A Critical Analysis of the Shootings of Unarmed African Americans by Police: A Social Work Perspective

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#### ABSTRACT

In recent years, more media attention has been garnered by the shootings of unarmed African Americans. This highlights the issue of the Black/White dichotomy of treatment under the law that has long been an issue in the United States. Presented herein is a literature review that contextualizes these shootings from a social work theoretical perspective. This review implements theories from the social work profession, such as critical race theory, contact theory, fundamental attribution error, and the strength based perspective, which offer a multidimensional understanding of the circumstances, history and bias underlying these shootings. The evidence provided in this review underscores the persistence of racism and its specific oppression of African Americans in society at large. It also highlights some of the ways in which American culture can redress issues such as segregation. Future directions, including the promise of reconciliation through consensus building within the communities impacted by shootings of unarmed African Americans, are discussed.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory; Contact Theory; Fundamental Attribution Error; Reconciliation; Racial Bias

#### Introduction

After numerous shootings of unarmed African American individuals, riots, protest, and the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement it is important that social workers bring their perspective to the table to integrate the profession's unique ethical and theoretical standpoint on current affairs. Use of deadly force is an act impacted by both conscious and unconscious forces. Accounts from law enforcement officials offer a narrative that purports that it is noncompliance with officer orders that justifies use of deadly force, and is in fact a calculated decision rather than one based on automatic thoughts or "split second" decision making (Gross, 2016). Herein, authors seek to understand the implicit bias that affects this post hoc use of deadly force. It is important for social workers to acknowledge and critically examine this social problem from all angles to fully

understand its nature as well as to present feasible solutions.

Until recently, the Department of Justice has not required police departments to collect data on officer related fatalities. In 2016, new procedures were enacted to ensure accuracy in the counting of "arrest deaths" related (Bureau of Justice Statistics, Department of Justice, 2016). In the interim, the Washington Post created an archival database of all officer-related fatalities in the USA from 2015-2017 (present). In 2015, 995 individuals were killed of whom 259 (26%) were African American, 497 (50%) of whom were White, 172 (17%) were Hispanic. In 2016, 963 individuals were killed of whom 233 (24%) African American, 466 (48%) White, 160 (17%) Hispanic, the count for 2017 is ongoing (Washington Post, 2017). In comparison to demographic data, as of the last Census in 2010, the percentage of 2 Davis and Block – Critical Analysis of Shootings

Whites in the US is 63.7%, African Americans 12.6%, 16.3% Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). As can be seen from these numbers. African Americans are overrepresented in these fatality statistics by at least a margin of 2:1. Whereas hispanic representation is near to population levels at around 16-17%. Moreover, it has been found that unarmed African Americans are 3.5 times more likely to be shot than their unarmed White counterparts (Mapping Police Violence, 2015). Also, African Americans who are armed but do not pose an imminent threat towards the police are more likely to be killed than Whites, Hispanics, and Asians (Mapping Police Violence, 2015). The numbers bare out what the following theoretical analysis unpacks: historical and socio-cultural factors result in social injustice for African Americans apropos their experiences with the use of deadly force and police.

According to the NASW's Code of Ethics, (1999) a social worker's primary mission is to "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (para. 1). Social workers have an ethical imperative, unique to this profession, which pushes professional social workers to prevent injustice and discrimination based on race. This paper utilizes theory, specifically critical race theory, contact theory and the fundamental attribution error to better understand the historical context of the issues facing the intersection of race and policing. A thorough understanding of the problem is the first step toward identifying possible solutions.

## METHODS

**Critical Race Theory** 

Issues of racial inequality, oppression and discrimination have persisted as social problems in the United States since the use of slavery as a means of production, nation building and social control. Severe inequality is accepted in U.S. culture and the legacy of slavery, without a doubt, affects cultural conceptions of African Americans today. CRT focuses on the primacy of race and racism and the connectedness with other forms of subordination. It questions the status quo, is committed to social justice, and places high value on society's experiential knowledge (Chaney & Robertson, 2015).

