

# Lessons from #McKinney: Social Media and the Interactive Construction of Police Brutality

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## *Abstract*

Video evidence of police aggression and assault on civilians has previously been considered irrefutable evidence of misconduct; its circulation contributes to the creation of “celebrated cases” of police brutality that draw attention because of their high-profile nature. In June 2015, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter comments on a citizen-captured video of a police officer attempting to apprehend an African-American girl at a pool party in McKinney, Texas, trended as one incident in the #BlackLivesMatter

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movement's canon of police mistreatment of African-American citizens. Through the lens of critical race theory, this qualitative content analysis triangulates data from three social media platforms to explore how users interpreted the incident. This study develops insights on how a "celebrated case" of police brutality is constructed by social media audiences. It makes a significant contribution to the literature by focusing on the often-overlooked experiences of African-American women and girls as victims of police brutality.

**O**n June 6, 2015, the nation's attention turned to the Dallas suburb of McKinney, Texas, after Brandon Brooks posted a YouTube video of McKinney Police Cpl. Eric Casebolt attempting to apprehend a group of Black teens at a neighborhood swimming pool (Brooks, 2015). Casebolt, a White, 10-year police veteran, forced bikini-clad 15-year-old Dajerria Beeton, who is African-American, to the ground and knelt on her back as she sobbed, "Call my mama!" Within a day of the video being posted on Twitter, two hashtags – #BlackLivesMatter and #McKinney – began to trend as social media users discussed the incident.

The #McKinney incident was highlighted by individuals tweeting with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to draw attention to allegations of police misconduct throughout the nation in 2014 and 2015. The movement, co-founded via the creation of a hashtag and online discussion by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, staged more than 1,000 protests to focus on police brutal-

ity (Garza, 2014). The videos captured by individuals using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag were shared via mobile devices and social media including Facebook and Twitter. This interactivity allows social media users an opportunity to co-create the news, adding their own interpretation of events (Lee, 2012; Springer, Engelmann, & Pfaffinger, 2015; Van der Haak, Parks, & Castells, 2012).

This study uses the #McKinney video as it was shared on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook in an intersectional, critical case study of public commentary on police brutality toward African-Americans. Through frame analysis informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT), this study compares citizen perspectives captured in comments posted on all three platforms within a week of this incident, and adds to literature about mediated perceptions of police and their interactions with African-Americans.

### **Police and African-American Communities**

Tensions between African-American communities and the police have a well-documented history. In 1968, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson to examine social and economic factors that contributed to race-related civil unrest in the late 1960s, leveled criticism at law enforcement and the news media for enflaming tensions between African-American communities and the police (Kerner, 1968).

The police are not merely a "spark" factor. To some Negroes police have come to symbolize white power, white racism and white repression. And the fact is that many police do reflect and express these white attitudes. The atmosphere of hostility and cynicism

is reinforced by a widespread belief among Negroes in the existence of police brutality and in a "double standard" of justice and protection — one for Negroes and one for whites (Kerner, 1968, p. 10).

Important segments of the media failed to report adequately on the causes and consequences of civil disorders and on the underlying problems of race relations. They have not communicated to the majority of their audience — which is white — a sense of the degradation, misery and hopelessness of life in the ghetto (Kerner, 1968, p. 18).

Researchers have since argued that affinity for African-American victims of police brutality contributes toward the communities' negative attitudes toward police, and are compounded by African-Americans' selective consumption of news that detailed police misconduct (Weitzer, 2002; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). These findings are supported by media effects research that indicates race has been a significant modifier on attitudes toward police (Chermak, McGarrell, & Gruenewald, 2006), and historical analysis of police relations and media coverage of Black life in America.

The Kerner Commission's warning of a shift toward "two Americas, one Black and one White," and its indictment of the media and the police is essential to understanding the groundswell of anti-police brutality protests staged in 2014 and 2015 (Taylor, 2016). These contemporary protests were fueled in part by the public's ability to capture and share images of police misconduct, circumventing mainstream media channels, which nearly 40 per-

cent of African-American adults have said they do not trust (American Press Institute, 2014). Social media users who said used the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag to follow reports of police brutality and protest in 2014 and 2015 said they chose to do so in order to watch news unfold unfiltered by mainstream media influence and decide on the issues for themselves (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016).

