Exploring the Experiences of Black Families Exposed to Police Induced Trauma Through a Critical Race Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Exploring the Experiences of Black Families Exposed to Police Induced Trauma Through a Critical Race Theory Perspective

By

Amanda Miguez

Master of Social Work

The purpose of this current study was to explore the experiences of Black families exposed to physical assault, emotional abuse, murder, and racial profiling by law enforcement and to use critical race theory as a framework to understand these experiences. The methods to obtain narratives: A total of 10 participants living in Los Angeles County participated in this research study; they identified as African American and had at least one child living with them under the age of 18. The results that were found after analyzing the narratives revealed the following themes: (a) aggressive racial profiling, (b) fear for Black men and boys (c) surviving police encounters, and (d) a predominant conversation of race throughout one’s lifetime.
Introduction

The research study will explore the experiences of Black families exposed to police induced trauma (i.e., physical assault, emotional abuse, murder, and racial profiling) and observe its impact on the family. Critical race theory (CRT) is valuable when considering police induced trauma against marginalized groups (i.e., African Americans) in a hierarchal society, because it offers an understanding that the trauma inflicted against African Americans stems from a larger narrative (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Aymer, 2016). The researchers will use CRT as a framework to understand the impact of police induced trauma on the Black family. The United States has a long history of police engaging in police brutality against Black people, particularly Black males. Between 1920 and 1932, white police officers accounted for over half of all the murders of Blacks (Myrdal, 1944), and in 2016 police have killed 198 Black people (The Guardian, 2016).

In March 1991, the world watched the horrific video and images of the beating of Rodney King. The research demonstrates an increase rate of police brutality against blacks (Staples, 2011; Guardian, 2016), despite videos showing the murder of Tamir Rice (November 23, 2014), Philando Castile (July 23, 2016), Terence Crutcher (September 16, 2016), and Keith Lamar Scott (September 20, 2016). The Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health (2015), reported that Blacks are 20% more likely to experience mental health issues than the general population. “Exposure to violence increases the risk of developing a mental health condition such as depression, anxiety, and post traumatic stress disorder. African American children are more likely to be exposed to violence than other children” (HHSOMH, 2015).

The researchers choose CRT because the underlying principles are grounded in the importance of race and racism and their interconnectedness with other forms of subordination, an
analysis of dominant belief systems, and commitment to social justice (Chaney & Robertson, 2011). CRT is used as a framework to understand the impact police-induced trauma has on Black families physically, emotionally, financially, and spiritually.
**Literature Review**

It is a historical fact that African Americans have experienced oppression during enslavement, Jim Crow, the civil rights movement, and now mass incarceration with young Black males. African American men, women, and children have suffered physical, psychological, sexual, and emotional trauma throughout each oppressive period (Aymer, 2016; Petersen & Ward, 2015). A review of the literature suggests that police induced trauma results from racism, racial profiling and officers own unconscious racial biases (Plant & Peruche, 2005; Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Chaney & Robertson, 2015). The literature on CRT supports the belief that racism is a major factor in the lives of African Americans and helps social workers understand the depth of systematic oppression against African Americans who have been experiencing trauma since enslavement.

**Racism.**

Marger (2012) defines racism as, “an ideology, or belief system, designed to justify and rationalize racial and ethnic inequality” (p. 25). Institutional racism relates to social and institutional policies that exclude African Americans from receiving benefits offered to other members of society (e.g., federal drug laws, housing, and education) (Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, Cancelli, 2000). Both covert and institutional racism continues to play a role throughout policies and practices that are rooted in social structures, systems, and institutions that systematically expose and generate racial inequality (Kolivoski, Weaver, & Huggins, 2014). Researchers have argued that racism is a widespread, aggressive influence on the health of African Americans and other ethnic minorities in the United States (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000; Hummer, 1996). It is important as researchers that we explore the experiences of Black families who have been exposed to police induced trauma to see whether or not this has an
impact on their health and overall well-being. Why does racism experience have such an impact on Black families?