A CRT approach within the following articles highlights why the shootings of unarmed African Americans by White police may be happening and how it is affecting the African American community's perceptions of law enforcement. Chaney & Robertson (2015) pose three questions: "1: How does the murder of unarmed African American (Black) people by police support White supremacy? 2: What do non-indictments of police suggest about the lives of unarmed African American (Black) people? 3: How does the murder of unarmed African American (Black) people individual. familial. escalate and communal mistrust of police?" The authors unpack these questions and apply CRT to the situation of shootings of African American men by law enforcement.

Through the first question the show the importance authors of understanding the historical significance of slave patrols and their legacy on policing in the United States of America. When African Americans are perceived as dangerous and subhuman, the sociopolitical process allows for White supremacy to hold fast. The lack of indictment tells African Americans that police have little to no accountability for their actions against the African American community. Through the second question authors emphasize that the lack of indictments tells African Americans that their lives have little value. Through the third question they look at how the shootings of unarmed African Americans impacts mistrust of police throughout the African American community (Chaney & Robertson, 2015). In combination, these questions research underscore the historical and current social circumstances that allow for the cycle of shootings of unarmed African Americans to continue (Crenshaw 2011; 2002; 1995; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009; Zuberi 2011).

From the very beginning, the nation's "White superiority" and history has been built on the backs of African Americans. They have been victims of brutality, physical force, abuse, and humiliation at the hands of those who created and enforced the laws in America. CRT brings full circle how the historical context of White superiority affects African Americans today. A bedrock piece of evidence in connecting theory to reality is the increasing rates of police brutality against African Americans in recent years (Chaney & Robertson, 2013). In this article, CRT helps to show how race is embedded in institutions such as law enforcement, etc. As well as how White could be increasing leadership the possibility of unequal treatment of marginalized groups according to CRT (Chaney & Robertson, 2013).

Through an extensive search of the National Police Misconduct Statistics and Project (NPMSRP) Reporting data between April 2009 and June 2010 the authors found that only 33% of misconduct cases went through to convictions and that the average incarceration, post-conviction, for officers was only 14 months compared to 49 for the general public (Chaney & Robertson, 2013). These findings suggest that police are not being held to the same standard of accountability as the general public. It also

shows that retribution is lacking in correcting the misconduct (Chaney & Robertson, 2013).

Whiteness throughout history and still today conveys a position of privilege and power. This hierarchy instituted by Whites, for Whites provides the lens through which cultural conceptions are drawn about race and racial inequality, including White attitudes about the use of force by the police (Carter & Corra, 2016). Carta and Corra suggest that one's perception of race is not truly their own; instead these perceptions are passed down through generations and enforced by the society one lives in. This theory erodes hope that the elimination of negative stereotypes and hostile relations can be achieved through the education of youth alone and underscores the complexity surrounding this national illness to erase it. Overwhelmingly, White individuals are the ones maintaining social control, and CRT bares out as much when one looks at power dynamics and race.

It is a well-known fact that lynching was a method of policing and social control, especially in the south, during the time of Jim Crow (post-civil war) (Petersen & Ward, 2015). Estimates indicate that over 2500 African Americans were lynched between 1890 and 1930 in the American South (Bailey & Snedker, 2011). Aymer (2016) discusses how the violence and death from these lynchings induced terror in African Americans, destroyed families and tore communities apart. These lynchings also furthered social control by Whites. These killings were never considered murders and African Americans never received protection or justice for their loved ones. The scant accountability for lynching in the Jim Crow south are reminiscent, in large part because of the lack of accountability for police officers, that by comparison is consistent of the shootings

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of unarmed African American's today (Aymer, 2016).