### **Shared Construction of the News**

Berger and Luckman (1966) presented the social construction of reality as a challenge for researchers to question the development of knowledge through the study of everyday social interaction. Social media platforms present a contemporary dimension for examining these interactions, adding a layer of complexity to audiences' abilities to define their social worlds through selection, consumption, and commenting on news (Östman, 2012). The conversation about police brutality is subject to interpretation through lenses of values, beliefs and attitudes of audiences who are no longer limited to one- or two-way, broadcast-style reception of news information and consumer feedback (Holton, Coddington, Lewis, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2015).

**News counter-narratives via social media.** Pew researchers have quantified how social networking sites have impacted news engagement in the 21st century. In July 2015, a Pew study indicated about one in 10 U.S. adults get their news on Twitter, and about four in 10 get news via Facebook (Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2015). YouTube also was identified as a major "social news pathway," with 51 percent of U.S. adults using the site, and about 10 percent of the adult population getting news on YouTube (Anderson & Caumont, 2014).

About half of U.S. social network site users say they have shared news stories, images, or videos via social media, and about 46 percent have used it to discuss a news event or issue (Anderson & Caumont, 2014).

These audiences, write Jackson and Foucault Welles (2016), form a networked counterpublic who use social media to legitimize and communicate their own realities and challenge the mainstream to acknowledge these narratives (p. 398). Social media users who comment online have been described as motivated by a desire to participate in journalism and to interact with other users, arguably making online comments on texts shared and consumed on social media platforms a rich site for analyzing shared social construction of a news event (Springer et al., 2015). Mindful of scholarly critique that comments left on the Facebook pages of news websites are comparatively less deliberate than those posted directly to the organization's website (Rowe, 2015), we triangulated data from the YouTube video itself, from Facebook comments on news sites that used the raw video, and from Twitter, where the strategic use of hashtags has been analyzed as a form of participatory political speech (Small, 2011).

### **Framing and Racial Tension**

Although racial minorities have expressed mistrust of mainstream media, there are a variety of social networking platforms that serve as venues where otherwise marginalized voices may present their own interpretation of news events. From a CRT perspective, these interpretations serve as “counterstories” of lived experiences that are otherwise colored from a default frame of whiteness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, pp. 42-43; Feagin, 2013).

Frame production occurs on these platforms as users participate in public discourse and generate alternative interpretations of news information (Borah, 2011, p. 250). In particular, Ryan, Carragee, and Meinhofer (2001) found that “news media represent critical arenas of social struggle” (p. 175). They argue that journalistic frames are influenced by the differing perspectives vying for attention: “News stories, then, become a forum for framing contests in which these actors compete in sponsoring their definitions of political issues” (2001, p. 176).

Scheufele (1999) argued that social norms and values, along with interest group pressure, are among the factors that can have an influence on journalistic framing, and that those with differing views “use mass media to construct opinions and reality, and their societal influence to establish certain frames of reference” (p. 110). Chong and Druckman write of this as a “competitive” process that “does not guarantee that the opposing sides will be equal combatants or that audiences will receive equal and simultaneous exposure to equally persuasive alternative frames” (2007b, p. 102). Race-related framing and the construction of someone’s identity as that of an “outsider” can occur through either inclusion or omission, according to Park, Holody, and Zhang (2012), with a similar finding by Ryan et al. (2001), who note a propensity by the media to “privilege frames advanced by political elites and miss valuable alternative framings” (p. 181). As Lawrence (2000) writes on law enforcement and the use of force, groups who believe that police brutality is a serious public problem find it difficult to win authority for their reality. This difficulty is due to “rhetorical, informational and political constraints that limit the construction of police bru-

tality as a public problem” (p. 24).

