play the race card they take it.” One participant (who reported preferring right wing media) went so far as to say that they felt that left wing media purposefully skewed information to gain the attention of ‘some people’, meaning the African American community.

The minimization of racism frame encourages people to ignore present forms of discrimination by leaning on the argument that “it’s not as bad as it used to be”. In doing so, this frame suggests that whites are unable or unwilling to acknowledge systematic racism today, and because of this, views minorities as being hypersensitive to racism. Unless the behaviors are ‘all-out’ racist, they view scenarios where underlying racist processes may be at play, as benevolent. Minimization occurs when the media fails to present these underlying racist processes or in depth explanations as to why African American are as upset and angered. The African American community by all rights viewed the unnecessary death of an unarmed black teenager by a white police officer working for a department with racism at its core of operations, as a result of discrimination.

When the media ignores the relevance of racism as it exists today and only shows the emotional reaction (riots, violence, mobilization), it denies viewers the connection between racism and outrage. The perspective that is then formed is: unfortunate but justified police-related homicide, followed by misplaced outrage, followed by unacceptable violence and aggression toward police, by individuals who are being overly sensitive claiming racism where it does not appear to exist. This ties back into the perspective that the death of Michael Brown was not racially motivated or explained, but rather a mistake, or a difficult, but well placed decision made by a brave and humble servant to the public committed in the noble line of duty.

Cultural Racism

Cultural racism relies on culturally based arguments or stereotypes to explain the standing of minorities in society. Culturally based stereotypes often take the form of misplaced explanations people use to rationalize behaviors and patterns they observe in the world around

them. Today, these stereotypes are typically masked, hidden behind softer words and phrases than they used to be. Back in the era of slavery and Jim Crow laws the rationale for excluding racial minorities was their presumed biological inferiority (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). These biological views have been replaced with cultural ones that effectively accomplish the same thing: maintain the racial status quo and whiteness as a property (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

So while today only the most blatant white supremacist may say something like “blacks do not have the same capacity for intelligence as whites”; your average ‘benevolent’ racist may say something culturally based such as “blacks do not have as many academic achievements because they don’t put as much emphasis on education as non-blacks.” By attempting to hide behind a misplaced cultural stereotype, this explanation not only ignores everything that Critical race theory teaches us about systemic racism (disparities in educational opportunities, access to resources, etc.), it also turns the blame entirely on that culture, absolving that individual from having to accept any form of responsibility for systematic racism.

Cultural racism may also be used here to explain why participants were (1) inclined to believe that in the wake of Michael Brown’s death that African Americans were overreacting, or not thinking rationally, and (2) so quick to focus on justifying the actions taken by the police officer. As previously mentioned in the above section on minimization, many participants reported feeling that the African American community overreacted to the death of Michael Brown making statements to support this position. Many defended their arguments that African Americans were excessively quick to play the “race card” and react in outbursts of rage and violence and other extreme emotions “every time something like this happens”. One series of statements that stood out in particular was, “The media didn’t make the riots happen, that was them. Jumping on race bait brought all the attention. What does shooting a black dude have to do

with robbing and looting? They do it to themselves. They've been race baiting since the civil rights." "The looting and rioting... all blacks, they're destroying towns." Upon analysis of these statements it occurred to me that some participants were walking on a fine line between the cultural stereotype that in contemporary discourse between police and minorities, African Americans are more likely to react emotionally than rationally; and the biological stereotype that African Americans are cognitively less capable of being rational and instead react in a primitive, barbaric manner. In both cases these stereotypes are incorrect and unsubstantiated, and the assertion that they should be denied their emotions and/or condemned for them is cruel.

Bonilla-Silva would suggest that these cultural stereotypes are what guided these participants to take the position that the African American community was wrong to react with frustration, anger, sadness, and in some cases violence. Rather than attempt to reach beyond the emotion-driven reaction and possibly grapple with understanding the complexities of the strain and oppression that results from systemic racism, many viewers will sooner attempt to label it as a simple situation being "blown out of proportion".

The second example of cultural racism as a frame that I came across in these interviews was not only the need for many participants to justify the police officer's actions, but the manner in which they worked out the justification in their minds. One of the most pivotal inquiries I made in each interview was when I asked participants "Do you believe the shooting of Michael Brown was justified?" This question above all others gave participants pause in formulating their response. Even the participants who believed the shooting was not justified took time to explain to me why the job of a police officer is difficult. I received numerous explanations across the board as to why Officer Wilson shot Michael Brown; "he robbed that store and roughed up that guy before didn't he?"; "police make mistakes just like anyone else."; "if you're a scary person

and scare a police officer, you deserve it.”; “police are put in tough situations, they make the best decision they can in the moment.”; “police deserve to be safe and go home to their families.”; “police do a lot of good.”; “the eyewitnesses who said he had his hands up were probably black.”; “if the cop felt threatened...then he did his job.”; “police just do what they’re trained to do...you cant train someone not to stereotype.”; “You’re damn right if I had that thug charging at me I’d kill him too”.