Ramirez, McDevitt, and Ferrell (2000) indicate that racial profiling towards Americans African is undermining their physical wellbeing and quality of life because it works against African Americans best interests. According to Oh, DeVylder, and Hunt, those who experience racial profiling are at significantly higher risk of having mood anxiety disorders, disorders. and posttraumatic stress disorder (2017). Victims of this type of law enforcement mistreatment were also at greater risk to report lifetime suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts (Oh, DeVylder, & Hunt 2017). Those who face racial profiling also are at higher risk of physical injury. This lack of "fit" with one's environment, in which African Americans are unable to feel safe in their communities, has negative consequences on one's physical/emotional health and well-being (Germain & Glitterman, 1995).

### **Contact Theory/Intergroup Contact**

The next theory that social workers can use to better understand this issue is contact theory (CT). CT states that intergroup contact can largely reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954). This theory helps to explain the power dynamics inherent to the relationship between African Americans and the police. Studies have suggested that the poor quality of contact that police have with African Americans while on duty may be negatively affecting their beliefs about African Americans (Peruche & Plant, 2006).

Pettigrew & Tropp's (2006) metaanalysis of five-hundred fifteen studies evaluates Allport's (1954) application of intergroup CT which requires that four particular conditions, equal status between groups in the situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authority and law, be present within the contact for there to be positive change. The samples studied show that groups that specifically used structured contact situations that followed Allport's four conditions did in fact have higher amounts of reduction in prejudice outcomes than other groups (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Study findings can be translated to underscore the importance of improving relationships and physical connectedness between African American and police forces (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The findings from this meta-analysis also support integrated schooling environments and other mechanisms for early life contact between races.

Utilizing the aforementioned data set, Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) looked at how contact theory can diminish prejudice. They claim that contact can eliminate prejudice by: 1) strengthening knowledge about other groups, 2) lowering anxiety about intergroup contact, and 3) increasing empathy and creating a more open mind set to see things in a better perspective.

Knowledge has been the most studied/applied concept thus far in contact theory research. The findings suggest that by learning about the out-group the ingroup members can build a knowledge base, which then reduces prejudice and stereotypes about the out-group. In researching how contact can reduce prejudice the authors found that this concept used alone is likely outdated because it ignores actual group differences and denies the ability to tackle intergroup conflict at a societal level (Pettigrew & Tropp 2008).

The second approach, lowering anxiety, is a more recent focus of contact theory research. Feeling threatened by an out-group increases feelings of anxiety that are then associated with the out-group (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). From this finding, many other studies have uncovered that anxious feelings and perceived threats from out-groups could be reduced by intergroup contact (Blasovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, in press; Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004; Pettigrew, 1998; Stephan, Stephan & Gudykunst, 1999; Stephan et al., 2002; Voci & Hewstone, 2003).

The third approach used in reducing prejudice is the concept that contact can create empathy and increase perspective taking. Intergroup contact and close cross-group friendships allow for members to be exposed to the perspective of the out-group member and highlights having empathy for the out-group member's troubles or concerns. Recent findings showed that empathy for the outgroup can even help the individual to create a process of self-expansion wherein the individual will extend their sense of self to include the out-group (Aron & Mclaughlin-Volpe, 2001). This approach can promote intergroup contact as a way to increase empathy and thus reduce shootings of unarmed African Americans (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008). Authors suggest that the most efficacious way to use these research findings is to reduce anxiety and then work on building empathy and knowledge to equip police with the tools that will best serve the public interest (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008).