**Power and news frames.** Ultimately, the acceptance of a frame, and the favor with which it is held, coincides with the holder’s values, according to Chong and Druckman (2007b), who found that an individual’s frame production represents a melding of already held, available beliefs; accessibility to new beliefs; and the resulting consideration given as to which beliefs are held applicable (2007a). A frame’s ability to assert a dominant position in the public discourse “depends on multiple complex factors, including its sponsor’s economic and cultural resources, its sponsor’s knowledge of journalistic practices, and its resonance with broader political values or tendencies in American culture,” write Ryan et al. (2001, p. 176), whose article on the Media Research and Action Project discusses the use of frame analysis as a tool toward facilitating voice for marginalized groups.

While media framing research has historically focused on content produced by professional journalists, the aforementioned studies, provide opportunities to examine social media users’ perception of an issue and challenge existing theory that indicates minority groups are unable to effectively sponsor frames. The context of a social movement such as #BlackLivesMatter, which centers footage usually captured by citizen witnesses, offers a compelling test for such research. A critical perspective that examines the impact of race and power in framing complements the theories used in studies of social media use in social movements, and is appropriate considering the race-specific nature of the conflicts.



## Video Evidence and the Social Construction of Police Brutality

In March 1991, the country watched citizen-captured videotape of four Los Angeles Police Department officers beat and kick motorist Rodney King during a traffic stop. The video evidence, seen by both the jury — which acquitted the officers — and the American people, has since become a key text in analyses of the social construction of police brutality. As Stuart (2011) observes, “the King case demonstrated to much of the public ... that skillful police and legal professionals are able to transform even the most ‘obvious’ and condemning video evidence into proof of their own countervailing claims” (p. 329).

In recent years, several videotaped conflicts between police and civilians have been captured via cell-phone cameras, and quickly uploaded to social networking sites, where they were viewed and interpreted by millions in minutes. In July 2014, a bystander recorded the last moments in Eric Garner’s life as he struggled in a chokehold after being confronted by Staten Island police (Baker, Goodman, & Mueller, 2015). His final words, “I can’t breathe,” were added to the #BlackLivesMatter protest lexicon as the public grasped to reconcile what they had seen — and the grand jury’s decision not to indict the officers involved.

Social media users have commented on Garner’s death as “*the case*,” a celebrated case with seemingly irrefutable evidence of police overreach and excessive use of force (Freelon et al., 2016, p. 31).

## Social Media Organizing via #BlackLivesMatter

In earlier media eras, celebrated cases of police

misconduct were often brought to light via photograph and videotaped evidence that detailed the incident and/or the victim's injuries or death. Related literature has examined the role of photojournalism or videography in the cases of victims including Amadou Diallo (Harring, 2000; Millner & Larsen, 2002) and King (Stuart, 2011). The proliferation of cellphone technology, including smartphones that allow users to capture images of the social world as it unfolds around them, has met a powerful force in the publishing capabilities of social networking platforms.

The videos and the hashtags shared on social media contribute to an update on “celebrated cases” of police misconduct. Such cases are defined by their prolonged coverage in the news media with presentation that differs from routine crime news (Chermak et al., 2006, p. 262). These cases may have unique influence on public perception of the police, including prompting members of the public to re-evaluate their beliefs about law enforcement and their actions (Chermak et al., 2006).

Existing scholarship on public perceptions of police suggests a gap in the literature about social media construction of “celebrated” cases of police brutality, a problem that is ripe for exploration in the wake of tensions surrounding police use of force highlighted by the #BlackLivesMatter Movement in 2014 and 2015.

### **Black women's erasure in #BlackLivesMatter.**

Much of the existing and emerging literature might lead the public to infer that African-American girls do not face the same risk of punitive action as their male counterparts (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). The celebrated cases of police brutality documented on social platforms in 2014 and 2015 via the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag support this

notion. They were overwhelmingly male, leaving critical questions about how the public constructs police brutality involving Black women and girls (Freelon et al., 2016). This finding empirically supports the claim that Black women's stories and experiences are and have been erased from the dialogue about African-Americans and police brutality (Crenshaw, Ritchie, Anspach, Gilmer, & Harris, 2015; Towns, 2016).

