

Framing Police Brutality: A Comparative Analysis of How Newspaper Coverage Deals with the Issue of Race in Instances of Police Brutality in the United States from 1991 to the Present.

Name: Anne Buitenhuis
Student number: 6262406
Supervisor: Mr. Devin Vartija
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Abstract: Police brutality disproportionately affects African American people in the United States. As a result, American policing becomes a means through which the systemic oppression of African Americans is perpetuated. Previous studies have focused on the use of racial stereotypes in the media, how these negatively impact African Americans in the United States, and how dramatic news events shape the problems we pay attention to as a society. This study has analysed the role race plays in newspaper coverage of instances of police brutality against African Americans in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. This study has focused on the Rodney King beating in 1991, the shooting of Tamir Rice in 2014, and the death of George Floyd in 2020, using the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory to make sense of its findings. (CRT). Critical Race Theory holds that racism is inherent in American institutions and influences every aspect of American society. This research has found that the usage of “black” or “African American” was used significantly over the term “white” to highlight racial differences, but that over time the usage of “white” increased, and as such, whiteness started being problematised in contexts of police brutality. Furthermore, this research has found that from Rodney King onwards, newspapers situated these instances of police brutality within the broader context of systemic racism by placing them against a backdrop of other instances of police brutality. This study concludes with a discussion on how we can make sense of how race is framed in the news and how news media can act as a positive catalyst for change.

Keywords: Police Brutality, Media Framing, Systemic Racism, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Rodney King, Tamir Rice, George Floyd

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1.
CHAPTER 1: THE BEATING OF RODNEY KING	6.
<i>The New York Times</i>	7.
<i>The Washington Post</i>	9.
Conclusion	11.
CHAPTER 2: THE SHOOTING OF TAMIR RICE	12.
<i>The New York Times</i>	14.
<i>The Washington Post</i>	16.
Conclusion	18.
CHAPTER 3: THE KILLING OF GEORGE FLOYD	20.
<i>The New York Times</i>	22.
<i>The Washington Post</i>	24.
Conclusion	26.
CONCLUSION	28.
BIBLIOGRAPHY	30.
APPENDIX A.	35.
APPENDIX B.	37.
APPENDIX C.	39.

INTRODUCTION

The motto of the American police force is “to protect and to serve,” but who protects citizens when police officers abuse their power? The officers that are sworn to protect and serve are the same ones that use excessive force against those they have sworn to protect, particularly African American citizens. According to FBI statistics, African Americans make up 31 percent of all victims shot by police officers while only making up 13 percent of the American population.¹ A study performed by data reporters Gabrielson, Sagara and Grochowski Jones, which analysed police reports of fatal shooting incidents, has found that young African American men are 21 times as likely as their white peers to be killed by police.² This study highlights the discrepancy in the excessive use-of-force by police against African Americans when compared to other ethnicities. Over the last few decades, the role of race in police brutality has become a widely studied topic amongst academics. Studies on police brutality varied from extensive data analyses on the number of African Americans killed by police officers on duty to more theoretical approaches that examine how this conflict between African Americans and the police can be resolved. Furthermore, framing in the mainstream media and the legitimisation of the excessive use-of-force by police against African Americans has also received the necessary scholarship.

Sociologist Niklas Luhmann argues that we primarily know what we know about our society and the world we live in through the mass media news.³ The news should be seen as what Regina G. Lawrence calls a “socially constructed representation of reality.”⁴ Although the news aims to represent reality accurately, it will always remain an edited version of the reality in which we live since the news will always fall subject to certain implemented biases in one way or another. Events, as they naturally occur, are raw materials for daily news content, and the primary way journalists aim to represent reality is by reporting on these events.⁵ Journalists, however, do more than report on these events as they instil meaning into them by placing them within our social context. By placing some groups on centre stage while directing others to the background, the news confers legitimacy and authority on particular perspectives on reality, usually the perspectives of officials or other social elites.⁶ The media is a “powerful instrument of knowledge production that is used by

¹ Perry S. Lyle and Ashraf M. Esmail, “Sworn to Protect: Police Brutality - A Dilemma for America’s Police,” *Race, Gender & Class* 23, no. 3–4 (2016): 155.

² Ryan Gabrielson, Eric Sagara, and Ryann Grochowski Jones, “Deadly Force in Black and White,” *ProPublica*, October 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.propublica.org/article/deadly-force-in-black-and-white>. Accessed December 10, 2021.

³ Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2000): 1.

⁴ Regina G. Lawrence, *The Politics of Force: Media and the Construction of Police Brutality*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): xi.

⁵ Lawrence, *The Politics of Force*, 6.