From the statements listed above, among others given, there are a few assumptions that can be made. First, there was an overall tone that Michael Brown was indeed a hardened and dangerous criminal. Of all the interviews conducted, every participant brought up the convenience store robbery. Some people indicated that they believed Brown had an extensive criminal history, some believed that he robbed the convenience store at gunpoint, some told me that he had stolen money from the cash register, a couple of people told me that he had beaten up the convenience store clerk. Overall, there were clearly people who misunderstood what actually transpired in the convenience store and who were unclear on the extent of Michael Brown’s criminal character. It is this researcher’s analysis that the media created a context of criminality around Brown based on their regular use of cultural racism to depict African American males as dangerous and criminal, and these participants were responding to that message.

Another assumption that can be traced from participant’s justifications for Officer Wilson the is that some people find African American males in general to be threatening and dangerous. Again this can be traced to a cultural stereotype that African American males are all “thugs”, “criminals”, and “brutes” (all words that were used in the media to describe Michael Brown, among other African American “villains”). As I watched many participants work out their justifications for the shooting, many of them were putting themselves in Officer Wilson’s shoes

and sympathizing with a perceived fear of having a black kid of significant stature “charging” at them. Darren Wilson, on his own behalf, described the teenager as looking “like a demon”, in an effort to mitigate his use of deadly force. In this way, cultural racism plays a role in labeling Brown as a danger, making it easy for viewers to see a threatening black masculinity on one side, and a law abiding white police officer acting in the honorable pursuit of justice. This frame provides a possible explanation for why nearly all interview subjects, regardless of whether they thought the shooting was right or wrong, attempted to justify Officer Wilson’s actions; both to me and to themselves.

Abstract Liberalism

To review, Bonilla-Silva describes the frame of abstract liberalism as one that involves using ideas associated with political and economic liberalism in an abstract manner to explain racial matters (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Due to the complexity of this frame, and my limited knowledge of liberalism in general, I initially hypothesized that this frame would be the most difficult to identify in the participants responses. I was surprised however to find that after further analysis, numerous interviewees made statements supporting hardened abstract liberal perspectives.

The first example of abstract liberalism I encountered was when participants explained to me their reasoning for why Michael Brown was shot. A theme of action-and-consequence began to emerge as participants voiced their opinions around the justification of the death. One person said, “People own the consequences of their behavior, if they scare the police... they deserve what they get.” Another said, “The cop had a job to do, if he felt threatened... he did his job.” “If the threat is great enough, deadly force is ok to use.” “The discourse that happens in a situation

like that depends on the neighborhood.” Another added, “He (Brown) attacked first... he got what he deserved.” “If he was armed, attacked him, or was running off... you’re going down.” Others made statements referencing Michael Brown’s “criminal” character; “I mean, he did steal and rough up that guy, he’s committed multiple crimes.”; “You don’t get to walk around doing whatever you want and give police attitude and not deal with the consequences.” In total, there was significant attention paid to the idea of action and consequences.

What makes these statements stand out as falling under the frame of abstract liberalism is the notion that there are societal and legal rules that any behavior considered unsavory or criminal will be met with swift and certain consequence. What I found troubling was how many participants viewed the scenario as balanced and fair. Regardless of what crimes Brown might have been charged with, the end result for the 18-year-old’s behaviors was death. This led me to question if participants felt that certain people should be executed by police. By justifying Daren Wilson’s actions by arguing that Brown’s “criminal” character was in itself threatening, they may also be saying that if you are a criminal you may be executed by the police; if you live in a neighborhood where there is no trust between police and civilians, you may be executed by the police; if you do not submit immediately to the demands of a passing police officer, you may be executed. Under the frame of abstract liberalism, participants form the basis of their argument by asserting that what happened was a result of knowing choice. This is to say that Michael Brown made the choice to involve himself in criminal activity and by doing so made himself a target for such an end. In doing so, those who fall under this frame of thinking fail to acknowledge any and all external factors leading up to this fatal exchange between Brown and Wilson. They fail to acknowledge why Brown may not have trusted police, why he might be not inclined to have respect toward police. On the other side they fail to acknowledge that Wilson

may have been hypersensitive to feeling threatened by an African American males. Ultimately, they fail to acknowledge racism as a fixture of not only the community of Ferguson, but as a fixture of policing and our country as a whole. In failing to acknowledge any factors outside of Brown's choices and any subsequent "consequences", they fail to acknowledge racism, social theory, and history. This abstract means of justification is a dangerously open-ended attempt to justify a police-related homicide with clear racial implications.

