

**Brutal Cops, News Coverage, and Public Perceptions of Law Enforcement:
An Experimental Investigation of Reality Construction**

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Abstract

This research examines the relationship between newspaper coverage of police brutality, the public construction of law enforcement reality, and the predictive capacity of exemplification theory. Two randomly selected subsamples were assigned to either a control or test condition in a posttest only experiment. Those in the test group were exposed to six newspaper accounts recounting incidents of police brutality. A negative construction of reality associated with police-citizen interaction followed exposure. It is clear that public faith in law enforcement is eroded by extra legal police behavior, and that police-citizen relationships are contaminated, as a consequence. Further research is called for, involving more ethnically and racially diverse populations, a more representative age demographic, and media other than newspapers, both print and electronic.

Introduction

This study examines the influence of newspaper content on the socially-constructed perception of law enforcement in the United States. Two fundamental questions are posed. One asks if newspaper revelations of police brutality produce expectations among citizens that they may become victims of such brutality. The second asks whether newspaper portrayals of police behavior are influential in public construction of a more general, perhaps negative, law enforcement reality. The central concern is assessment of the public reaction to transgressions by cops and how those reactions may influence public beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in interaction with law enforcement.

The United States has a history of pervasive police brutality (Kirschner, 1997; Lopez and Thomas, 2004). As a consequence, consistent with normative expectations that news media will perform a watchdog role in a democracy, incidents of police brutality, though typically underreported, nonetheless find themselves the frequent subject of mass media attention (Human Rights Watch, 1998).

Examples of reported transgressions are illustrative. Some recent, some more remote, suggest an enduring problem.

In what has been seen by some as a pivotal point in press exposure of police brutality, the *Los Angeles Times*, on Thursday, March 7, 1991, carried a lengthy account of depredations visited upon Rodney King by Los Angeles city cops. King, in what has become an internationally notorious exemplar of police malfeasance in America, was beaten by cops, who said he threatened them. Both witnesses and a videotape of the incident contradicted police accounts. On August 14, 1997, a *New York Times* editorial reflected on the killing of Charles Campbell, beaten and shot by a New York cop who objected to Campbell's choice of parking places; the killing by a cop of Nathaniel Gaines, who was shot in the back on a subway platform; and the beating of Lebert Folkes, shot in the face by cops who mistakenly thought Folkes was driving a stolen car.

On February 9, 1999, the *New York Times* carried an op-ed piece noting that claims of excessive

force in the city had risen alarmingly in the prior four years. Specifically, the *Times* drew attention to the cases of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed West African immigrant gunned down the week of February 2, 1999, by four cops in the Bronx; an incident involving a Latino real estate agent and his client, roughed up by three cops in East Harlem who said they thought the client's umbrella was a gun; the torture of Albert Louima, raped with a broken mop handle in a precinct restroom; the killing of Anthony Baez by a cop whose car was struck by a football, which may have been thrown by Baez; and the arrest and handcuffing of a television sports producer, who asked an off-duty police officer to stop tossing trash from the cop's car into the street.

On April 23, 2006, the Baton Rouge *Advocate* detailed four cases of police brutality that cost the city almost \$1 million in lawsuit settlements. The cases included the verbal and physical abuse of a Burger King employee and her mother by two cops responding to a false alarm, and the beating of a handcuffed man, arrested following a domestic dispute.

On Friday, October 29, 2004, the Riverside, California *Press Enterprise* reported the police beating of a local neurologist, who likened the experience to being raped.

And on September 7, 2006, the *Los Angeles Times* reported the killing of an 18-year-old girl, shot 23 times by police, eight times in the back. Cops claimed the youth lunged at them with a knife. Witnesses said she didn't. It appeared, they said, that she may have been attempting to flee. A cursory Lexis Nexis search for the period, June 28, 2005-June 27, 2006, located 250 similar accounts. In some respects, the volume of stories seems surprisingly low, when considering the frequency of police assaults on members of the public.

Literature Review

Over a two-year span, the Chicago police department's Office of Professional Standards received more than 6,000 excessive force complaints, a number roughly duplicated in New York City, with an additional 212 reported in Portland, Oregon. In Atlanta, Georgia, in a single year, more than 650 citizens claimed they had been assaulted by police; another 50 complaints were lodged in Boston, 281 in Detroit, 84 in Indianapolis, 219 in Los Angeles, 57 in Minneapolis, 250 in New Orleans, and 186 in Philadelphia. Similar conditions have been reported in San Francisco and Washington, D.C. (Human Rights Watch, 1998).