⁶ Lawrence, *The Politics of Force*, xi.

the powerful in society to configure social thought.”⁷ Following this line of thinking, it can be argued that the mainstream media is used to maintain the systemic oppression of African Americans that manifests most visibly in police brutality and its mainstream representation.⁸

One of the main topics of interest when studying race relations in the media is the use of racial stereotypes and how these negatively impact people of colour in the United States. Research has shown that media representation of criminals and victims shapes public opinion. The overrepresentation of certain racial groups in the media as perpetrators, such as African Americans, promotes racial stereotypes and reinforces public hostility.⁹ In addition, the overrepresentation of the victimisation of certain groups, in this case, whites, can promote misleading views on white people as being more vulnerable to crime.¹⁰

Multiple studies conducted on racial stereotypes have demonstrated how layered representations challenge fixed constructions, leaving space for alternative definitions of gender, race, and even sexuality.¹¹ This raises the question of whether the media presents the public with layered representations of different races or with very singular representations when reporting on race and police brutality issues. Gregg Hoffmann argues that the news media have the power to be catalysts for positive change in many areas of our culture.¹² He points out that one of the areas in which the news could be a catalyst for positive change is racial stereotyping. However, the media often perpetuate racial stereotypes instead of having a positive influence.¹³ Ronald Hampton argues that the mainstream media continue to contribute to the issue of police brutality more than they do in alerting the general public to the problem.¹⁴ He argues that the media tends to “side with the police” since they mostly rely on official police accounts to report on instances of police brutality.

Political scientist Regina G. Lawrence performed a study of particular interest for this research. In *The Politics of Force: Media and the Construction of Police*, Lawrence analysed over 500 incidents of violence enacted by the American police, which was covered by *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* from 1985 to 1994. In this study, Lawrence attempts to understand

⁷ Ernest Morrell, *Radical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation*, (New York: Routledge, 2008): 157.

⁸ Williams C. Iheme, “Systemic Racism, Police Brutality of Black People, and the Use of Violence in Quelling Peaceful Protests in America,” *The Age of Human Rights Journal*, no. 15 (December 2020): 224.

⁹ Travis Dixon, “The Portrayal of Race and Crime on Television Network News,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (December 2003): 498.

¹⁰ Dixon, “The Portrayal of Race and Crime on Television Network News,” 498.

¹¹ Dwight E. Brooks and Lisa P. Hébert, “Gender, Race and Media Representation,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Gender and Communication*, ed. Bonnie J. Dow & Julia T. Wood, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc., 2006): 312.

¹² Gregg Hoffman, “Racial Stereotyping in the News: Some General Semantics Alternatives,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 48, no. 1 (1991): 22.

¹³ Hoffman, “Racial Stereotyping in the News,” 22.

¹⁴ Ronald Hampton, “Why Do We Still Have Police Brutality?” (Seattle: Langston Hughes Cultural Arts Centre, Seattle, May 16, 1996), quoted in Regina Lawrence, *The Politics of Force Media, and the Construction of Police Brutality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): 30.

better how dramatic news events shape the problems we pay attention to as a society.¹⁵ Moreover, her study has shown how news coverage of police violence can be used as a vehicle by marginalised social groups to gain attention in their fight for equality. In this research, she has developed a framework for understanding why some events become important news stories and how these events shape public discourse about policing.¹⁶

This research, like Lawrence's, analyses newspaper coverage of police brutality to answer the following research question: What role does race play in newspaper coverage of police brutality against African Americans? In order to answer this question, this study performs a close reading of news coverage from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* on the beating of Rodney King in 1991, the shooting of Tamir Rice in 2014, and the death of George Floyd in 2020. These articles have been retrieved through the Nexis Uni Database. These cases have been selected because all three were high-profile cases for which video footage recordings exist. This study focuses on the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* because they are two of the most prominent newspapers in circulation in the United States and have a similar political slant. The liberal slant of both newspapers sparked an interest in seeing how these newspapers deal with the issue of framing in coverage of police brutality. The analysis of these sources has focused on three aspects of these newspaper articles. Namely: the use of racial descriptors (i.e., "black," "African American," and "white") to highlight the racial differences between the parties involved, as it overemphasises the importance of race in these events; the expurgation of the victim (the portrayal of the victim as aggressive, violent, threatening, often through reference to the victim's criminal history); and lastly whether articles position the incident within the larger context of police brutality against African Americans by referring to other cases. The second aspect requires some further explanation. In their study of newspaper coverage on the shooting of Tamir Rice, Rebecca Stone and Kelly M. Socia used a coding scheme created by Hirschfield and Simon, consisting of seven linguistic and symbolic techniques used to legitimate police use-of-force.¹⁷ One of these techniques is expurgation, which John B. Thompson describes as constructing an enemy by portraying them as evil, harmful or threatening.¹⁸ According to Stone and Socia, official police accounts on instances of police brutality commonly highlight "direct threats" posed by victims and officers' "reasonable" responses to them.¹⁹ Therefore, looking at expurgation in an analysis of newspaper coverage on

¹⁵ Lawrence, *The Politics of Force*, xi.