The most glaring example of how abstract liberalism was used to explain away race as an issue was when participants attempted to convince this researcher that the death of Michael Brown was not a race issue at all. There were two participants in particular who took firm stances that race was not a relevant category surrounding the incident. Some of the statements made in support of this argument include: "Yeah I think there are racist cops out there, but they're both black and white cops."; "This isn't a race issue, it's a police issue."; "This only became a race issue when blacks started shouting race, if they hadn't this would have just blown over and everything would have been fine."; "They've been race-baiting since the civil rights movement."; "Racism exists because they (blacks) let it."; "Muslims don't play the race card."; "If they'd (blacks) stop playing the race card racism would die out between whites and blacks."; "White people don't cry race."; "This 'them vs. us' mentality is bullshit, a white cop gets beat up by like 20 black dudes and they don't report on it, its just hypocritical."

While many of these statements are clear examples of blatant racism, there were statements made by other participants that still fall under this frame despite their, comparatively, more benevolent forms of abstract liberalism. "The media magnified the race aspect more than it needed to be."; "The media is 100% responsible for fueling racial tension."; "I think the media skews information to gain the attention of...certain people, and makes things worse."; "Some of

these communities, they don't trust the police, and the police can't do their jobs without the public's trust, and that's not the police's fault.”; “We should look at what happened objectively, not as a possible race issue.” What seemed to be happening was participants wanted to minimize both a racialized homicide and racialized reporting by applying an abstract liberal approach that says ‘we are equal, racism does not exist, therefore we need to look at this situation without taking race into account, because that would be the most objective, fairest, *right* way to look at it’.

The same abstract approach was taken by many of the participants who addressed the Black Lives Matter movement. Of the 10 participants interviewed, 7 mentioned Black Lives Matters and of those 7, 5 mentioned “all lives matter”. While the Black Lives Matter movement is focused on affirming the lives of black individuals who have been systematically disadvantaged and oppressed for centuries, “all lives matter” was created for an entirely different purpose. In asserting “all lives matter”, it is to say that the Black Lives Matter movement is illegitimate and that we should not acknowledge racism as a persisting issue or fixture of our society. Abstract liberalism is applied here to say that expressing black lives matter is a breach of the idea of equal opportunity, that to set any racial category's lives apart as being important is inappropriate since we *should* consider the lives of all humans as important. This of course ignores the entire premise of the Black Lives Matter movement, which is to acknowledge that as of today, equality has not yet been achieved. Further, it ignores the relevance and importance in remembering the atrocities that were committed against African Americans throughout the history of our nation. “All lives matter” succeeds only in rationalizing racial inequalities and maintaining the status quo of color-blind racism.

The use of abstract liberalism to justify racialized situations fails to acknowledge external variables by simplifying complicated scenarios into objective standards. If we are to observe a situation like the death of Michael Brown and judge it as right or wrong, just or unjust, we cannot use a uniform, one size-fits-all standard. Further, we cannot ascribe sole blame for this altercation to the 18-year old boy that was left dead in the street. Regardless of whether he fully appreciated the consequences of his actions, he did not wake up that day expecting to be shot to death, nor did he steal those cigars expecting to be shot to death. This was not an isolated scenario taking place between two knowing adults, where the only variable was one individual's disregard for the law and any consequences. This was a scenario that took place between a white police officer and an African American teenager living in a place where there was proven to be racialized practices between police and African American civilians. To ignore the context and circumstances of any situation, particularly the persisting presence of racism and all its implications, is to be blind to the true nature of our world.

Other Themes

As part of my investigation into how my peers came to understand the death of Michael Brown and the subsequent unrest, I was curious about how their preconceived notions, exposure to media, and political views might impact their perspectives and responses. I was additionally curious about their thoughts on police and the criminal justice system as a whole. The following section contains additional findings from the interviews.