Plant and Peruche (2005) research suggest that White police officers view Black men as potential perpetrators, which increases the likelihood of police violence. Perceptions of African Americans, particularly Black men, are thought to be aggressive criminals and dangerous (Plant & Peruche, 2005; Carbado & Rock, 2016). Therefore, it is not uncommon that police officer’s act aggressively towards African Americans as a result of being influenced by race (Jefferies et al. 2011; Carbado & Rock, 2016). Stereotypes that portray African Americans as violent human beings have been ingrained within America’s culture and consciousness that excessive force has become the norm (Carbado & Rock, 2016). Therefore, the use of force by white police officers against African Americans may be instinctive or internalized, as cognitive or oppressive schemas (Ragdale, 2000; Hurtado, 1996).

**Racial Profiling.**

Staples (2011) looks at the history of racial profiling and considers it to be rooted in “white slave-owners” controlling their “so-called property” (p. 32), because in 1693, the city of Philadelphia allowed its police officers to stop any Black person walking on the street to determine whether or not they were free from their slave owner. This is the beginning of racial profiling, officers stopping someone who is Black because they appear out of place. Racial profiling leads to unfounded arrests, mass incarceration, police brutality, and murder (Staples, 2011; Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Carbado & Rock, 2016, Alexander, 2011). According to Staples (2011), it is more than the crime that determines whether or not an individual goes to jail, but rather the race and class of an individual. According to Staples (2011), “Arrest rates are three to four times higher for blacks than for whites when black American’s are less likely than whites
to use drugs, and there is no credible evidence that they sell drugs more often.” (p. 34). The mere fact that Blacks are more likely to be arrested for a crime that Whites are doing more often than Blacks is a direct link to racial profiling.

Officers are no longer stopping people from seeing if they are free from their slave owners; however in New York City officers are allowed to stop-and-frisk a person if they appear suspicious (Staples, 2011). Staples (2011) states, “that more than 80 percent of those stopped and frisked in New York were Black or Latino” (p. 35). Racial Profiling inhibits African Americans from living in a society where they can have a sense of belonging. In 1996, Hilary Clinton spoke to a Keene State University audience and said the following:

“We need to take these people on. They are often connected to big drug cartels; they are not just gangs of kids anymore. They are often the kinds of kids that are called super-predators, no conscience, no empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way, but first, we need to bring them to heel. (”Mrs. Clinton’s Campaign Speech”, 1996)”

When African Americans are described and portrayed as violent, evil, animalistic criminals, it is no surprise that officers target African Americans to do a stop-and-frisk. Fast forward after Mrs. Clinton's speech, America was introduced to mass incarceration, also known as “The New Jim Crow” which was a result of President Bill Clinton’s presidency (Alexander, 2011).

Racial Biases.

The stereotype of African Americans as violent, criminal human beings is well documented for decades (Eberhardt, Purdie, Goff, Davies, 2004; Carbado & Rock, 2016, Sagar, Schofield, & Manis, 1980). Due to this stereotype, many people believe that African Americans are more likely to be violent than White men; this stereotype lingers in the unconscious mind of officers which causes racially biased “interpretations of suspects’ behavior” (Plant & Peruche,
Implicit bias (e.g., racial profiling) and explicit biases (e.g., racism) are alike in the sense that people assign individuals to stereotypes related to their groups (e.g., race, gender, age) and these stereotypes can influence perceptions and behaviors (Fridell & Lim, 2016). An officer who has an implicit or explicit bias may view an African American as a violent criminal due to the many stereotypes that exist within American society.

In looking at Plant and Peruche’s (2015) study which used a computer simulation program to determine whether or not officers had an unconscious bias towards Black males over White males, it was found that officers were more likely to shoot Black men. An essential element of bias is the human automatic tendency to categorize. Fridell and Lim (2016) write, “People categorize individuals and objects to make sense of the world, and this includes categorizing people we don't know (“ambiguous stimuli”) according to group membership” (p. 38). People categorize from the time they are born. Babies are trying to find out who is safe and who they can trust. When children get older, they are categorizing the many things they encounter (e.g., dogs, balls, etc.). Before knowing the difference between football and basketball, a child will just say, “I want a ball.” Categorizing comes naturally to us, and though stereotypes can be detrimental when forming relationships, or getting pulled over by the police, people continue to do so.

Critical Race Theory.