¹⁶ Lawrence, *The Politics of Force*, xi.

¹⁷ P. J. Hirschfield and D. Simon, "Legitimizing Police Violence: Newspaper Narratives of Deadly Force," *Theoretical Criminology*, 14: 161.

¹⁸ John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990): 65.

¹⁹ Rebecca Stone and Kelly M. Socia, "Boy with Toy or Black Male with a Gun: An analysis of Online News Articles Covering the Shooting of Tamir," *Race and Justice* 9, no. 3 (January 2017): 165.

police brutality is essential because it highlights the degree to which the news media corroborate the framing techniques used by the police.

It should be noted, however, that the degree of violence used by the police varies across the three selected case studies. Nevertheless, since this research does not analyse the violence used by the police and instead looks at the news coverage of police brutality, the legitimacy of this study remains intact regardless of this difference. Furthermore, this study will not focus on the individual behaviour of reporters and editors. It will instead look at the discourse created by the reporters and the editors, the collective behaviour of news organisations in constructing narratives around police violence against African Americans, and how this may impact the socio-cultural position of African Americans in American society.

Newspapers are an integral part of society and history, providing us with snapshots of events that are important to our lives and reflect our culture, directly from the time in which they are written.²⁰ Therefore, studying newspaper coverage on police brutality is academically relevant because it can offer valuable insights into how the problem of police violence against African Americans is positioned in society at any given point in history. Furthermore, this research adds to the long and extensive historiography on police brutality by starting where Lawrence's time frame ends. In doing so, it sets out to discover whether the framing of police brutality in the news has seen any development since the 1990s and whether notable differences exist in the coverage of different newspapers.

According to sociologist William H. Sewell, a historical event has three components that make it an event. A historical event is (1) a ramified sequence of occurrences that is (2) recognised as notable by contemporaries, and that (3) results in a durable transformation of structures."²¹ Furthermore, Sewell argues that underlying social and cultural structures profoundly govern social relations.²² Therefore, a proper understanding of the role of events in history must be founded on a concept of structure.²³ In the United States, the concept of race is built into a hierarchical social structure, in which whiteness is broadly construed as being superior. This racial hierarchy infiltrates all aspects of life in the United States and thus impacts American policing. To better understand the importance of racial differences in police brutality and American policing, this research uses the theoretical framework provided by Critical Race Theory (CRT).

²⁰ Danuta Reah, *The Language of Newspapers*, (London: Routledge, 2002): 1.

²¹ William H. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 228.

²² Sewell, *Logics of History*, 226.

²³ *Ibid*, 226.

Critical Race Theory emerged in the mid-1970s from critical legal studies as a response to the slow pace of racial reform in the United States.²⁴ CRT quickly became a movement in which activists and scholars from different disciplines started studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power.²⁵ CRT places race at the centre of critical analysis while tracing its origins back to the legal scholarship of Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw.²⁶ Moreover, one of the central premises of CRT is that racism is an ordinary fact of American life.²⁷ Since the police are an extension of the law in the field, they become a means through which systemic racism is perpetuated. For this reason, CRT can provide meaningful insights into understanding the role of race in news coverage of police brutality.

The first chapter focuses on the Rodney King beating in 1991. Chapter 2 focuses on the Tamir Rice shooting in 2014. The third and final chapter focuses on George Floyd's death in 2020. The concluding chapter will combine the findings of these three chapters to answer the research question of how racial differences are portrayed in the media in cases of police brutality against African Americans and offer a critical reflection on the mainstream media's role in sustaining systemic racism.

²⁴ Brooks and Hébert, "Gender, Race and Media Representation," 304.

²⁵ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, (New York: New York University Press, 2001): 2.

²⁶ Brooks and Herbert, "Gender, Race and Media Representation," 304.

²⁷ Brooks and Herbert, "Gender, Race and Media Representation," 304.

CHAPTER 1: THE BEATING OF RODNEY KING

On March 3, 1991, Rodney King, an African American man, was being pursued by police for speeding.²⁸ After being stopped, Rodney King was brutally beaten by four white LAPD officers. King was shocked with a stun gun, kicked repeatedly, and beaten with batons by the four officers.²⁹ The beating lasted approximately fifteen minutes while more than a dozen cops stood by. The violent altercation caused skull fractures, broken bones and teeth, and permanent brain damage to the victim. A bystander, George Holliday, recorded the event on his camcorder from the terrace of his home. After Holliday released the tape to CNN and NBC, the videotape was played repeatedly on television news stations.³⁰ When the jury acquitted the four officers who partook in the beating approximately fourteen months later, Los Angeles exploded into violent protests that lasted six days and have come to be known as the 1992 Los Angeles Riots.