It is important to understand how officers make decisions to shoot and how their previous contact with African Americans can affect split second decision-making processes. Peruche & Plant (2006) explore law enforcement officer's racial biases and their decisions to shoot criminal suspects through the use of a shooting simulation. Authors found a significantly higher rate of officers mistakenly shooting unarmed African American individuals compared to White individuals even more so if the officer held negative attitudes toward African Americans. These findings indicate that it is critical to focus on changing police officer's attitudes and beliefs about African American individuals when attempting to reduce racial bias.

important An factor in understanding law enforcement responses to African American suspects is looking at the officer's previous contact with African American suspects. Intergroup contact hypothesis suggests that when certain criteria are met contact between members of out-groups improve intergroup attitudes (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). If officers believe African Americans are more likely to be dangerous criminals it may lead to more aggressive responses. Contact with African American people is primarily done, for many White officers, while on the job. Negative contact can greatly increase racial biases or impede the elimination of racial biases. In the study, officers with positive contact with African American people in their personal lives were shown to eliminate biases with training on simulations much faster than those who only had negative contact with African Americans.

### **Fundamental Attribution Error**

Another concept that can be applied when looking at the issue of shootings of unarmed African Americans by police is Ross' fundamental attribution error (FAE) (as cited in Langdrige & Butt, 2004). This theory of error posits that people tend to make internal (personal) attributions about others, rather than external ones, even when there are clear signs of potential situational causes. FAE is very common in individualistic cultures, like the USA, and is engrained in American culture (Crisp & Turner, 2014). Authors suggest that FAE is a critical part of attributing causality in Western cultures and less dominant in non-Western cultures (Norenzayan & Nisbett, 2000).

FAE happens because automatic processing has the advantage of speed; it

allows individuals to come to conclusions almost simultaneously. However, these attributions are often flawed because they are made so quickly (Song, 2012). In times of high stress and pressure the impact of the situation is rarely acknowledged because correcting the judgment requires mental effort and takes longer (Kubota, et al. 2014, Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Authors also found that stress can increase an individual's reliance on heuristic processing (Kubota et al., 2014), which is a fast and easy mental shortcut that simplifies complex judgments to easy rules of thumb. However, most result in biased information processing (Crisp & Turner, 2014).

It is important to consider the impact the environment has on individual's judgments of others around them (Kowalski-Trakofler et al., 2003). This literature review uncovers this probable formula for unpacking the shootings of unarmed African American men: intense pressure + racial stereotyping x dispositional attributions of the actor =shooting of unarmed African American's. It is clear that the impact of stress on police officer's decision to shoot must be more in depth; researchers need to better understand the implications of this dispositional attribution and how this could be increasing outcomes of unarmed shootings of African Americans.

## DISCUSSION

## **Future Directions**

The first step that must take place to mend the relationship between police and African Americans is reconciliation. Reconciliation is a form of restorative justice that focuses on the harm that results from a crime by involving the victim, offender and community (Laxminarayan & Wolthuis, 2015). This process is different from traditional criminal justice processes in that it allows for both parties to be highly involved in the process by being part of deciding ways in which to move forward (Laxminarayan & Wolthuis, 2015). It is through this mechanism that reconciliation gives the conflict back to community allowing the for an empowerment process where the communities voices are heard.

Reconciliation is the process through which law enforcement would acknowledge the real and abusive law enforcement practices in the history of the United States of America, including slavery, toward African Americans to reset relationships between them. Next, the reconciliation process addresses how communities have failed to stand up against crime. This highlights how there must be a change in both sides to repair and move forward. This process would also acknowledge and respect the negative narrative each group holds about the other (National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice, 2015). What reconciliation seeks is common ground so that both sides can move forward in working together to create a safer and more equitable community. Reconciliation aims for communities and law enforcement to come to an understanding of mutual respect and trust through acknowledging the historical harm African Americans have faced, accepting that both the police and African American communities have contributed to the current addressing issues. all misconceptions, and agreeing on mutual support going forward (National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice, 2015). One key point in this process is that they are not "rebuilding" but instead are coming to a mutual understanding in which both groups desire to build safety within their communities (Harris, 2017).

Reconciliation actively utilizes a key component of social work theory: the strengths based perspective. The strengths based perspective focuses on the multidimensional nature of personal and environmental resources (Cowger & Snively, 2002; Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2013; Saleebey, 2009). Applying this foundational piece of the social work profession to reconciliation helps to make sense of why it works so well. By focusing on strengths instead of shortcomings the possibility is opened for a dialogue between groups that is free of hostility and flows with possible solutions (Dubois & Miley, 2014). Significant intergroup interactions between Whites and African Americans must exist to dispel the myths that persist through to today.