Collins (2002) would cite such omission as the work of interlocking oppressions of race, gender and power that subjugate Black women and girls' experiences to the interests of media gatekeepers. Within this framework, we apply the characteristics of womanist caring to defend the selection and analysis of this particular case, noting the criteria of *embracing the maternal* in our attention to Becton's welfare as a child; *political clarity* in noting the documented over-policing of Black girls, and *an ethic of risk*, our willingness to commit to scholarship meant to draw greater attention to the injustices suffered by weak social actors in opposition to the police (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 77, via Gordon & Patterson, 2013). Our CRT-informed analysis of the #McKinney incident's construction was performed with an emphasis on Becton's treatment as a Black girl in the users' comments.

The #McKinney case presents a point-in-time case that can be analyzed in the greater context of how social media is used in the social construction of police brutality and racial (in)justice. Drawing on this hashtag, we explore an incident of alleged police misconduct — caught by a social media user — which became a “celebrated case” in June 2015 to address the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What key themes that emerge from the com-

ments on YouTube, Twitter, and the Facebook pages of broadcast TV stations contribute to the social construction of this incident as an act of police brutality?

**RQ2:** What do these messages tell us about public perception of race and police relationships in America today?

### **Study Design/Methodology**

This critical case study applied qualitative content analysis methodology to a purposive sample of social media comments from three sources to construct meaning of a celebrated case of police misconduct. Comments from three social media platforms, YouTube, Twitter, and the Facebook pages of three local news outlets, were collected for analysis. We selected the first 400 comments posted on Brooks' original YouTube video the day after it was uploaded to YouTube, 940 total comments from the news stations' Facebook pages, and 7,100 tweets for analysis, coding every 10th tweet. Each researcher coded a different subset of the data. All of the texts were posted between June 7 and June 15, encompassing a one-week period following the incident.

### **Examining Frames through a Critical Lens**

As an unobtrusive method of inquiry, content analysis allows researchers to examine texts created by the public in order to identify mediated representations of culture, history and current events (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). We approach this research with the Foucauldian (Foucault, 1995) assumption that public knowledge exchanges are indicative of shifting power relations among

actors. We build on that assumption to analyze comments posted by users who were formerly limited to the dichotomized roles of producer and consumer. As explained by Ruggiero (2000), Internet-enabled activity allows both the image's initial producer and its consumers to shift the balance of power among them — the consumers become producers of knowledge about the actions seen in the video. Interrogating their comments is a means of examining both cultural dominance and hegemonic resistance as they are enacted in a text (Hall, 1973).

**Intersectionality in news media examination.** The interrogation of these texts is assisted through the application of critical race theory, a lens used to examine the relations of race, law and power. CRT theory — developed by Crenshaw (1995) and advanced by Delgado and Stefancic (2001) provides a lens for examining the influences and impact of race, power and the law in social situations — is appropriate for this content analysis, which seeks to analyze public discursive practices in the discussion of power relations between the police and African-American communities.

Becton's case meets Flyvbjerg's (2006) definition of a critical case of bearing strategic importance to the broader problem of police brutality as chronicled by the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag in 2014 and 2015. We selected this particular incident because of its dynamics: the main figures in the video represent polar opposites of Collins' Matrix of Domination (2000), which details how different forms of power — in this case, articulated along the lines of age, race and class — form intersections of oppression.

**Coding procedures.** The data were coded in three stages: initial coding, followed by values coding, and fi-

nally, a theming of the data (Saldaña, 2013). For the initial coding stage, each researcher open-coded one of the data sets to identify key concepts in the incident's discussion on each platform. Second, using the descriptive codes generated across the data sets, we used values coding to categorize the expression of values, attitudes and beliefs related to social movements, police-citizen relations, and media coverage of public disorder (Saldaña, 2013). Finally, drawing on the major themes from comments on the YouTube video, we used the constant-comparative method outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008) to collapse the categories from the axial coding stage and refine themes from emergent in the Twitter and Facebook-based discourse. We identified three key themes — anti-police sentiment, social deviance, and racism — that characterized the public discourse of this case.