Social Constructionism

This research, examining the influence of such reports on perceptions of law enforcement as it is administered in the United States, is grounded theoretically in social constructionism and mass media effects.

Social constructionism holds that reality is the product of human interpretation of symbolic phenomena. It has long been recognized that human beings construct reality, based in part upon exposure to mass media content (Gans, 1980, p. 79). Epistemologically, the core concern is with institutionalized, contextualized beliefs that constitute the knowledge of a community or culture (Goldman, 2001). Berger and Luckmann, in a seminal conceptualization, argued that what is experienced as real is a social order that is an ongoing human production bound to communicative and other human activities (1966). Thus, social facts are human constructions. They are the consequence of human beings assigning functions or roles to physical objects and events and abiding by a set of rules for their treatment (Searle, 1995). Within this context, a wide range of communicative interactions become reasonable subjects for investigation (Thagard, 1997). Global implications of social epistemology take into account print, radio, and television journalism as channels for dissemination of information contributing to communal or cultural knowledge that becomes a habitualized construction of reality (Goldman, 1999; Berger & Luckman, 1966). Those who, for example, watch a great deal of television have been shown to construct realities consistent with television depictions (Adler, Hawkins, & Pingree; 1987). Conversion into cultural knowledge of information supplied by media presupposes an active

audience that processes and reconfigures media content. Knowledge so accrued becomes a basic element in social constructions of reality, producing a foundation for action (Surette, 1998). Theoretically, it is assumed that reconfiguration of information will be consistent with a shared reality derived from a socially-based correspondence of meaning, and, further, that there is an architectural relationship among media, culture, and the construction of reality (Baran & Davis, 2003; Barak, 1994). Such constructions, however, are contingent upon judgments of source credibility. Credibility is reasonably assigned only when there appears to be objective evidence of source reliability and veracity (Hull, 1975). Thus, the effects of media reports on social constructions of reality are dependent upon credibility assigned to media generally, a specific medium, and a specific story.

Mass Media Effects

Media effects theory and research has mutated over time from an early suspicion that effects were undifferentiated across audiences and unalloyed by other social experiences and psychological states to a considerably more liberal construction recognizing that a host of variables affect media influence (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1982; Sparks, 2006).

Among those concerned with media effects, Anderson and Meyer have proposed an accommodation perspective, suggesting the contexts in which mass media are engaged function as intervening variables, producing differences in the interpretation and influence of media content (1988). McLeod and Reeves have proposed a typology of effects, including micro and macro-level effects; content specific and diffuse general effects; attitudinal versus behavioral versus cognitive effects; and alteration versus stabilization effects (1980).

The limited effects model, initially advanced by Klapper, argued for the importance of demographic, psychographic, and sociographic influences as antecedent variables in assessing media effects (1960). It has been shown by Lock, for example, that audience demographic characteristics interact with media type to produce different effects. Newspaper readers have been found to be more civil libertarian than those who get most of their news from television, presumably because they are, as a group, better educated; civil libertarians have been shown to be less disposed to trust police; and young adults, who populate the sample employed in the present research, have been found to be more civil libertarian than their elders (Lock, 1999). Those attributes interact with mass media content to shape the public consciousness, providing a foundation for organizing knowledge people have of their own lives (McQuail, 1972). Knowledge obtained from media contributes to a constructed image of the reality and acceptability of law enforcement procedures and behaviors. That image, projected through an echo effect, is imposed upon other and future events (Surette, 1998). Conceptually, the echo effect is linked to exemplification theory (Zillmann, 2002). Exemplification theory holds that similar media depictions of more or less like events are categorized as exemplars by media content consumers and, as exemplars, provide an inductive foundation for generalization of media-constructed versions of reality. Those generalizations are the product of a representativeness heuristic, which Zillmann argues provides the foundation for induction, without regard to the number of exemplars contained in a sample (2002). Among the consequences is that media effects extend to similar, though unrelated and unpublicized events, influencing public judgments and expectation of law enforcement behaviors (Green, 1990; Surette, 1998). Theoretically, mental models that are the product of media priming can be seen to contribute to construction of exemplars (Roskos-Ewoldsen, D., Roskos-Ewoldsen, B., & Carpentier, F., 2002).