The beating of Rodney King was not the first instance of police brutality against African Americans. However, the difference this time was the existence of video evidence of this excessive use-of-force by the police against an African American. According to Lawrence, the video recorded by Holliday presented journalists with an opportunity to tell the story of police brutality from a unique starting point in these types of news stories.³¹ Namely, the video gave journalists a starting point of an assumed certainty that the police had used excessive force.³² Journalists and their audience could look at the event with video evidence as a starting point, rather than relying solely on official police statements. Claims from official sources often provide journalists with a news narrative encouraging reporters to rely on these narratives. The video footage led journalists to construct a narrative that challenged the official police accounts.³³ Furthermore, the video of the beating proved that decades after the Civil Rights Movement, race-based violence still prevailed in the United States,

This chapter analyses the role of race in newspaper coverage of the Rodney King beating in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to better understand the matrix of journalism, police brutality, and race relations in the United States. The analysis in this chapter focuses on the use of racial descriptors (i.e., “black,” “African American,” and “white”) in the articles, expurgation of the

²⁸ Ronald N. Jacobs, “Civil society and Crisis: Culture, Discourse and the Rodney King Beating,” *American Journal of Sociology* 101 no. 5 (1996): 1239.

²⁹ Lee Sigelman, Susan Welch, Timothy Bledsoe, and Michael Combs, “Police Brutality and Public Perceptions of Racial Discrimination: A Tale of Two Beatings,” *Political Research Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1997): 777.

³⁰ Paula Rabinowitz, “Street/Crime: From Rodney King’s Beating to Michael Brown’s Shooting,” *Cultural Critique* 90 (2015): 143.

³¹ Lawrence, *The Politics of Force*, 149.

³² Lawrence, *The Politics of Force*, 149.

³³ *Ibid*, 73.

victim, and whether newspapers situate the Rodney King beating within a larger context of police brutality against African Americans by referring to other cases.

The New York Times

Most articles in the *New York Times* discussing the Rodney King beating explicitly mention the racial disparities between the victim and the police officers involved. Twelve out of fourteen articles (85,7%) make an explicit reference to Rodney King's race employing the racial descriptor "black" or "African American."³⁴ Eight out of these twelve articles made an explicit reference to the race of the police officers involved by using the racial descriptor "white." In doing so, the *New York Times* alerts their readers to the importance of race in the unfolding of this event. The fact that more than half of the articles use the racial descriptor "white" is rather significant, and it is here that we can apply the lens of Critical Race Theory to understand its significance better.

One of the central tenets of CRT, namely the Black-White Binary Paradigm, is relevant here since paradigms of race impact our understanding of race and racial problems. Juan F. Perea uses Thomas Kuhn's concept of a paradigm, as described in Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and applies it to the discourse on American race relations. Kuhn defines paradigms as a "shared set of understandings or premises which permits the definition, elaboration, and solution of problems defined within the paradigm."³⁵ Thus, a paradigm is a set of understandings that allow us to differentiate between what is considered relevant to the solution of a problem and what is not. Perea then describes the Black-White Binary paradigm as "the conception that race in America consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and the White."³⁶ As such, this paradigm has obscured the role of other races in the problem of America's racial order.³⁷ Considering the dominant position that accompanies whiteness in American society, the use of racial descriptors is almost always exclusively reserved for those belonging to so-called minority groups. Whiteness is considered normative, and as a result, "race quintessentially means African American."³⁸ Other races are minorities only insofar as their experiences can be equated to that of blacks.

The *New York Times* using the racial descriptor "white" in most of the articles that explicitly highlight racial disparities becomes significant when we consider the normative status of whiteness

³⁴ For all articles consulted, see appendix A.

³⁵ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970): 37.

³⁶ Juan F. Perea, "The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race: The "Normal Science" of American Racial Thought," *California Law Review* vol. 85, no. 5 (October 1997): 1219.

³⁷ Juan F. Perea, "The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race: The "Normal Science" of American Racial Thought," *California Law Review* vol. 85, no. 5 (October 1997): 1219.

³⁸ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 77.

in American race relations. Using the racial descriptor “white” challenges the practice that racial descriptors are reserved for minority groups – in this case, African Americans. In doing so, the *New York Times* draws whiteness into discussions of race rather than treating police brutality as an issue that solely concerns African Americans. By bringing whiteness into discussions of police brutality, the *New York Times* counteracts the normativity of whiteness in