Social Media: Something I found particularly interesting was how many participants reported receiving their crime news from social media as oppose to other more formal media outlets. Seventy-five percent of the respondents listed social media as being one of their top

sources for receiving news in general. This led me to wonder about the possible implications of receiving news along with the opinions of friends. Traditionally it is not uncommon for news to be accompanied with opinion pieces, but those opinions are being presented separately and by journalists who are bound by certain language restrictions. What is happening today is individuals are receiving “news” in the form of shared and posted highlights, typically with captions and comments from one’s peers. The more a particular topic is ‘trending’ on these online community sites, the more users are exposed to that topic along with whatever rhetorical message the poster or sharer includes.

Many participants addressed the rapid nature of this post-and-share phenomena that occurs on social media. Some participants expressed to me how split social media became over the death of Michael Brown and incidents of police-on-civilians violence causing racial tensions. It would appear that just as the media presents information using specific frames to create a binary in perspectives, social media further separates that divide by engaging the public in quick, debates over the topics, the discourse of which is highly emotional and can sometimes escalate to the point of personal threats. Not only is social media a place where like-minded people can have their beliefs and opinions reinforced or refuted, but also a place of unverified, biased, personal accounts of reality, with framed facts somewhere in between.

Who Saw What: In addition to learning that most participants relied on social media for their news, I was surprised to find that much of the content I came across in my media analysis was not mentioned whatsoever by participants, even when prompted. For example, not one participant mentioned or addressed the autopsy of Michael Brown’s body, a topic I found was well covered by all 4 national media outlets I reviewed. Additionally, I would note that there was very little brought up in regard to Michael Brown’s body at all. No one mentioned how many

times he had been shot, where he had been shot, and only one participant noted that his body had been left in the street for hours. In terms of what types of stories participants did view, every person reported seeing the convenience store tape, protesting, looting, and standoffs with police. Additionally, most individuals referenced social media hash tags such as #HandsUpDontShoot, #BlackLivesMatter, and the general back and forth arguments of whether it was a racially motivated shooting or not. When I asked participants what the most prominent piece to this media-dominating story was, the overall tone was that people felt they were being forced to choose a side; you are either pro-black and anti-police, or you are pro-police and anti-black, or at least, that's how the media was making them feel.

Was the Shooting Justified?: Despite the distinct, opposing narratives that surfaced from this incident in Ferguson, and the push toward one side or another, most people found themselves in the middle when asked if they believed the shooting of Michael Brown was justified. When asked, 16% said they believed the shooting was not justified, 33% said the shooting was justified, and 50% said they were not sure. Of those who believed the shooting was *not* justified, 1 identified as conservative and 1 identified as liberal. Of those who said the shooting *was* justified, all 4 identified as conservative. Of those who were unsure, 2 identified as liberal and 4 identified as being somewhere in the political center. Of those who believed the shooting was *not* justified, 1 reported having a positive association/experiences with law enforcement and 1 reported having a negative association/experience with law enforcement. Of those who believed the shooting *was* justified, 3 reported having a positive association/experiences with law enforcement and 1 reported having a negative association/experiences with law enforcement. Of those who were unsure, 2 reported having a positive association/experiences with law enforcement, 2 reported having a negative

association/experiences with law enforcement, and 2 reported not having any association or experiences with law enforcement. To review, associations or experiences with law enforcement was presented to participants as having any personal or familial connections to law enforcement. This could have been knowing/being related to a police officer or having generally pleasant interactions with police (a positive association), or any personal or familial connections to being arrested or having generally negative experiences with police (a negative association).

Trust in Police: One of the most interesting findings of the interviews was the participant's focus on police. While nearly all participants discussed discomforts with policing today, many citing a new, over-invasive military style of policing that was contributing to an overall "us v. them" mentality between citizens and government, *all* participants expressed gratitude for the work police do. As previously mentioned, participants were quick to justify the actions of some overly zealous police officers by addressing the difficulties of the profession. I got the sense that even the participants who disapproved of Darren Wilson and other law enforcement's actions, they wanted to defend them, almost as if they were convincing themselves of something.

Despite the hasty defense of American policing, when asked to quantify their trust and confidence in police, participants offered lower ranks than I expected. The question was, "If you had to rank your trust and confidence in police to act fairly and justly on a scale of 1-100, with 100 meaning you have 100% trust in police, where would you rank it?" Nearly two-thirds of participants ranked their trust between 45% and 65% with the other third of participants ranking between 70% and 90%. Over half of the participants interviewed felt they could trust police only half of the time, notwithstanding their supportive statements toward them.