CRT is a useful theoretical approach when studying police induced trauma encountered by Black males. According to Chaney and Robertson (2013) the primary concepts of critical race theory are: “(1) the primacy of race and racism and their interconnectedness with other forms of subordination, (2) a questioning of the dominant belief system/status quo, (3) a commitment to social justice, (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) a multidisciplinary
perspective” (p. 484). CRT illustrates how race is embedded within institutional structures (i.e., law enforcement). CRT seeks to study and transform the relationship between race, racism, and power, and, questions the fundamentals of liberal order (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Kolivoski et al., 2014). CRT suggests that racism is so deeply rooted in American society that it is hard to treat and address due to its invisibility (Kolivoski et al., 2014; Aymer, 2016). Racial profiling and racial biases can be understood by using CRT because racism is intricately intertwined in racial oppression which complicates the lives of African Americans in the United States. African Americans are more likely to be stopped and frisked, followed in stores, and CRT can be a useful tool when examining the experiences of Black families exposed to police induced trauma because race, racism, and power are prevalent within the trauma.
Methodology

Reflexivity.

*Ealy, Corey* I chose to research this issue based on first-hand experience. As a Black man, I have dealt with police brutality and racial profiling throughout my entire life. I remember a time, in the late 1980’s my sister and her boyfriend participated in collegiate athletics at California State University of Northridge, whose school colors happened to be red and black (i.e., affiliated gang colors in Los Angeles). One night my sister, her boyfriend, and I wore the team jackets and hats that were red and black, which we decided to wear to play mini golf in the San Fernando Valley. We were later pulled over by the police at gunpoint and asked to get out of the car and sit on the curb. This was humiliating for all of us. I remember wondering if white student-athletes were pulled over at gunpoint for wearing a college team athletic jacket and hat.

Police induced trauma has been going on in my neighborhood for decades. However, since the Rodney King beating in 1991, the coverage of such incidents by mass media has helped bring this issue to the forefront. As our nation heals from a series of high-profile incidents among African-American men shot by police officers, it is important to support and research the experiences of Black families during this time so that healing and restoration can occur.

*Miguez, Amanda* I came to this study in my third year of my master’s program in social work, after taking multiple classes on racism, and systematic oppression. Also, I was witnessing multiple police shootings on television and social media, and the outcry from American citizens drove me to want to learn more. I knew the importance of this subject and the impact it has on our country’s well-being. This subject is also important to me because I have a 9-year-old daughter who identifies as an African American bi-racial child. I never grew up talking about race, but as a child, I knew its importance, its impact both positive and negative, and the
struggles people endure to fit in, to belong. Now as an adult I have an opportunity to communicate with my daughter regarding the different aspects of race and how it may affect her.

Participants.

Participants were ten individuals part of a family unit living in Los Angeles County, California (50% female; and 50% male). The mean age of participants was 39 years, and all participants identified as African American. Each individual is a parental guardian to at least one child under the age of eighteen.

Permission to recruit participants came from CSUN’s IRB. After we had received authorization, we began a snowball sample. Participants were informed that their responses would remain completely anonymous, and any identifying information will not be disclosed.

Measures.

Questions asked during the individual interviews emphasized on the experiences of Black families exposed to police induced trauma. Data from this study came from a thematic analysis of the following research questions posed: (1) Please describe any personal experiences you may have had with law enforcement throughout your lifetime? How have these experiences shaped you as a person? (2) Looking at what has been going on in the past few months with officer related shootings, murdering unarmed Black men and harassment towards women, discuss the impact this has on your life? (3) Describe how it has impacted your relationships outside of your family (e.g., coworkers, friends, employers)? (4) How has it impacted your family? (5) How is race discussed in your family? (6) How do your children understand race as it relates to them? (7) How is the topic of race different from the time you were growing up until now in your family unit? Or how is it the same? (8) Describe the way your family heals from police violence?
(9) Thinking about officers who assault or use racial profiling, describe how you feel about this?

(10) What do you think is the solution to police violence?

Research Design.

This research is a qualitative study consisting of individual interviews. Each interview was transcribed and later coded for the purpose of discovering common themes. Open-ended questions were used to gain as much data as possible.

Procedure.

Participants were recruited using a snowball sample. Participants met with the research team for face to face individual interviews. They met at a private location mutually agreed upon by the participants and research team. The individual interviews consisted of 10 participants. The participants participated in the following activities: (1) Completing a consent form for participating in the study (15 minutes). (2) Participating in individual interviews (60-75 minutes). The individual interviews were audio recorded with the permission of participants. There was no compensation offered to participants, and no deception was involved in this study. The individual interviews were audio recorded with the authorization of the participants and then transcribed within 72 hours of the interview. The consent forms were stored in a locked box in the locked home of one of the researchers. Audio recordings of the interviews were kept on a password protected computer of the members of the research team. Transcripts of the interviews were de-identified. The interview transcripts were kept in a lockbox separate from consent forms. Only de-identified data was used for analysis. Only the researchers had access to both identifiable and de-identified data.
Data Analysis.

