



African American Male Youth Perceptions of Police Officers That Patrol in Urban Communities: The Cumulative Effect of Police Interaction

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Abstract: Researchers have explored the experiences of young African American men when interacting with police officers, while paying little attention to the cumulative effect of police interaction over the life cycle. The perception of police officers that patrol in low-income communities is manifested through experiences over several stages of development. This study draws from 5 focus groups consisting of 43 African American males in middle school, high school and undergraduate students at a predominately White and an historically black institution. The study uses a grounded theory approach to examine the development of African American males' perception of police officers from middle school through early adulthood. The findings suggest that their perceptions change over time as they interact more with police officers.

A large body of peer-reviewed literature on encounters between police officers and the public has emerged during the last half century. This body of work has provided the impetus for researchers to explore the cumulative effect of police/citizen interaction in urban communities over the life span. Studies show that African American male youth experiences have caused a disdain for police officers that patrol in urban neighborhoods (Weitzer & Brunson, 2015; Rios, 2011). These experiences have persisted, despite the fact that the number of African American police officers has exponentially increased. The perception of police officers that patrol in urban communities is shaped by the residents' version of the American experience.

The historical frame of policing in economically disadvantaged communities provide the lens through which police officers are perceived by young people whose perceptions of them is shaped by a collection of experiences. These experiences evolve from the

culture of the neighborhood where they live and context of their interaction, both of which play a critical role in developing and sustaining their views of the police (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009; Stewart, Morris & Weir, 2014; Brunson & Miller, 2006). Researchers have explored the experiences of young men when interacting with police officers, while paying little attention to the manifestation of their experiences during the early stages of their development as young boys prior to the event of a police encounter. Being exposed to police mistreatment through the experiences of friends and family members during childhood can put into perspective their attitudes toward police officers later during adolescence and early adulthood. It is predictable that such “vicarious” contact will have a profound and lasting role in shaping the views of children and confirming their assumptions about police officers. Previous work by Harris, 2002; Jacobs, 1971; Brunson, 2007 and Rosenbaum, 2005 all postulate that African Americans in general, but boys in particular are predisposed to view the police with suspicion and disdain, which is formed by the collective experiences and norms within their neighborhoods.

The current body of police/citizen interaction literature is primarily focused on police/suspect encounters, procedural justice and how situations influence police decision-making (Brunson & Miller, 2006). These studies, most of which are surveys have examined a specific set of circumstances or point in time. Both of which are limited in explicating the cumulative psychosocial effect of interacting with police. A different approach is needed to assess these experiences which can lead to a deeper understanding of the relationship between young African American males and police officers in urban communities. One way to address this concern is to measure the cumulative effect of police interaction using a developmental approach that begins with childhood and continues through early adulthood. This approach allows for an analysis of thought processes from one stage of development to the next and thus, give a more in-depth analysis of how African American male youth process interacting with police officers. How information is processed can be a social and psychological phenomenon that varies from one person to another. And how people respond to social circumstances can be influenced by a set of connected experiences that extend back over several stages of development throughout the lifecycle. Consequently, these experiences can shape how a person manages interacting with police officers, which is grounded in family and community dynamics with historical implications. African American families in urban environments prepare their male children to anticipate conflict with police officers, with the belief that how they respond can determine if they live or die.

Theoretical Context

Discrimination, culture, and class are examples of the societal forces believed to influence our perceptions and actions during police encounters. The social exchange of

information that occurs during police encounters is varied and not predetermined, yet hinges on commonly supported assumptions of risk and behavior held by police officers and other segments of society, respectively. During these exchanges, young African American males frequently report feeling unfairly singled-out for suspicion of a crime or infraction, while police officers report justifiable causes for initiating and handling the encounter (Rios, 2011). Over time, the meaning ascribed to police encounters among these groups can transform to one of mistrust and disagreement that extends from one generation to the next. For members of the African American community, the police notion of “to protect and serve” raises a question of “from what and for whom?” The grander meaning reflected through our behavior during a police encounter is supported by the theory of symbolic interaction. Symbolic interaction contends that people assign various meanings to facets of the physical and social environment that influence individual responses to certain situations and may eclipse the face value motivation for the interaction. In reflecting on symbolic interactionism Ritzer & Smart (2003) suggest “to understand people’s social acts, we need to use methods that enable us to discern the meaning they attribute to these acts.” They go on to say “interactionists believe it is essential to understand those worlds of meaning and to see them as the individuals or groups under investigation see them.” Symbolic interaction has been described as a three-legged stool where an individual’s thoughts, language, and meanings are ascribed to everyday events (Aksan, Kısac, Aydın, & Demirbuken, 2009). Moreover, the symbolic interaction that occurs during police encounters in low-income communities can take place within an environment where criminality and dysfunction are structural characteristics (Cantillon, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2003; Kingston, Huizinga, & Elliott, 2009).