Journalists usually rely on official police accounts to report on instances of police brutality. Official police statements, however, often expurgate victims by portraying them as violent, aggressive, non-compliant, and resisting arrest to justify the violent escalation of the situation. Research has shown that the threshold for being perceived as dangerous, and therefore falling victim to excessive use-of-force by the police appears to be lower for African Americans compared to their white peers.³⁹ Expurgation in the form of describing the victim as dangerous is thus more likely for African Americans. Only two articles in the *New York Times* include statements that mildly expurgate the victim. One article writes how King was unemployed and that he had served time in prison following a second-degree robbery conviction.⁴⁰ Although disclosing this information is a core element in ‘cop vigilante’ narratives, police are rarely aware of their victim’s criminal past. Mentioning King’s unemployment status and criminal background can negatively affect his image. Since the police officers could not have known this at the time of the beating, the mention of a criminal history cannot count as expurgation as it is ineffective in justifying excessive force by the police. Another article mentions how Rodney King “resisted arrest twice following the freeway chase, first by the California Highway Patrol and then by the city police.”⁴¹ Writing about how the victim resisted arrests portrays him as non-cooperative and as such can be considered expurgation. Nonetheless, a different article included a statement made by a Deputy District Attorney saying that “the police had failed to support the contention that Mr. King resisted arrest.”⁴² The inclusion of the statement by the district attorney counters the expurgating statement.

Moreover, this same article writes that the police wanted Rodney King to be prosecuted with “charges of battery on an officer.”⁴³ Although Holliday was not able to record the entire encounter between King and the police, the footage was able to record did not show King resisting anything. The *New York Times* used this footage to contest the official police statements that portrayed King as non-compliant. In doing so, the *New York Times* news coverage spares the victim of any negative

³⁹ Reed T. DeAngelis, “Systemic Racism in Police Killings: New Evidence from the Mapping Police Violence Database, 2013-2021,” *Race and Justice*, (October 2021): 8. This particular study includes black, white, and Hispanic victims of police killings. Asian and Native American victims were excluded from this study due to their small cell size.

⁴⁰ Seth Mydans, “Tape of Beating by Police Revives Charges of Racism,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 1991.

⁴¹ Associated Press, “Los Angeles Jury Widens Inquiry in Police Beating,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1991.

⁴² Mydans, “Tape of Beating by Police Revives Charges of Racism.”

⁴³ Mydans, “Tape of Beating by Police Revives Charges of Racism.”

sentiments that may arise in readers regarding racial prejudice and stereotypes against African Americans.

The coverage of the Rodney King beating in the *New York Times* situates the event in a larger context of police brutality against African Americans. The newspaper articles recall two other instances in which the LAPD has mistreated African Americans. One article recalls an incident in 1989 where Don Jackson, a former police officer, was pushed through a plate glass window by members of the Long Beach, California Police Department and then “lied about what happened.”⁴⁴ Additionally, this same article writes about how Jamaal Wilkes, a Los Angeles Lakers basketball player, was handcuffed by two Los Angeles police officers after being stopped because “the light over his license plate was out.”⁴⁵ By referring to these instances, the *New York Times* draws attention to the mistreatment of African Americans by the LAPD. Nearly every article published in the *New York Times* addresses the problems with racism within the LAPD. None of these articles, however, broaden their scope on police brutality outside of the LAPD, thus framing it as if racism and police brutality against African Americans are unique to the LAPD. This sentiment is further strengthened by articles describing the public outcry from Los Angeles’ “minority residents” following the incident.⁴⁶ Another wrote that the beating of Rodney King “confirmed long-held fears that any black person in Los Angeles could end up like Mr. King.”⁴⁷ Including these statements helps with the problematisation of police brutality against African Americans. However, the coverage largely frames the issue of police brutality as being unique to the LAPD rather than an issue with American policing in general.

The Washington Post

Coverage of the Rodney King beating in the *Washington Post* does not explicitly reference to the racial disparities between Rodney King and the LAPD officers in most of their articles. Six out of fifteen articles (40%) in the *Washington Post* referred to Rodney King by using the racial descriptor “black” or “African American.” Three out of those six articles also mentioned the police officer’s race by including the racial descriptor “white.” However, the most common way of referring to Rodney King in the coverage of the *Washington Post* was through the term “motorist” without adding a racial descriptor. By not addressing the racial disparities between the victim and the police officers in most of their articles, the *Washington Post* removes the focus from the importance of race in the unfolding of the event. In this manner, the event is largely removed from the larger

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Taylor Gibbs, “L.A. Cops Taped in the Act,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 1991.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Taylor Gibbs, “L.A. Cops Taped in the Act,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 1991.

⁴⁶ Robert Reinhold, “Los Angeles Chief Assailed by Mayor,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 1991.

⁴⁷ Don Terry, “Badge Tarnishes on Los Angeles Streets, Police Say,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 1991.

context of police brutality and the systemic racism that American policing enforces. Not addressing the racial disparities removes the event from the broader context of police brutality.