Research has found that 1) individuals living in high crime neighborhoods are the least tolerant of the crime and 2) that the vast majority of community members are not involved in criminal activity (Sampson anv & Papachristos, Bartusch. 1998: 2009: Papachristos, Meares, & Fagan, 2007). This form of restorative justice has the potential to lead to greater satisfaction from both sides, allows for empowerment of the victims, and decreases the rate of reoffence by the offender (Laxminarayan & Wolthuis, 2015). High Point, North Carolina is a successful example of the process of reconciliation, coupled with straight talk about racial conflict,

High Point was drowning in drugs, dealers, and violence. The new police chief opted to utilize a new strategic intervention to close drug markets and bring about reconciliation between law enforcement and the community. Based on model Ceasefire, started in Boston in the 1990s, problem oriented policing was combined with collaboration with community member (Kennedy, 2009), the High Point Model (also known as the Drug Market Intervention model) utilizes concepts from the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative, and Project Safe Neighborhoods to address violence and end drug markets in communities.

Many community members in High Point had negative narratives about the police that included beliefs that the police were trying to destroy the community and felt that "three strike laws" were created to put their children in jail for life. On the other side of things, police believed that the community didn't care, had no expectation of finishing school and that there wasn't anv community left to partner with to address these issues (Kennedy, 2009). From a reconciliation perspective, neither view was entirely true nor entirely false; the oppression was real, as was the high crime rate. These negative narratives had created a wall between officers and community members and in the High Point case, reconciliation was a key part of the process to breaking it.

The conversation that began focused on the drug market, rather than drug use; and chose points that could be discussed and addressed as a community; specifically retaking the neighborhood locations that had become drug markets (Kennedy, 2009). Law enforcement had to recognize and declare that they could not eliminate the long history of oppression of African Americans. However, the police could acknowledge that this history does have an impact and that they want to move forward (Kennedy, 2009). There was an open and frank discussion between the community, police, and dealers that acknowledged the shortcomings of all groups and put the decision in the dealer's hands. The community openly clarified to the dealers that they did not accept the behaviors the dealers were partaking in and the police put the dealers on warning that if they were caught dealing drugs they would be arrested (Kennedy, 2009). Soon after this meeting the community and law enforcement were amazed to find that the drug market practically evaporated and very few dealers went back to dealing.

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This method of reconciliation has since been used in over 25 other U.S. cities and the results have been remarkable (Kennedy, 2009). Overall there has been a forty to fifty percent reduction in violence and drug related crimes in these cities after reconciliation (Kennedy, 2009). This serves as one key example of how the process of reconciliation can mend the broken bonds between law enforcement and African American communities and how acknowledging the deep history of racial injustice is a critical part of resolving problems facing the communities today.

# Conclusion

This literature review highlights the theories that tease apart the uniquely complex situation that African Americans face when engaging with law enforcement. Racial biases can lead to severe and deadly consequences which, this review seeks to frame different in а theoretical understanding. For police officers the use of physical or deadly force is impacted by stereotype history. and experience (Chaney & Roberston 2013; 2015). In analyzing these forces, authors were able to come to a clearer understanding of the antecedents of this discrimination as well as to explore future efforts to ameliorate this significant social problem. (Crenshaw 2011; 2002; 1995; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009; Zuberi 2011). For the social work profession these findings are extraordinarily important: the ethical duty to support and correct the narrative of White superiority is a pressing social One that has concern permeated mainstream culture and will require significant buy in from Whites, judiciaries and those with power. In the interim, social work professionals must seek dialogue and intervention using the theoretical underpinnings discussed herein, to promote social and racial justice for African American client populations.

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