## Findings

We analyzed these frames as context for understanding how users construct the interaction seen in the video. The first and second round of coding generated the following codes for the comments across each platform:

- Anti-police
- Anti-Cpl. Eric Casebolt
- Pro-police
- Pro-Cpl. Eric Casebolt
- Anti-news media
- Out of control teens
- Teens as trespassers, violating property rights
- Racism
- Personal attacks against those sharing opinions

**Table 1**  
***Major Themes Across Platforms***

The number of times one of the themes was identified in each category

|                       | Facebook/<br>TV news | Twitter | YouTube |
|-----------------------|----------------------|---------|---------|
| Anti-police sentiment | 29                   | 331     | 59      |
| Social deviance       | 152                  | 86      | 41      |
| Racism                | 273                  | 400     | 55      |

We first eliminated the personal attacks theme and focused on the interpretive frames that emerged from the data. Collapsing these codes into categories, which were used to refine our findings, we identified three competing thematic frames throughout the data sets to describe how social media users constructed this case as symbolic of a greater epidemic of police brutality:

- Anti-police sentiment
- Social deviance
- Racism

We report some overlap in the construction of these categories, as some tweets and comments contained messages of anti-police sentiment, social deviance, and/or racism. Although the tweets and comments used in this analysis are publicly available per the Terms of Service of their respective platforms, we have omitted user handles in this report as a means of protecting user privacy. The

original language of each message, including misspellings, incorrect grammar, and obscenities, have been left in place. The themes are not presented in any particular order.

### **Anti-police Sentiment**

Across the data sets, one strong message was of suspicion, mistrust, and occasionally outright hostility toward police forces. One tweet mentioned how you can't really call 911 for help when it's about police brutality. This theme was characterized by statements expressing sentiment that the public would be better served without police presence:

We've all seen what happens when people are detained by the police. Nobody trusts them, compliance gets you fucked or shot these days if you aren't white. Fuck that. It's only a matter of time before citizens take some authority back into their hands (Personal communication, YouTube, June 11, 2015).

**Comments specific to the officer.** We note that 21 of the 59 anti-police comments on the YouTube video in specifically target Casebolt. One user described the officer as: an ex military asshole, that thinks he is still in command....Seen it many times watching these treasonous felons... (Personal communication, YouTube, June 8, 2015)

Others criticized the “good cop, bad cop” narrative, citing a lack of officer intervention as the girl was being detained:

RT: @user: The entire time ... not one “good cop” intervened. (Personal communication, Twitter June 7, 2015)



I understand it was frustrating with everyone around him and his backup. But my god he straight up lost his temper which we as people do not need. We expect justice and that was not justice with the violent reaction he had towards teenagers. I am always on the side of law enforcement but that crosses boundaries with his actions. (Personal communication, Facebook, June 11, 2015)

Fine officer? LOL! There were many there that day, but Casebolt was not one of them. (Personal communication, Facebook, June 11, 2015)

... He rolled up ... to a teenage pool party ... like it was a war zone. #McKinney (Personal communication, Twitter, June 7, 2015)

... girls in bathing suits require pulling a pistol out? ...power trip from a scared little man. That's ridiculous. #McKinney (Personal communication, Twitter, June 7, 2015)

**Police mistrust.** Of the more than 800 tweets analyzed, 331 contained messages that reflected an anti-police sentiment that criticized Casebolt and other officers for using excessive force in breaking up the party. A total of 117 of the YouTube comments spoke specifically to the theme of not being able to trust the police because of the unpredictability of the officer's behavior. One user mentioned the officer "couldn't wait to kick some civilian ass." Another user, who claimed to have trained police officers, called the video a show of "oppression."

A competing theme that emerged in the analysis was a weaker show of support for law enforcement as a whole, which blamed the teenagers and members of Black communities for the problems at the pool that day. The

conflict contributed to ongoing discussions between users, particularly on the YouTube video, where 34 comments were volleyed back and forth between commenters.