The articles published in the *Washington Post* on the Rodney King beating include statements that can be deemed expurgation of the victim. One article includes a police statement claiming that Rodney King initially ignored requests to leave his car. Furthermore, the police claimed that when King finally got out of the vehicle, he had “his left hand in his pants pocket, which may have led officers to believe that he had a weapon.”⁴⁸ In this way, the assumption that the victim might have been carrying a weapon is inserted into the narrative. Assuming that the victim was carrying a weapon and was a threat, means that the police use-of-force can be justified to a certain extent. The inclusion of this statement thus counts as expurgation of the victim. as black Americans are more likely than whites to be associated with gun crime than white people. Research has found that Black people are always more strongly associated with weapons than whites, even if violent crime rates are higher for white people than they are for black people.⁴⁹ Another article mentions that King fleeing from the police “cannot be overlooked.”⁵⁰ The author continues by adding that King created an atmosphere of “danger and suspicion” and that it was a “very emotional, frightening and dangerous situation” for the participants.⁵¹ Inserting such statements may cause negative sentiments towards Rodney King to arise in readers and strengthen racial prejudices against African Americans, especially when these statements are not discredited by using the video evidence, as is the case in the published articles by the *Washington Post*.

Nevertheless, the coverage in the *Washington Post* does refer to two specific cases of police mistreatment of African Americans by the LAPD. The *Washington Post* recalls how Los Angeles Lakers player, Jamaal Wilkes, alleged that “the Los Angeles police pulled him over and handcuffed him because he was black.”⁵² The same article also mentions how Joe Morgan, an African American man, alleged that “he was mistaken for a drug courier and detained at Los Angeles International Airport.”⁵³ By referring to these events, the *Washington Post* draws attention to the fact that the mistreatment of African Americans by the police is not uncommon. Nevertheless, the coverage in the *Washington Post* frames the violence enacted against Rodney King as a rarity. One article argued that what happened in Los Angeles “is not representative of most of the metropolitan police forces around the country” and is not “necessarily even representative of Los Angeles.”⁵⁴ By

⁴⁸ Jill Walker, “Police Beatings Called Chronic Problem,” *The Washington Post*, March 8, 1991.

⁴⁹ David J. Johnson and William J. Chopic, “Geographic Variation in the Black-Violence Stereotype,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2019 Vol. 10(3)291

⁵⁰ Frank G. Scafidi, “The Rodney King Case Through Police Eyes,” *The Washington Post*, April 4, 1991.

⁵¹ Scafidi, “The Rodney King Case Through Police Eyes.”

⁵² Jill Walker, “Police Beatings Called Chronic Problem,” *The Washington Post*, March 8, 1991.

⁵³ Walker, “Police Beatings Called Chronic Problem.”

⁵⁴ Edwin Delattre, “Brutality on the Beat,” *The Washington Post*, March 24, 1991.

arguing that the Rodney King incident should be seen as a rarity, the *Washington Post* undermines the systemic racism that influences social structures and causes the police to treat African Americans differently from their white peers.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the role of race in the news coverage of the Rodney King beating in 1991 in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. This chapter has found that both newspapers used the racial descriptor “black” or “African American” more than “white” to highlight the racial disparities between Rodney King and the LAPD officers. The *New York Times* explicitly referred to racial disparities in twelve out of fourteen articles (85,7%), using the racial descriptor “white” in eight out of those twelve articles. The *Washington Post* explicitly referred to racial disparities far less than the *New York Times* did, only using racial descriptors in six out of fifteen articles (40%). The usage of the racial descriptor white in most of the articles in the *New York Times* and in three articles in the *Washington Post* is significant considering that at the time, whiteness was not often brought into discussions of race.

Moreover, both newspapers included information from the police statements that can be considered expurgation. These expurgating statements painted King as aggressive and non-compliant and included the presumption that he had been carrying a weapon and therefore posed a threat. That King was non-compliant and aggressive was included in both newspapers, but the *New York Times*, however, did not include suspicions that King was carrying a weapon. Furthermore, both newspapers referred to other instances where police mistreated African Americans. However, these instances of police brutality were largely treated as unique to the LAPD. As such, the King beating was largely framed as an issue of racism within the LAPD rather than having the event exist within a nationwide issue of systemic racism in American policing.

When applying the lens of Critical Race Theory to this chapter’s findings, it becomes apparent that by treating this event of race-based police brutality as unique to LAPD, both newspapers fail to adequately address the systemic racism that exists in the American policing system. The coverage does properly address the fact that race played a central role in this event by making explicit references to racial disparities. However, the coverage of the King beating does not align with Critical Race Theory as the coverage fails to situate the event within the context of police brutality on a national level. Although the coverage addresses other instances of the police mistreating African Americans, it fails to address the severity of racism in the American policing system. In doing so, it does not align with Critical Race Theory.