Social Disorganization theory explains why residents in some communities find it difficult to socially regulate behavior around a set of ideals such as safe and clean neighborhoods (Steenbeek & Hipp, 2011). This notion of social disorganization adds complexity to our investigation of police encounters in low-income communities where high rates of resource deprivation, residential turnover, crime, and social isolation are believed to influence deviant behavior and attitudes that become commonplace over time (Krohn, Lizotte, & Hall, 2010). These structural concerns also heighten the nature and intensity of the interaction when residents encounter police officers, which add to the divergent perceptions of residents, and police officers toward each other.

Juvenile Interaction and Perception of Police Officers

Research on perceptions of police officers among young African American males in urban areas of the United States suggests that they have a significantly higher rate of police encounters that are perceived to be: (a) negative (b) overly aggressive (c)

unjustified (d) reflective of larger social forces of structural discrimination, and (e) intent on criminalizing behavior among this group (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009; Weitzer & Brunson, 2015). These sentiments are reflected in a recent study that show 44% of African Americans have little to no confidence in the local police and 41% have only some confidence. There is a stark difference along racial lines regarding the perception of how people are treated by the police. The overwhelming majority (78%) of White people believe the police in their community are doing a good to excellent job of protecting them from crime whereas only 48% of African Americans share in that belief. Most White people (75%) believe police office officers use the right amount of force and treat racial and ethnic groups equally compared to 33% and 35% of African Americans. They also have very different views regarding if police hold each other accountable when misconduct occurs with almost three-quarters (70%) of White people believing they do, compared to only one third of African Americans (31%) (Moran & Stepler, 2016). These numbers offer a glimpse into the dichotomy of the American experience.

The settings for police encounters involving young African American males vary and play a role in establishing the type of suspected delinquent behavior with regard to public spaces, neighborhoods, and predominately White social environments. For example, Stewart et al. writes, “we found that black adolescents most frequently are discriminated against by the police in predominantly white neighborhoods. This effect especially is pronounced in white neighborhoods that experienced recent growth in the size of the black population. These results lend support to the “defend white neighborhood thesis” (2009). Brunson and colleagues extend our understanding of the perceptions held by young men by adding this embodied reflection:

“Regardless of their own delinquency, young men felt themselves tainted by a kind of unilateral suspicion, which they associated most explicitly with their race, but also to their presence in public spaces, their peer associations, their manner of dress, and their previous contacts with the police. Nevertheless, the young men recognized the important role of policing in their communities and the need for a different kind of policing than they routinely experienced” (2006).

In all, the sheer presence of these young men reflected a form of social disorganization and perceived criminality that followed them from one environment to the next and was believed to contribute to the increased incidence of a police encounter. The research points to African American youth perceptions of police that are directly and overwhelming influenced by past personal experiences. Flexon, Greenleaf & Lurigio posit that negative police experiences do more to form perceptions of the police than positive experiences (2012). The weight of negative experiences is tied to symbolism attached to interactions with police. The negative law enforcement experiences were also more likely to be reported among racial and ethnic minorities in comparison to

White youth. Like Black youth, Hispanic youth reported experiencing high rates of negative police interaction. Interestingly, Schuck (2013) discovered that up until the seventh grade or about 12 years old, youth had a favorable attitude toward the police at which time she notes a dramatic decline in the favorable attitudes of youth toward the police begins. More negative perceptions of police are associated with minority racial status, negative experiences with officers, involvement in the delinquent subculture, and greater expressions of skewed legal norms. This support the notion that the perception of police officers is influenced by the collective experience of individual groups over a period of time and this experience affects their day-to-day activities and shapes how they interact with each other. Moreover, it intensifies as the number of encounters accumulates (Rengifo & McCallin, 2017). Therefore, when they reach a certain age their perception is ingrained and settled.