Purely out of curiosity, I further asked participants to quantify their trust in the criminal justice system's ability to exercise justice fairly and rightly. The question was, "If you had to quantify your trust in the criminal justice system's ability to arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate offenders fairly and justly on a scale of 1-100, 100 meaning 100% in the criminal justice system's abilities, where would you rank it?" In all the answers provided ranged from 0% to 60% with the average response being 45%. Following this question, some participants added commentary concerning a broken system, one that disadvantages minorities and members of a lower socioeconomic status. Others contributed that our system does not do enough to punish those who commit crimes, or do a well enough job to keep people safe.

Conclusions

The objective of this piece of my research was to better understand how my peers understood and processed the information being presented to them around the death of Michael Brown. Overall what I found was that it was far easier to identify the racialized frames being presented in participant's responses, regardless of the perspective, than it was to attempt to draw conclusions from who-thought-what based on what types of media they were exposed to.

Overall, the data indicates that parent's political views had the least amount of bearing on the views of my peers over any other factor considered. My findings do however suggest that participants who identified as conservative and preferring right-wing media were the most likely to believe that the shooting of Michael Brown was justified. Alternatively, those who identified as liberal were more likely to view the shooting as not justified. It should also be noted that overall, the majority of participants listed their primary source of news as being social media. Those who identified as left or leaning toward the left were less likely to report watching or

preferring left wing media as those on the right or leaning to the right were to report preferring right wing media. I was ultimately surprised by how many participants identified as being in the political center as well as how many participants reported being somewhere in the middle when asked if they thought the shooting had been justified or not. When I began this thesis, one my main interests was in uncovering how my peers came to form their opinions. With everyone so quick to take a side and defend it, I expected more participants to have more solidified positions on the issue.

I had hypothesized that a person's experience or associations with law enforcement would have an influence over whether or not they believed the shooting was justified but what I found was that it had more to do with how they felt about police overall. Typically what would happen was I would ask the participant if they had any relatives or close friends who worked in law enforcement or had ever been arrested and had negative experience with law enforcement and there would be an immediate reaction. If the participant told be they had uncles, parents, siblings, friends, etc. who worked in law enforcement there would be a brief but visible moment of pride in their telling me so. If the participant told me they family or they themselves had negative run-ins with law enforcement that they viewed as unjust or unfair, there was a brief but notable moment of distain in their tone. This was the only distinguishable differences I picked up on from the opposing responses. As previously mentioned, all those who had either positive or negative experiences with police expressed gratitude for police and defended their positions. In my analysis of the interviews, I did not find that a personal connection to law enforcement had a significant effect on participant's perspective on the shooting.

I believe that if I had more time and access to participants, I would have been able to draw further conclusions about how specific media outlets may have impacted individual's

perceptions of Michael Brown's death and the subsequent unrest in Ferguson and across the country. The greatest limitation of this portion of my research was number of subjects I was able to include. Had I more time, or an opportunity to conduct this study again, I would have liked to include at least 30 interviews. Additionally I would have liked to add a quantitative data component such as a survey. I believe these measures would have lead to more conclusive results.

By far the greatest take away from these interviews was the realization that 100% of participants at one point or another made a statement that could be traced back to the coded frames that Bonilla-Silva contends are a function of color-blind racism. What I learned from this was that these frames are not just used by the media or other large institutions. They are used by individuals, everyday, in every capacity, to explain and justify the perpetuation of racial inequalities as they exist in the world around us. Most of these statements are benevolent, the speaker is unaware that the paradigm of thought they are engaged in is one of excuse. The distortion of reality that is achieved through these frames brings a certain peace to the speaker, as they relieve themselves of any guilt or responsibility. It has become ever more clear to me that the only way to make the next great step toward equality is to change how we learn about racism. We need to change the way we identify racism, speak about racism, and act on racism if we are to eradicate it fully from our society. For this it will take much effort, from everyone, and the acknowledgement that a person's race still has implications on their acceptance and success in this nation. Racism cannot persist to be present in law, education, media, the criminal justice system, or any other institution in our nation. If we do not it will only lead to more unrest among civilians, the consequences of which could be dire. The failure to acknowledge this systemic inequality as unacceptable is in and of itself unacceptable.

Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusions

Processes of Absorbing Information

One of the driving forces of inquiry behind this thesis was the question of whether or not specific framing of information could have an impact on public perceptions and opinions. In my content analysis of national news coverage of Michael Brown's death, I did find that there were significant distinctions in tone and presentation of information between notable "left" and "right" media cites. The most notable of those distinctions being in the language used, the content chosen, and the overall framing of the coverage. From my own observations, I do believe that racialized frames were deliberately used by the media to incite specific reactions from the public. From the opposing narratives that were formed, the public became increasingly divided on racial and political lines and continues to today with each new broadcasted case of police-on-civilian violence, particularly when the victim is a minority.