Empirical work has demonstrated that exposure to local and national newspapers predicts cognitive effects with regard to policing issues (Drew & Weaver, 1990). The media treatment of the beating of Rodney King by a gaggle of Los Angeles cops on March 3, 1991, cast the affair as a typical incident of police behavior, where brutality is standard operating procedure. A consensual construction of the way police behave flows from such mass communicated perspectives, which often resolve for the public ambiguity associated with interpretation of events (Surette, 1998). Following the assault on King, 86 percent of Blacks, 76 percent of Hispanics, and

45 percent of Whites interviewed said they believed the behavior was endemic to the Los Angeles police department, suggesting that what might have been seen as an isolated incident instead was generalized. A similarly generalized perspective grew out events described above in which police used a broken broom handle in the jailhouse rape of Abner Louima (Weitzer, 2002). Such mass media scrutiny illuminating police transgressions produces intense criticism, where police behavior violates community norms (Kasinsky, 1994).

While there is no contention that media representations provide the exclusive foundation for the induction, it seems improbable that media exposure plays no part. Behaviors or judgments motivated by assessments of police behavior are linked to exposure to and interpretation of such media content (Baran & Davis, 2003; Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002). A definitive construction of police civility and professionalism is contingent upon access to media resources. Where access is available and media sources are credible, audience members are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward police (Dillman, Hirschburg, & Ball-Rokeach, 1986; O.Keefe & Reid-Nash, 1987). Weitzer concludes that media reports of police misconduct negatively bias public perceptions of the police and that such perceptions erode slowly (2002). Though media messages may be polyvalent, susceptible to multiple interpretations, leaving some to view depictions of police malfeasance in a he-(or she)-must-have-had-it-coming light, others may be less forgiving, particularly when news, as it often does, portrays cops as generally brutal martinets (Chircos, Escholz, & Gertz, 1997; Surette, 1992).

Such subjective social realities provide a basis for social action that ensures the maintenance and persistence of objective reality, including institutional realities (Berger & Luckman, 1966). This, Goldman (2001) refers to as strong social constructivism, in which both conceptions and their referent objects are socially constructed. In this sense, newspapers and policing become socially constructed institutions.

Adoni and Mane (1984) assert the centrality of mass media in the social construction of reality, discuss close zones of life experience, those accessible to individuals in their quotidian activities, and identify two basic research approaches, the first focusing on the social construction of reality in relation to culture and society, the second concentrating on the social construction of reality as a media effect. The latter applies in the present research. The present investigation concentrates on ways in which newspaper content influences subjective social reality constructed by members of a relatively young sample of presumptively libertarian bent (Andoni & Mane, 1984).

Two hypotheses were tested. The first was explicitly designed to test exemplification theory and hypothesized echo effects. H2 examines more diffuse newspaper influences on reader beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors as they relate to perceptions of law enforcement.

H1: Test group subjects will report lower mean scores than control group subjects on measures of projective expectations regarding police brutality.

H2: Test group subjects will report lower mean scores than control group subjects on measures of media effects in construction of law enforcement reality.

Methodology

To minimize threats to validity posed when research participants are exposed on multiple occasions to the same instrument, a posttest only experiment was employed in conducting this investigation (Babbie, 1989).

The instrument employed operationalized two central theoretical constructs: predictive expectation, related to exemplification theory, and reality construction, related to theories of media effects and social constructionism. Predictive expectation is concerned with assessment of the degree to which reading newspaper accounts of past events influences future expectations with regard to similar but unrelated matters. Reality construction is concerned with more general

influences of newspaper content.

Lower scores, in each case, suggest the construction of a reality that is less hopeful, more negative, and biased against the system. Projective measures involve questionnaire items designed to elicit information about how respondents believe they will react to future events. Measures of reality construction are concerned with more general perceptions of police conduct. Methodologically, studies of social epistemology invite application of a variety of approaches, the fundamental choice driven by whether research is descriptive or normative (Goldman, 2001). In the present investigation, the emphasis is descriptive, though the methodological approach provides also a foundation for explanation and claims of causality.

In executing the experiment, a sample of university volunteers (N=209) was randomly assigned to a test group (n=105) and a control group (n=104). Random assignment to two subsamples reduces concerns that might otherwise exist with regard to sample quality and generalizability of research results. Additionally, impediments to statistical generalization that may arise from the sampling protocol are substantially mitigated by the potential for analytical generalization (Yin, 1994).