The vast majority of the research focused on police/juvenile interaction involves African American and White police officers. However, increasingly there are more African American police officers patrolling predominately African American communities. It is important to know if African American male juveniles have a different experience when they encounter African American police officers than when they encounter White police officers. There is very little research in this area therefore this is an exploratory study that is designed to provide insight into young African American males' perceptions of police officers. The goal of the study is to understand what factors contribute to the development of African American male youth perceptions of police officers and whether the development of these factors is affected by the race of the police officer.

Data and Methods

The data for this study was collected from five focus group interviews (N=43). A 12-point semi-structured interview guide was used to obtain participants' perceptions of African American, and White police officers patrolling in communities where they live.

The questions were designed to generate answers about participants' interaction with police officers and to determine if African Americans' treat them better, worse or the same as White officers. The focus groups allowed for an interactive and open discussion among the participants and enabled them to talk about their experiences when interacting with police officers. The opportunity to express their views in the company of their own peer group was empowering. Homogeneous groups according to age and academic classification were used to avoid the possibility of younger participants being influenced or intimidated by older participants about expressing their true experiences. The focus group format permitted the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the collective experiences that shaped the perceptions participants have of police officers.

Participants

Study participants included 26 college students (10 from a historically black university and 16 from a predominately white university), 12 middle-school students and 5 high-school students. The age of the participants ranged between 12 and 25 years old. The middle and high school students were part of a feeder system that included two high schools. The 5 high school students were freshmen and sophomores; they were instructed to go to the middle school on a specific day and time to participate in the focus groups. Three of the focus groups comprised of college students; one of middle-school and one of high-school students.

Data Analysis

A Grounded Theory approach was used to analyze these data. A thematic structure was created to understand how participants developed their perceptions of police officers. Individual experiences that produce similar responses among groups with different demographic characteristics can be used to explain different behaviors and attitudes over the life cycle.

Results

In this study there is a general interest in participants' experiences with police officers and a specific interest in their experience with African American police officers. The intra-racial dynamic between citizens and police officers is one of the most ignored, but yet compelling phenomena in urban communities. Study participants were asked 12 questions during each of the focus groups. Middle and high school participants had similar experiences when interacting with the police. While college students had a different experience, which shaped their perceptions of police officers.

How often do you see police officers in your community?

Middle and high school study participants reported that they don't see police officers much in their neighborhoods. They only see them when the "swat team" is preparing to take someone into custody or when they are near or around public housing projects. When they see police officers they are riding around in their patrol cars but never get out and interact with people. Conversely, college students see police officers all the time, whether they are campus police or city police officers patrolling around or near campus.

What is your perception of police officers in your community?

When ask this question middle and high school participants were all in agreement that police officers in their neighborhoods are "not very nice." They referred to them as being

“racist and disrespectful.” Interestingly, none of them personally, had a bad experience when interacting with police officers. However, all of them had witnessed a family member being mistreated during traffic stops and some of them witnessed a friend or family member get beat-up by the police. Also, they agreed that their perception of police officers is influenced by what they have seen and heard on television and in the news. The college students were very adamant about the fact that the police couldn’t be trusted. They felt that police officers were always looking for a reason to arrest them.

Have you ever been stopped and questioned?

When asked this question, none of the middle and high school participants had ever been stopped. They echoed much of what was said in the previous question. The only difference was that their limited interaction with police occurred on their way home from school when police officers would give them directives to keep walking or break up gatherings. On these occasions police officers would often use derogatory language and speak to them in a disrespectful tone. On the other hand, all of the college students had been stopped and questioned by the police on more than one occasion. They all agree that they get nervous and feel anxious when they see the police.

Why do you believe you were stopped?

This question was a second part to the previous question. Middle and high school participants believe the language and tone police officers used when interacting with them while walking on their way home from school was motivated because of their ethnicity. With respect to observing their family members interacting with police officers during traffic stops, they agreed that in some instances they should have been stopped, mostly for speeding. But to them, how they were treated was influenced by their ethnicity.