CHAPTER 2 THE SHOOTING OF TAMIR RICE

On November 22, 2014, 12-year-old Tamir Rice was playing outside with a toy pellet gun in a park near the Cudell Recreation Centre in Cleveland, Ohio. Around 3:30 in the afternoon, a 911 call was made by another park visitor near the recreation centre. The person making the phone call was calling to report a man with a pistol, saying that it was probably fake but that he kept pointing it at everybody.”⁵⁵ The caller added to this by stating that the person in question was “probably juvenile.”⁵⁶ In response to the call, the police dispatcher sent out a code 1, the department’s highest level of urgency, but failed to relay the information that the gun may be fake or that the suspect was probably juvenile.⁵⁷ Officers Garback and Loehmann responded to the dispatch. Upon arrival at the scene, both officers got out of their vehicle with firearms raised at Tamir Rice. Officer Loehmann fired his gun twice, one bullet hitting Rice in the chest within seconds of arriving at the scene. Loehmann, the 26-year-old white police officer who fatally shot Tamir Rice, claimed that he thought Tamir Rice was reaching for a gun in his pants, thus leading him to shoot. Tragically, the police dispatcher did not relay the crucial information that the gun was probably fake and that the suspect was juvenile, resulting in Loehmann taking drastic action. After being shot, Tamir Rice was not offered any aid for nearly four minutes.⁵⁸

Furthermore, the police officers stopped Tamir’s 14-year-old, visibly distraught sister from coming near him, even going as far as handcuffing her and putting her in the back of their police car.⁵⁹ Tamir Rice’s mother, Samaria Rice, was threatened with arrest because she was yelling at the police officers for refusing to allow her to attend to her son, who had just been shot.⁶⁰ The police offered her an ultimatum to either stay at the crime scene or ride in the ambulance with her son.⁶¹

Tamir Rice’s death happened when public attention to excessive use-of-force by police against African Americans was already high. The incident between Tamir Rice and the Cleveland police occurred a few months after Darren Wilson, a white police officer, fatally shot unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The grand jury’s decision not to indict officer Darren Wilson caused a massive uproar in the city of Ferguson which lasted for months. The lack of

⁵⁵ Rebecca Stone and Kelly M. Socia, “Boy with Toy or Black Male with a Gun,” 331.

⁵⁶ CNN, “911 Caller: Gun Might Be Fake,” YouTube, November 27, 2014, 1:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xjf89P6kaEc>.

⁵⁷ Lauren Carasik, “Impunity in Tamir Rice Killing Intensifies Demands for Systemic Reform: Police Use of Deadly Force Reflects Racial Bias,” *Aljazeera America* (January 5, 2016): 1.

⁵⁸ Carasik, “Impunity in Tamir Rice Killing,” 1

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ “Tamir Rice,” Stanford Libraries, accessed June 1, 2022. <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/saytheirnames/feature/tamir-rice>.

⁶¹ Samaria Rice, “My 12-Year-Old Son, Tamir Rice, Was Killed by Police. I’m Not Allowed to Be Normal,” *Good Morning America*, July 13, 2020. <https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/news/story/12-year-son-tamir-rice-killed-police-im-71654873>.

justice for Michael Brown's death signalled the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement which concerns itself with bringing attention and justice to African Americans who have unjustly died at the hands of police officers. The same year saw the death of 43-year-old Eric Garner who was placed in a chokehold by a white police officer in Staten Island, New York on July 17, 2014. Garner pleaded for the police officer to release him by saying "I can't breathe" eleven times before losing consciousness. An hour later, he was pronounced dead in a hospital. A bystander recorded the event on their mobile phone and shared the footage online, gaining media attention. The deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and many others helped galvanise public opinion. They caused a nationwide debate on the existing relationship between race and the police abusing their power. It is therefore unsurprising that the shooting of Tamir Rice resulted in a rapid increase in the number of news articles covering the case, many of which had been published online just hours after the event occurred.⁶²

The King beating in 1991 is a watershed moment showing the power of modern technology in documenting police brutality against African Americans. Since then, modern technology has evolved and seriously changed the relationship between the police and citizens. Historically, police officers have enjoyed a great extent of autonomy.⁶³ Portable recording devices are cheaper and therefore more accessible to the public. The first camera phone was launched in Japan in October 2000.⁶⁴ By 2003, mobile phones equipped with cameras had become ragingly popular since over 55 million people worldwide owned one.⁶⁵ CCTV cameras were also widely installed in public spheres. The instalment of CCTV in public places combined with people's tendencies to always carry their mobile phone on their person has increased the chances of police misconduct being recorded, therefore challenging the autonomy of the police.

Furthermore, the White House looked vastly different compared to 1991. The United States elected its first African American president in the history of the United States in 2008. Barack Obama's presidency, which lasted two terms, signalled a time of hope for many African Americans, and many expected him to bring meaningful change to minority groups. Christopher S. Parker defined this as the "Obama effect," which is the impression that after the election of the first African American president, the United States had finally moved beyond its struggles with race relations.⁶⁶ However, the deaths of Tamir Rice and many other African Americans showed that police brutality against African Americans did not halt during the Obama presidency.

⁶² Rebecca Stone and Kelly M. Socia, "Boy with Toy or Black Male with a Gun," 331.

⁶³ DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, "The Use of Video Surveillance for Police Accountability: Benefits, Limitations, and Considerations," September 3, 2021: 4.