The control group completed a questionnaire designed to measure frequency of newspaper reading, time spent reading newspapers, perceptions of newspaper content effects on readers' values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, and perceptions of newspaper story accuracy. The questionnaire also measured beliefs related to occurrence of police brutality. The test group completed a similar questionnaire designed to measure the same reader and newspaper variables. However, before responding to questions measuring beliefs related to police brutality issues, participants read copies of the six newspaper articles discussed above, exemplifying a category of relevant police behavior.

To recapitulate, material to which subjects were exposed was constituted in part of news articles, in part of op-ed articles, and in part of editorials. The first story in the group was a 24-inch-long *Los Angeles Times* news account of the shooting of a school girl by Los Angeles police. The second was a 20-inch-long *New York Times* op-ed piece. The third was a 20-inch-long news story published in the Baton Rouge *Advocate* detailing incidents of police brutality in that city. The fourth was a 20-inch-long *New York Times* editorial reflecting on several incidents of police brutality in New York City. The fifth was a 58-inch-long *Los Angeles Times* news story recounting the police beating of Rodney King. And the last was a 15-inch-long news account published in the Riverside, California, *Press-Enterprise*, reflecting on the police beating of a local neurologist. Use of both news and editorial treatments of the subject matter is consistent with exposure of audiences to both forms in uncontrolled, natural conditions.

In addition to the requirement that content focus on incidents of police brutality, other criteria applied in article selection included geographic coverage and circulation. Geographically, newspapers involved represented both coasts, the South, and a small, inland California community. While geographic possibilities were not exhausted, the diversity suggests police behavior examined is not geographically isolated. Finally, two of the newspapers from which material was selected serve major, highly diverse, metropolitan constituencies, one a mid-size, urban constituency, and the last a comparatively small suburban audience, suggesting that size and audience composition are unrelated to coverage of police brutality. Additionally, the geographic range and high circulation numbers associated particularly with the two metropolitan dailies permit analytical generalization of research results to large populations (Yin, 1994).

To account for the possibility that some respondents in the test group might have had previous and possibly repeated exposure to the same stories, either in print or electronic form, or stories concerning the same or similar events, two precautionary measures were taken. To minimize the possibility that earlier exposure might influence responses, articles selected were months to years old, reducing or removing influence associated with recall. Additionally, respondents were asked if they remembered having read or seen previously any of the same or other articles dealing with

incidents of police brutality. While some respondents in the test group reported prior exposure to articles chronicling police brutality, there was no statistically significant relationship between recalled exposure and any variable involved in hypothesis testing. Effects reported, then, can be attributed to the experimental intervention. Following the work of other investigators, a number of additional predictors of attitudes toward police were measured, including libertarianism, age, race, and ethnicity (Weitzer, 2002). Those results are included here in a post hoc analysis.

Results

Data were coded and entered into an SPSS file for analysis. Five items measuring perceptions of police propensity to engage in use of excessive force were tested for reliability. Cronbach alpha was .80. On all five items, test group respondent scores were lower than those of the control group, indicating that exposure to the newspaper articles precipitated a view of police brutality as relatively routine.

With regard to hypothesis testing, H_1 was supported. The mean for control group respondents was 2.83, for the test group 2.49. Those exposed to newspaper articles were more likely to believe that they and others would be future subjects of police violence, $F(1, 202) = 4.91, p = .03$. The inference is that the hypothesized echo effect was indeed present, with news articles functioning as exemplars referenced via a representative heuristic in predicting future probabilities. That inference is supported by the belief among test group respondents that behavior chronicled in the newspaper articles was not unusual. Of 95 responses, 79 percent evaluated the behavior as somewhat to very typical ($m = 2.93, s.d. = .75$).

H_2 was also supported. The test group differed significantly from the control group when asked about the probability that police could be trusted to behave appropriately in their contact with citizens, $F(1, 208) = 4.89, p = .03$. The mean score for the control group was 3.18, for the test group 2.97. The inference is that, apart from brutality-related concerns, and consistent with media effects theory and social constructionism, exposure to newspaper articles influenced attitudes toward police, producing, in this case, a less optimistic reality.