The college students believe they were stopped primarily because of their ethnicity. Moreover, they expect to be stopped particularly when there are three or more of them in a car. They also noted how different their experiences are when they are with their White friends as oppose to their Black friends. When they are with their White friends the police ask them a few questions before letting them go. But when they are with their Black friends they are forced to get out of the car, put their hands up, spread eagle and are frisked.

Do you mostly come in contact with African American or White police officers?

When answering this question middle and high school participants agreed that they mostly come in contact with African American police officers but frequently come in contact with White officers. College participants almost always come in contact with White officers.

Do African American officers treat you differently than White officers?

The unanimous response to this question by middle and high school participants was that African American police officers treat them with respect. One African American participant stated that “they ask us about our day, they don’t call us names.” Another said, “there is a difference in how they treat you, they actually care about what you say.” On the other hand, college participants from the HBCU stated that Black officers don’t treat them any differently; in fact, they sometimes treat them worse than White officers. College participants from the predominately white institution stated that White officers on campus treat them better than White officers in the community and Black officers in the community treat them better than White officers.

When you see police officers (AA and White) do you go the other way?

The response to this question by participants in all four groups was “yes” they try to avoid coming in contact with the police, irrespective to the officer’s ethnicity. “The easiest thing to do is go the other way”. One middle school participant responded by saying “yes, don’t want to take a chance, the police are the police.” The participants from the HBCU indicated that if they are driving and see police they will “park and go in a store,” “turn to see if they will follow” or “stop, park and get out of the car and go to the store.”

Do you expect police officers to harass you when you see them?

The middle and high school participants both stated that they don’t expect to be harassed but would not be surprised. The college participants from the predominately white institution were more concerned about being harassed while in the community than on campus. While in the community they expected to be questioned but didn’t know what to expect on campus. The HBCU participants didn’t distinguish between being harassed on or off campus. They made it clear that they expected to be harassed whenever they saw a police officer.

How do you think (AA or White) police officers perceive you when they see you on the street?

Middle and high school participants believe police officers perception of them is they are thugs, troublemakers or gangbangers. The college participants believe police officers perception of them is that they are drug dealers, criminals and thugs.

If you needed help would you go to a police officer (AA or White)?

The response to this question by middle and high school participants was that they would seek help from a police officer only in extreme or emergency situations. Their

concern would be that they would be questioned and possibly taken into custody. They believe how they look and where they live are determining factors in how they are treated. The college participants agreed, that only under extreme circumstances would they go to an officer for help.

Who would you rather patrol in your neighborhood, AA or White police officers?

Middle, high school and college participants preferred police officers of their same ethnicity patrol in their neighborhoods. The college participants stated that the shooting of unarmed African American males is the reason for their preference, not because African American officers treat them better.

What do you think can be done to improve the relationship between AA young males and police officers in your community?

The response to this question by the middle and high school participants was to treat them with respect and spend more time in the neighborhood interacting with them socially i.e., playing basketball and attending neighborhood activities. The college participants believed the relationship could be improved if there was a different model of policing and if police officers had a better understanding of the community and held each other accountable.

Discussion

The young men who participated in this study, rarely, if ever get the opportunity to discuss their experiences with police officers in a structured format. It is usually after they observe an incident of police mistreatment or have a personal encounter that they find comfort in venting to each other. Being able to discuss these situations as part of a controlled investigation brought value to their life experience. In each of the five focus groups it was clear that participants found strength and support in each other while discussing their shared experiences. The focus group format uniquely allowed participants to be expressive and submit to full disclosure. We took a deep dive into exploring the participants' broad perception of police officers and how those perceptions shape their everyday reality. The responses within the study population created distinguishable subgroups. Most notable was the similarity in responses between middle school and high school participants and how different they were from college participants. The middle and high school participants were essentially one group, with very little variance in their experiences. These participants were 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th graders, so the high school participants (9th and 10th graders) experiences were still very limited and similar to the middle school participants. The fact that the study population did not include any 11th and 12th grade participants could be perceived as a limitation,

however one critical difference between the 10th and 11th grade is parental latitude, which includes legal access to operate an automobile. Most African American males' first major encounter with a police officer is when he is either driving or a passenger in a car. The college participants in our study referred to the latter part of their high school career as when they had the experience that started to fortify their perception of police officers. Every incident involved being stopped and questioned and or detained by a police officer. Therefore, the experience of college participants can suffice for what we might have learned from 11th and 12th grade participants.