### **Social Deviance**

The second major theme, social deviance, included comments that referenced assumptions of absent parents, a lack of respect for the law and authority:

Yeap, but if the law enforcement shows up, YOU HAVE TO DO WHAT THEY ASK, if they pull you over, DO IT, if they say go back home YOU BETTER DO IT. THEY ARE to protect us. In the 1950's you never seen something like that. Parents today are not teaching ethical values to their children. (Personal communication, YouTube, June 7, 2015)

This officer clearly told these girls to vacate the property no less than five times but they still back talked and attempted to come back. How about some parents step up and take responsibility for their children regardless or not if she lived in that community. If the officer told her to leave, then go home until the situation is resolved, and then you can head back up to the pool. Kids today are taught to not respect authority and it's going to be a very sad future. (Personal communication, YouTube, June 9, 2015).

um turn on the tv and see the news reports of black teens roaming stores looting and beating up people for fun. Of course we are going to be suspect when your 14% of the population and commit 50% of murders and violent crime. (Personal communication, YouTube, June 9, 2015).

Similar comments repeated how the teens seen in the video ignored commands to leave the area, spoke back

to the officers, and otherwise disregarded orders. The language linking the action of a few individuals to systemic, societal issues of deviance is in line with Cohen's (1973) definition of a moral panic, in which "an episode, person or group is defined as a threat to societal values and interest" (p. 9). Becton and the teenagers in the video were criticized in the "stylized and stereotypical fashion," (p. 542) through practices which, in previous eras, had been employed by the news media in biased coverage of Black and Hispanic subjects (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Status of the participants in crime stories and the cultural deviance of their acts have been established as criteria of newsworthiness in stories to criminalize Black subjects (Gruenewald, Pizarro, & Chermak, 2009).

In constructing this case, YouTube and news site commenters used such criteria to label the teens as symbols of a greater societal issue problem — lack of respect for authority. A critical reading of this construction leads us to note that both pro-police and anti-police sentiments citing social deviance attempted to use race to strengthen their arguments. Our analysis indicates that commenters sympathetic to Becton and the other Black pool-goers most effectively seized upon the issue of race to bolster arguments that police brutality is, in fact, a public problem.

### **Race and Racism**

The first tenet of Critical Race Theory is that racism exists, and is, in fact, ordinary. CRT also posits that White superiority of color has both material and psychological benefits for Whites, and that race is the product of a socially constructed hierarchy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, pp. 7-9). The first assumption is useful in interrogat-

ing discourse about the #McKinney incident as an instance of policing Black existence. However, the definition of racism solely being socially constructed is fundamentally flawed logic, a point we discuss in the following section.

Racism, the third and final theme developed from the data, was most prevalent in the broadcast media/TV station website comments, where it was mentioned in 273 of the comments, and the tweets, where approximately 400 items mentioned race or racism, signaling overlap with the other themes. Racism was either mentioned or strongly implied in 55 YouTube comments. Overwhelmingly, it was discussed as having a negative impact on the situation, demonstrating users' affinity with African-Americans, which contributes to a sense of resentment, fear or animus toward law enforcement officers:

There is at least 2 reasons why this video is a show of racism. One is (from news stories and firsthand eyewitness accounts) that Caucasian people were making racist remarks about African-American people. The other (still from news stories and witnesses) is the cops only targeted African American people. Also, the Caucasian people stood, watched, and laughed while this was going on AND people have said that a Caucasian mother was the one who started the chain of events. Now, if race wasn't involved, people were still at fault. The cops, or more accurately the one cop, did not have to resort to actions tha violent and extreme. This video has showed that racism is very much at large, and if we lived in a world without racism, violence would be our main problem. (Personal communication, YouTube, June 12, 2015)

The ignorance is mind boggling. This is about race. AND excessive police force at the same time. Please do not try to remove race from the scenario to prove

your point. The cop was wrong and showed aggression towards the teens who were Black. It has been reported and shown that he ignored the other teenagers. Also the melee started with two Caucasian women yelling racial slurs and stereotypical comments. It is about race. Accept it and then do your part to make a change. Ignoring the problem is why this is happening all over the country. Sad.  
(Personal communication, Facebook, June 8, 2015)

We did not include users' performed identities as part of our analysis, leaving us to analyze solely the message content as indicative of racially-oriented beliefs.