In this qualitative research design, the researchers used interviews to collect narratives from participants that experienced police induced trauma either by observation or direct experience. The researchers used a tape recorder to collect interview data from the participants and transcribed, coded, categorized, and identify emerging themes. The qualitative data analysis included identifying and coding patterns that are found in the data collected by interviewing the participants. The researchers interviewed 10 individuals between the ages 21-64 who identify as African American. The researcher used a digital recorder to record all interview responses. The researcher used an online dictation program called TranscribeMe to transcribe the participants’ interviews. A number was assigned to participants given by the researchers to identify each interview transcription.

The researchers read through all the data collected to obtain the overall meaning of the participant and to get a better understanding of what is being said. The data gathered from the interviews was transcribed, coded, and categorized. Researchers identified emerging themes. The researchers first collected the raw data (transcripts & field notes), then organized and prepared the transcripts and notes for data analysis by individual participants and read each transcript thoroughly. The researcher used a thematic analysis to analyze the data because it allows for the researcher to code and categorize data into themes and then display and classify data according to its similarities and differences within and across the individual participants. We created and produced the data more efficiently to obtain a better understanding of the attitudes, feelings, behaviors, actions and beliefs of the participants and how these characteristics may influence how they experienced police induced trauma.
Results

The narratives reveal that most participants had an aggressive experience with law enforcement after being racially profiled and pulled over. The narratives also reveal that most participants have a genuine fear that their loved ones may be murdered by an officer, particularly their Black men and young boys, and most participants are instinctively learning to survive encounters with the police and are continuing the same conversation of race from the time they were children to now being parents themselves with their children.

Theme 1: Aggressive Racial Profiling.

A prominent theme among each participant was that everyone was pulled over by the police; regardless if traffic laws weren’t being violated, or crimes weren’t being committed. Some participants were just walking to their car and were stopped by police officers. Two participants (both male and female) were held at gunpoint by an officer, another was asked to get out of the car without being asked for identification or vehicle registration, and others were harassed verbally. As one participant recalled a time, they were pulled stated, “We were in Harlem driving back home after picking up some food. All of a sudden a cop car swerves in front of us, and one pulls up behind us. They draw guns, order us out of the car, and on the ground.”

The same participant stated that the officers began to ask them if they had just robbed a bank. Confused, the participant responded to the officer by saying, “What? No, hell no!” They continued by explaining to the officers they were just getting food. Another participant who is a female was also pulled over because she met two of the six physical traits (i.e., African American, and wearing a scarf) of another woman who just robbed an older lady. Participants emphasized that they felt harassed, characterized as a criminal, and anger after being aggressively pulled over by the police.
Theme 2: Fear for Their Black Men/Boys.

The majority of participants feared more for their male children and male relatives than their female children and relatives. When participants were asked how has recent officer related shootings, murdering unarmed Black men, and harassment towards women, impacted their lives their responses were either living in fear or having feelings of anger. One participant stated, “Now that I am a mother it makes me think of all the things my son is going to go through just because he is African American and he’s a male.” There was an emphasis on the fact that her child was a male. She continued to state, “It’s always a scary feeling whenever his dad leaves the house, or when my son gets older and wants to hang out with his friends, because that’s what’s going to be in the back of my mind like oh my gosh did my son walk outside with a hoodie on? Did he have earphones in?” One mom has a disabled son and is deaf in one ear she stated, “When my son turns 12, 13, 14, I’m going to constantly be scared for him. I’m going to teach him the right things, but I’m scared since my son is deaf in one ear, he won’t be able to respond appropriately to officers.” She continued to say, “Cops will think he's disrespectful when he doesn’t respond to them because he can’t hear them, but he’s disabled, and they will mistake that for disrespect” She ended concluded with, “Black men are considered a threat.”

Theme 3: Surviving Police Encounters.