This question of whether or not media reporting has the power to influence public opinion is a heavily researched topic. Numerous theories have developed over the years on how impactful media frames can be, how direct or indirect they are, and how strategic the presentation is. In this section, I examine and discuss two different approaches theorists have taken on how the media and the use of frames interact with the public and how information is processed. The first looks at the psychological processes taking place when viewing media frames, under the assumption that those frames are having a direct effect on how perceptions are formed. The second set of theories will focus on less direct processes, which operate off the assumption that the media's effects are filtered through additional social and individual interpretive processes.

Scholars largely attempt to examine how framing may imply a direction or implicit answer to what should be done about an issue being presented (Veenstra, 2008). Veenstra et al. (2008) theorize that journalists and opinion leaders advance issue positions and simplify news presentations by constructing issue controversies as a clash of principles, with opposing perspectives drawing on similar values of liberty and justice. Veenstra further contends that value frames not only provide the public with a pathway to understanding complex issues, but may also resonate with people's preexisting schema.

Here we can observe media framing as a means to make information easy for the public to comprehend, while acknowledging its ability to create a binary in how people interpret the same event. A notable aspect of this theory on how people psychologically process media frames is the idea that while the public is being fed information, and while the opinions they produce may place them on opposing sides of an issue, the foundation of their thought rests on their preexisting notions and *values*. The interview portion of my study did not yield significant evidence that media framing influenced the participant's interpretations of Michael Brown's death. However, one observation I did make was that regardless of what side of any given issue (the use of deadly force, racialized police practices) a participant was on, it was evident that their stance rested heavily on their personal beliefs of what is right or wrong or just.

In 1996, Shah et al. found that value framing induces a spread of activation to related issue schemas, which influence conceptions and judgments of other issues being presented. By this he means that because core values are chronically accessible in one's own mind, they are easily activated by media frames. Further, the presence of those values in addition to the provocation of the frame function to reinforce core values and bolster self-image (Shah, 1996). From this a conclusion is drawn that people process value-framed information in a way that

relies primarily on existing knowledge and beliefs rather than on new information being presented in the frame (Veenstra, 2008). This would explain why people are more likely to observe and draw their knowledge from news sources that are known to align more heavily with their personal beliefs. For example, people who identify as conservative prefer right-wing media just as people who identify as liberal prefer left-wing media.

A drawback to people producing their knowledge through value framing is it creates a shortcut that can result in misinformation or a lack of in-depth understanding. In their book, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and Public Good*, Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Jamieson (1997), Cappella and Jamieson note:

News stories, even those strategically, framed, often carry substantive information about issues, albeit set in the context of self-interested manipulation. Attentive exposure can alter political knowledge by increasing the accessibility of information, changing the associations among constructs, and cuing and strengthening existing localized networks of concepts.

Here they illustrate what is potentially being lost when someone observes news through value-frames: substantive information. They further theorize that strategic framing leads to a greater intake of strategic information. While value frames act on ones preconceived values, strategic frames activate clusters of strategic nodes, making that piece of information more salient (Veenstra, 2008).

The argument here is that the reception of a strategically framed story should lead to greater intake of strategic information, causing the viewer to have to process information more deeply because they are relying on fewer preexisting constructs (Veenstra, 2008). Alternatively,

value framed information allows people to use cognitive “shortcuts” by giving them quick access to information based on what they already know or believe to be true. This cognitive process of absorbing information may be “good enough” for many media viewers to deduce their opinion on an issue such as whether or not Michael Brown’s death was justified or racially motivated. This process arguably denies the viewer the time or the depth required to definitively criticize and wholly understand all the factors and elements present in one event. This might explain why so many participants in the study spent more time talking about what they believed in rather than offer a confident argument on behalf of their stance.

The theories outlined above discuss a process of observing news and perceiving a reality as a result. There are other theories however which find the connection is not so direct. Boda and Szabó (2011) talk about a different approach, which they refer to as *social constructivism*. Social constructivists, they argue, wish to detect social constructions and understand the way that individuals acquire knowledge and how they perceive reality (Boda, 2011). They believe that in large, industrialized modern societies, the media is a primary source of knowledge, views and assumptions about reality, but there is no direct, homogenized media influence (Sacco, 1995). They argue rather that the media provides us with “mosaics” from which we build our own realities (Boda, 2011).