This investigation was aimed at exploring the intra-racial dynamic and focused on four specific areas of interest. To that end, study participants were asked questions related to their perceptions of African American police officers. They were also asked questions about how they expected to be treated; who they rather patrol in their neighborhood and how they thought police officers perceived them. Their responses show that their overall perception of police officers is based on their accumulated experiences over time. The younger participants were more understanding and forgiving than their older counterparts. However, the build-up of repeated experiences, vicarious or personal developed into a cemented disdain for police officers that cannot be reversed. The college participants' responses represent a full circled experience that covers four different points in time during the life cycle. This developmental transformation begins with no exposure to the social environment to the innocence of a child's observation and listening ear, followed by an adolescence's direct interaction with police while in the

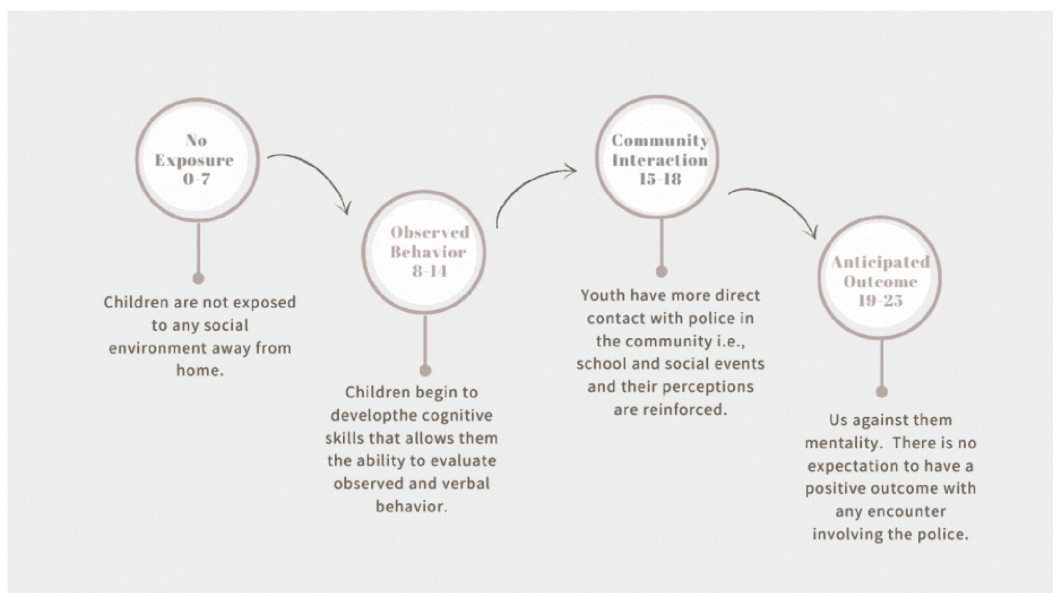


Figure 1: Developmental Model of African American Males' Perception of Police Officers.

community and ends with the recognition of young men being targeted victims of what they believe is unfair treatment because of their race.

Consistent with other research, among the older participants there is virtually no distinction between how they are treated by African American officers compared to White officers. However, they all agree they would rather African American officers patrol in their communities than White officers. A psychosocial assessment of the African American community suggest that this thought process could be driven by the number of White police officers involved in the shooting and killing of unarmed African American men in recent years. This phenomenon more than anything else distinguishes the perception of African American officers compared to White officers.

Conclusion

This study is grounded in the experiences of young African American males when they interact with police officers. These experiences produce impressions that help shape their perspective of the social world they live and engage on a daily basis. Participants in this study show how over time and at different stages of development a collective experience can be detrimental to the psyche of an entire community. They speak to what young African American males experience every day in cities across America. One negative experience can lay the foundation for what they can expect to happen during the next encounter. Repeated negative experiences shape attitudes that become fixed and cannot be moved. The perceptions of police officers by African American males are determined by personal and vicarious experiences. Study after study show that in America the African American male experience is unique unto itself. Interacting with the police is perhaps the most controversial and emotional event that can occur in the African American community and males are particularly vulnerable to negative outcomes.

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