Another reoccurring theme was participants were intentionally avoiding police to avoid being harassed, or possibly shot. Participants are learning to survive police harassment by either deliberately going the other way when they see an officer or overcompensating when they are interacting with them by saying things such as—yes sir, no sir, I am reaching for my wallet, sir. One participant stated, “I try to avoid police even though I’m not participating in any crime. As far as I’m concerned being black is considered a crime or driving while black is a crime.”
Another participant stated, “The way these events have shaped me as a person is to not trust law enforcement.” A third participant said, “I still get uneasy when followed by law enforcement even though my driving record is clean as a whistle as well as any criminal history. I am a productive, educated citizen of the United States of America and still get treated like a disregarded peasant with low social status by law enforcement.”

Participants talked about their experiences of verbal harassment, and how things with the police and the Black community aren’t getting any better. All participants talked about how they are training their kids at a young age on how to interact with the police to ensure that they come home unharmed. Some parents are preparing their children for the day a police officer looks at them as a criminal instead of a human being. As one father said, “Telling my kids, telling myself you have to approach the situation where you can’t escalate the situation, you can’t be like ‘HEY WHY ARE YOU PULLING ME OVER!?’ say ‘why are you pulling me over?’ At the appropriate time…it’s a way you interact with the police.” The primary concern of all those who participated in this study was how their children are going to avoid police induced trauma (i.e., verbal and physical harassment, racial profiling, and murder) while living in Los Angeles as an African American. As one mother said, “Unfortunately it’s something you have to teach your kids to make sure they survive.”

**Theme 4: Predominant Conversation of Race.**

The discussion of police violence is as prevalent in the lives of these participants as they were growing up as it is now that they have children of their own. One participant said, “My children and family coincidently are experiencing the same unfortunate situations the criminal justice system and law enforcement have failed us on.” A handful of participants explained that
what is going on in the news is nothing new for them; the only thing that has changed is that it’s being caught on videotape.
Discussion

This qualitative study had the primary goal to explore the experiences of 10 participants exposed to racial profiling, physical assault, racism either overt or covert, and observing police shootings (i.e., police induced trauma). The literature suggests that police brutality maintains a social dominance over Black people, particularly men (Aymer, 2016; Petersen & Ward, 2015). According to each participant, everyone was racially profiled, pulled over by the police, and for one participant he was arrested for sleeping in his car after a night of drinking, because he didn’t want to drive drunk, but was arrested for a DUI anyway. According to Chaney and Robertson (2013), African Americans are more likely to be the victims of police induced trauma and are more likely than Whites to be pulled over (“Driving While Black”), (Smith & Holmes, 2003). All 10 participants reported having at least one negative experience with law enforcement. Research suggests that African American’s, particularly Black men, are generalized as aggressive criminals; therefore, police are more likely to perceive Black men as a threat. In turn, justifying the disproportionate use of deadly force (Plant & Peruche, 2005; Chaney & Robertson, 2013).

Reflecting upon the four evolving themes critical race theory is imperative when considering the experiences of African Americans because it doesn't ignore race and the significant role it plays in their lives. When looking at each theme and examining them through a CRT perspective one can begin to understand why African Americans believe their skin color plays a crucial role when being pulled over. To pretend race is not a factor (living color blind), when an officer pulls over a Black man, it normalizes racism and ensures its existence (Abrams & Moio, 2010). CRT helps us figure out why parents are afraid for their men and children, why they must avoid law enforcement or why race is talked about from the time they were growing up to now as adults with their children. Not taking race into account hinders any growth within
law enforcement and keeps a divide between police and the Black community (Chaney & Robertson, 2013). CRT acknowledges the voices in this study, by validating the direct connection between their experiences and race.

**Limitations.**

There are a few limitations to this research study. First it was a small sample size, and we were limited to Los Angeles County and cannot be generalized to other counties. Lastly we focused on individuals who had a child under the age of 18 living in the home, when we could have reached more participants by considering children who are older than 18 not living in the home.
Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of Black families exposed to police induced trauma and contribute to the discussion that is currently taking place in America by addressing what anonymous men and women have to say and how this trauma affects their families. Since there is a public outcry after the multiple shootings of unarmed Black men the US Department of Justice should be vigilant with seeking solutions within law enforcement. If possible, our hope is that this current study can begin a new approach to the scholarly exploration into the areas of police induced trauma against African American citizens.
References