The foundation on which this theory rests is the works of famed sociological researcher Paul Lazarsfeld. Lazarsfeld believed that the media was strongly connected to numerous aspects of everyday life that shape people’s thinking and attitudes, but that it did not have a direct effect (Boda, 2011). In his original 1948 publication, *The People’s Choice*, Lazarsfeld introduced his theory of a two-step flow model. He theorized that mass media information and narratives are channeled to people through opinion leaders with “privileged” access to media, which then gets

coded and decoded by the viewer. This processes is arguably similar to the concept of value framing, but assigns greater agency to the individual viewer and focuses on all other influencing factors such as their interpersonal relationships, environment, and other contributing sociological factors (Boda, 2011).

Lazarsfeld's theories on media influence have been taken and tweaked over the years. Based on his concepts, Joseph Klapper (1960) theorized that the media was more likely to reinforce people's behaviors and attitudes than it was to change them. He also expanded on Lazarsfeld's ideas of external influencing phenomenon, which he referred to mediating factors. These factors included individual predispositions, group memberships (friends and family), interpersonal dissemination of media content, opinion leadership, and the role of media in society (Klapper, 1960). I found this theory particularly interesting considering the overwhelming role the media has taken in our society over the last decade.

With the advent of social media as well as the increasing availability of new (online and mobile news apps), the ways in which we interact with all of the aforementioned mediating factors has changed. We can now review and share news stories with friends and family at the push of a button anywhere, anytime. We can communicate our own interpretations and understandings instantly, as well as criticize the perceptions of others openly in large online communities. Opinion leadership has also transformed. In the time of Lazarsfeld and Klapper, an opinion leader was likely a politician or journalist. Today an opinion leader may be a comedian, athlete, CEO, celebrity, or even an average person with a large enough following on the Internet.

It is difficult to say whether media framing has a direct or indirect effect on how we perceive reality based on what see when we watch the news. After researching the subject, I maintain that direct influence is very much possible, but for the most part media framing triggers

preexisting notions in a person's network of understandings. These flickers of facts and ideas interact with outside social factors not just within one, isolated social process, but by drawing on previous interactions and established schemas. In addition, I believe that social media and the overwhelming presence of opinion mixed with news (evident in the very layout of social media sites) is creating an unprecedented manner in which people form their understanding of reality. We will need more research going forward to assess the interplay between media framing and the growing presence of social factors around how we experience media.

Processes of Racialization

Critical race theory was a crucial component to understanding processes of racialization for the purposes of this thesis. I found it necessary not only to observe media framing through a critical race theory framework, but also to see the social institutions that interact with our daily lives through a CRT lens. CRT allows historical and persistent racial practices in education, law, housing, policing, employment, the judicial system, and the political system to be assessed and scrutinized. As outlined in the literature review, the tenets of CRT make it possible to breakdown and observe particular intersections of power, disparities in treatment, and racialized realities of these social realms. This perspective was intrinsic to my process of assessing racialized frames in the media.

In both the content analysis and the interviews section, I detected racial frames used by the media and by participants. These frames were easily identifiable when put in the context of Bonilla-Silva's four racial frames. Minimization, naturalization, cultural racism, and abstract liberalism were all found to be present in one form or another, in the language, coverage, and arguments addressed by the media and by participants. These frames could be further applied to

other areas where CRT could also be used. One of the most important functions of these frames is that they bring light to the fact that so many still deny the presence of a racialized reality in today's society. Bonilla-Silva argues that instead of relying on these frames to ignore racism and shirk responsibility, we must confront it if we truly wish to end it.

Central to this thesis is the specific function of the media in the participation and perpetuation of racialized practices. By disproportionately representing minorities as offenders, filtering news through racial frames, and creating a binary in narratives told, the media has successfully divided the country on racial and political lines. I have also found that the media is largely responsible for reinforcing negative stereotypes and fueling negative attitudes between police and civilians. By forcing this divide in the public's interpretations of police-on-civilian violence, the media has made many feel that they can be only pro-black or pro-police, not both. Based on my understanding of critical race theory and the power of racial framing, I conclude that there are deliberate motivations behind the knowledge production sources that bring the public their news. I believe those motivations may on the surface be related to stirring up ratings, but are on a deeper level in place to maintain white privilege and oppress minority members of society.

Learning about critical race theory is something I am extremely grateful for. Not only has it taught me about the impact and prevalence of racism on communities, but on our country as a whole. Racism is an ugly reality that has plagued our society since we first came together as a nation. It has divided us, created systemic disadvantages to minorities, and denied many their constitutional and fundamental rights to equality. We must put an end to making excuses and agree that when observed from a critical standpoint, racism exists at the core of each example of inequality and disproportionate privilege.