## **Discussion**

Nearly 50 years ago, the Kerner Commission warned the country that part of the issue contributing to ill feelings between African-American communities and law enforcement was public perception of mistreatment at the hands of the police. Despite the government and news industry's attempts to act on the commission's suggested reforms in media and law enforcement policies, modern videotaped evidence of such mistreatment highlights ongoing tensions between law enforcements and Black communities. These images, and the discourse they spark, are at the center of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which has sought to categorically define police brutality as a public problem. Although we intentionally selected a video that focused on a African-American girl, and applied theoretical analysis that structured our inquiry to consider interlocking oppressions faced by women, youth and other underprivileged peoples, we note the distinct absence of comments that explicitly mentioned Becton herself, a gap that underscores the argument African-American women and

girls have been erased from the online dialogue on police brutality.

### **Strengthening the call for intersectional interrogation**

Becton's erasure across the comments emphasizes the relevant demands of Black feminist scholars who call for an intersectional approach to reading social interactions in which race, gender, and their resulting power differentials come into play. As Crenshaw, Ocen and Nanda (2015) note in observations drawn from empirical data about policing Black girls, Becton and others like her experience racism in disproportionate rates of punishment as compared to their peers. Executed in forms of punishment ranging from school suspension to expulsion to searches of both bodies and property, racism has a demonstrated material and psychic impact on Black girls (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

A closer examination of the #McKinney incident suggests that racism, through the interlocking oppressions of race *and* gender *and* power, is directly experienced by Black girls as a power that can violate and crush their Black bodies with observable, measurable pressure — i.e., Casebolt kneeling on Becton's back — and simultaneously subject them to the public discourse of whether they are social deviants who deserve such punishment. While CRT offers a useful lens for examining the social construction of racism, analysis of contemporary struggles highlighting tensions of race, gender, and power — such as police use of force against women and children of color — requires an approach informed by Black feminism and one that defines the metaphysics of racism via the lived realities of these groups.

## **Social Video and the Public Problem of Police Brutality**

Social media contributes to the construction of police brutality as a public problem through creating sites of discourse where individuals, even through competing themes, co-construct a social understanding of what this misconduct looks like. In cases of contentious interaction between police and civilians, video evidence has mistakenly been purported to “speak for itself,” offering the viewing public direct insight into how such encounters unfold (Goodwin, 1994, p. 615-616).

The evidence must still be processed by viewers and their way of seeing the world. What may appear to be a clear-cut case of excessive use of force by police can and has been construed as an appropriate level of response when interpreted through the lenses of power afforded to authority figures. From the early 1990s, when video of a vicious beating was insufficient to win a conviction of police misconduct in the Rodney King trial, to 2014, when the videotaped chokehold death of Eric Garner failed to provoke even an indictment against the officers involved, we are reminded that even videotaped witness of such actions is still subject to the conflicting social constructions of our realities concerning right, wrong and (in)justice.

Our study of social media comments related to the video illustrates that competing narratives of the role of law enforcement, adherence to social norms, and the lingering effects of Black-White racism emerge as part of diverse belief systems that complicate audiences’ ability to position unarmed Black child as a victim of police brutality.

## Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This exploratory research was significantly limited by several factors, including:

- Comments posted to the broadcast news/TV station websites are subject to moderation and removal by the respective websites, according to individual policies. The comments that were analyzed were those present on the websites at the time they were collected; they may differ from the comments subsequently viewed at another time.
- The purposive sample was profoundly limited and cannot be used to draw sweeping generalizations. Given that more than 500 million tweets are posted per day, and YouTube receives billions of views daily, the data collection was limited to a week within the week of the June 5 incident and narrowed to focus on #McKinney and #BlackLivesMatter.

This research would benefit from repeat analysis on similar cases involving African-American women and girls to analyze whether and how the public constructs them as victims. This research could be further strengthened by sentiment analysis of the online comments, including how the online performance of race influences the commenter's stated opinions. Finally, we encourage researchers interested in similar work to consider complementing an analysis of online comments with interview data from the individuals who post such comments to examine their motivations and intent.



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