Post hoc analysis

Analysis of variance located a single statistically significant relationship between respondent behavior patterns and variables used in hypothesis testing. As frequency of church attendance increased, respondents were more likely to believe police could be counted upon to behave appropriately in interactions with citizens, $F(4, 197) = 2.90, p = .02$. One possible interpretation is that those who attend church more frequently are likely to enjoy a relatively more sanguine view of human relationships. It may also be that those who attend church more frequently are more socially conservative, and, thereby, more sympathetic to law enforcement. Gender, race, ethnicity, political affiliation, income, article length, or personal acquaintance with law enforcement personnel were unrelated to measures involved in hypothesis testing.

Discussion

This research examined the influence of newspaper articles on beliefs about police brutality in the United States, the implications for reality construction, and how a constructed reality affects future expectations.

It is evident that a negative construction of reality emerges from exposure to newspaper content chronicling police use of excessive force. Respondents in a test group exposed to six articles exposing police brutality scored lower than their counterparts in a control group on each of five items measuring perceptions of the likelihood that police would engage in use of excessive force. In addition, results were generally consistent with other empirical work involving exemplification theory. Exemplification theory holds that environmental phenomena, in this case newspaper articles, serve as exemplars referenced through a representativeness heuristic in making judgments about future events. The prediction that exposure to articles would cause those

exposed to expect they or others would, at some point in the future, be victims of police brutality was supported. An echo effect accompanied newspaper accounts of police malfeasance, with the accounts being employed as exemplars in framing future expectations. Further, a relationship between reality construction and media exposure was illustrated. Hypotheses tested were supported.

It is clear that public faith in law enforcement is eroded by the kind of extra legal police behavior examined. The resulting contamination of the citizen-police relationship has significant public policy and public safety implications. Because citizen complaints lodged against law enforcement personnel tend to be sustained at alarmingly low rates (Human Rights Watch, 1998), mechanisms for more stringent oversight need to be established. Police department policies related to investigation of citizen complaints of brutality need periodic review, and, where policies are demonstrably ineffective, modification. Where complaints are found to be justified, more severe sanctions may prove a useful deterrent, discouraging similar behavior by others. Removing authority for investigation, determination of guilt, and imposition of sanctions from inherently biased internal investigations, and placing it in the hands citizen review boards may serve two purposes. First, dismissal of complaints as unfounded would be less likely, and punishment commensurate with the misdeed more likely. It would also elevate public confidence in the probity of the process. Efficacy, however, requires more than lip service. Power vested in such boards where they already exist, and its execution, has often been inadequate to the need. (Human Rights Watch, 1998). With regard to public safety issues, the citizen-police coalition said by law enforcement to be critical to crime control is difficult to nurture in an atmosphere of mistrust.

In looking toward extension of this research, the involvement of other populations is important. Future work needs to be conducted among more ethnically and racially diverse, less affluent groups involving a more representative age demographic. Such investigations need also to involve media other than newspapers, both print and electronic. It is important, as well, to investigate empirically the theoretical assumption that the size of a sample of exemplars is unrelated to size of effect. It is reasonable to imagine that a greater number of exemplars will produce a greater effect, reaching some optimal point beyond which effects may begin to plateau or erode. It is important as well to determine if effects of exemplars decay over time, lacking reinforcement through periodic re-exposure. In contrast to results of some other investigations (Zillmann 1999, 2002), that possibility is suggested here by the absence of a statistically significant relationship between prior exposure to media discussions of aberrant police behavior and control and test group responses in this investigation. There needs to be investigated, as well, the impact on effects of intervals between exposure to media accounts. Here, again, the relationship is ambiguous. In this research, news presentations were read with no time lapse between exposure. Whether impacts would be altered if some interval separated exposure is an open question theoretically and empirically. It is possible that the essentially uninterrupted exposure here artificially magnified effects. Conversely, given evidence that effects tend to intensify over time (Zillmann, 1999, 2002), the greater likelihood is that exposure separated by some interval would result in increased impact of articles individually and in the aggregate.

In assessing the defensibility of media content selection and treatment on public judgments of official culpability, normative imperatives need to be taken into account. Media have been assigned, implicitly and often explicitly, a social responsibility mandating illumination of individual and institutional transgressions, including those associated with police misbehavior (Baran & Davis, 2003).

While it is the case that exposure may provide fertile ground requisite for the growth of mistrust, it is equally true that public constructions of an abhorrent reality and consequent demands for remedial action are contingent upon exposure. It is this reality that justifies - and that should motivate - editorial decisions making prominent coverage of conduct conflicting with public morality.

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