Why it all Matters: The Implications of Racism Today

The impact racism has had on our country cannot be dismissed or minimized. Racism is not a secular phenomenon that occurred in our history, but a living, persistent disease that plagues our social and legal institutions. The weight of racial oppression weighs not only on our minds as we look to the unforgettably cruel past of our nation, but also on the shoulders of any citizen today who believes they and their fellow man deserve to be free and equal. The implications of racism's very existence in the past has followed minorities today, disenfranchising them from equal opportunity, treatment, and mobility in the United States.

Part of the reason why so many people engage with racial framing is because they fail to see the connections between the deliberate forms of oppression in the past, and current forms today. One of the most prominent forms comes from segregation. First, there were laws which mandated blacks be kept apart from whites, distinguishing whites as the superior being. With that status came privilege. Whites received better education, had greater access to resources, they were given priority seating in restaurants and on the bus. Even after segregation was deemed unconstitutional, the effects of segregation carried over into a new form of racial isolation. Discriminatory real estate practices such as red lining effectively accomplished the same by giving priority to white families when suburban neighborhoods were being formed. It is no mistake that today there is a concentration of minorities living in underprivileged, urban environments characterized by poverty and crime. Today we still see the effects of this discrimination. As previously discussed in the literature review, African American children are disproportionately punished, suspended and expelled from schools compared to other races.

Additionally we see evidence that minorities living in underprivileged areas of the country are less likely to have access to resources and aid.

Another prominent example is slavery. In the transition from the days of slavery to today, African Americans have had to fight long and hard, over an extremely slow moving process, to be compensated equally for labor. Yet even today African American's collectively still make less money and have smaller net worth's than their white counterparts. African American's also still face employment discrimination. The disparate opportunities in education and employment for African Americans have disadvantaged them in terms of social mobility, which is why today we still see a concentration of minorities in the lower class. It is shameful to engage in naturalization, minimization, cultural racism, or abstract liberalism as a means to shift the blame of this unfair and unequal reality on minorities and their "free will" in our capitalist society. This blatantly ignores centuries of actively protected privilege and oppression.

Other forms of oppression which have been discussed at length in this thesis include the overrepresentation of African Americans at all levels of the criminal justice system. It has been well documented that African Americans have historically been disproportionately persecuted for crime based on racially motivated legislation, police practices, and legal processes. The implications of this legal discrimination are dire. This means a disproportionate number of African Americans who have been affected by a racialized justice system have been labeled as felons, who now cannot participate in our democracy because they are unable to vote. The absence of their voice in our elections is significant and eerily resembles a time when African Americans were denied the right to vote outright.

Among the most significant dangers of a racialized society are the psychological implications. It is not right for one group of human beings to maintain dominance or privilege

over another on the basis of race. It is not ok that in our modern society people are made to feel inferior because of the color of their skin. It is not right that African American parents feel that conversations are needed with their children to keep them safe from police officers. It is not ok that a young African American male is confronted with the strain of knowing that he is more likely to get arrested than he is of going to college. It is not right that our perspectives of others and ourselves are fueled by stereotypes that are being broadcasted by a biased media. It is not right that because of all these realities and the reality of our past that African Americans are forced to mourn the oppression of their ancestors, their loved ones, and themselves. It is not fair that in 2015 over 1,000 people were killed by the police, almost half of them minorities. It is not fair that the media vilifies the African American victims of these murders that gain national attention. Finally, it is not fair that there is not nearly enough being done by our communities and country to comfort these emotional and psychological traumas.

Moving Forward

What we need moving forward in sympathy. We need unity. We need to collectively acknowledge and bear responsibility for racism today because it very much exists and will continue to exist without intervention. When injustice comes across our screens and enters our communities, we cannot turn a blind eye. We cannot continue to try and explain it away. We cannot chastise those who cry out in pain over their oppression by reducing their desires for equality as “whining”. We need to value human suffering. We need to agree that equality is something we all want and are willing to fight for. We need to hold law enforcement to the same standards we hold civilians, when it comes to ethics and when it comes to breaches of law and constitutional protections. We need to rebuild and repair community relationships. Finally, it is

my sincere hope that more research will lead to increased understanding and awareness of racism's persistent role in our language and in all other formal and informal institutions that make up our society. Perhaps then each person can live their life in this country knowing they are equally as capable, equally as important, and equally as deserving of respect, dignity, and peace. This justice we owe to those who have lost their lives in the pursuit of freedom and equality.

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