⁶⁴ L. Srivastava, "Mobile Phones and the Evolution of Social Behaviour," *Behaviour & Information Technology*, Vol. 24, no.2. (March – April 2005): 117.

⁶⁵ Srivastava, "Mobile Phones and the Evolution of Social Behaviour," 117.

⁶⁶ Christopher S. Parker, "Race and Politics in the Age of Obama," *Annual Review of Sociology* 42 (2016): 217-30.

This chapter analyses the role of race in newspaper coverage of the shooting of Tamir Rice in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to better understand the matrix of journalism, police brutality, and race relations in the United States. In this event, Tamir's age dramatically impacts both the effectiveness of the news framing and the court of public opinion. As this study is a comparative analysis, this fact should be adequately acknowledged as it set this event apart from the King beating and George Floyd's death. The analysis of newspaper coverage has focused on the use of racial descriptors (i.e., "black," "African American," and "white") in the articles, the expurgation of the victim, and whether newspapers situate the Tamir Rice shooting within a larger context of police brutality against African Americans by referring to other cases.

The New York Times

Most of the coverage of the shooting of Tamir Rice in the *New York Times* does not explicitly mention the racial disparities between the victim and the police. Six out of twenty articles (30%) explicitly referred to Tamir Rice by referring to him by employing the racial descriptor "black" or "African American."⁶⁷ Moreover, seven articles referred to the officer with the racial descriptor "white." Only seven articles out of twenty did not make any mention of race at all, either implicit or explicit. These implicit references to racial disparity relate Tamir Rice's death to the Black Lives Matter movement or mention name alongside other black victims of police brutality. Instead, emphasis was mainly placed on Rice's age. The lack of explicit mentions of race in the *New York Times* is striking when considering the heightened attention to police brutality in the mainstream because of other high-profile cases that occurred around this time. By not explicitly highlighting the racial disparities in most articles, the *New York Times* largely undermines the importance of race in the unfolding of the event. Implicit references to race do not have the same effect as explicit mentions in addressing race as the main factor in the unfolding of this event.

The coverage in the *New York Times* also included some information that can be considered expurgation of the victim. The published articles take information from the official police statements that stated that Tamir "failed to raise his hands."⁶⁸ Moreover, the police statement mentions that Tamir had "reached for a gun in his waistband."⁶⁹ Another article recalls that the police had yelled at the victim to show his hands a three times, but that "the boy instead reached to

⁶⁷ For a list of all articles consulted, see Appendix B.

⁶⁸ Emma G. Fitzsimmons, "12-Year-Old Boy Dies After Police in Cleveland Shoot Him," *The New York Times*, November 23, 2014.

⁶⁹ Fitzsimmons "12-Year-Old Boy Dies After Police in Cleveland Shoot Him."

his waistband for the object.”⁷⁰ These statements made by the police expurgate Rice by portraying him as non-cooperative.

Furthermore, another article mentions how the toy gun Tamir was yielding was “indistinguishable from a real firearm.”⁷¹ This same article also included a statement from Police Chief Calvin Williams, who said that “guns are not toys.”⁷² These statements also expurgate the victim by shifting the blame away from the police and toward the victim by drawing into question why he possessed such a realistic toy. His possession of this toy made Rice a threat to the police. Nonetheless, the *New York Times* used the video footage to contest these expurgating statements made by the police. One article writes how unlikely it is for Tamir to have ignored the police request as the video shows that he was shot within two seconds of the police arriving to the scene.⁷³ By relying on the video evidence to counter the police narrative, the *New York Times* was able to frame the event of police brutality in a way that was less harmful to the victim’s reputation and therefore does not contribute to the reinforcement of damaging racial stereotypes of African Americans.

Nonetheless, the *New York Times* has placed this event within the larger context of police brutality against African Americans by referring to other instances of police brutality. The name that surfaced the most in news coverage of the Tamir Rice shooting was that of Michael Brown, the unarmed teenager whom a white police officer in August of the same year. One article mentions how Tamir’s death happened two days before the grand jury “decided not to indict a white officer in the shooting of an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, Mo.”⁷⁴ Another article also mentions how the grand jury decided not to indict Michael Brown’s killer during his trial.⁷⁵ This same article reports how the grand jury made the same decision during the trial of the white police officer who held Eric Garner in a chokehold until he died.⁷⁶ The coverage of the shooting often mentioned Tamir’s death in the context of the Black Lives Matter Movement. By referring to other instances in which African Americans have died at the hands of police, the *New York Times* situates the shooting of Tamir Rice within the context of the larger issue of police brutality in the United States.

The coverage in the *New York Times* moved beyond simply referring to other instances of police brutality and published thematic coverage on the issue of police brutality. An opinion piece published on January 5, 2015, under the headline “Privilege of ‘Arrest Without Incident’” addresses

⁷⁰ Emma G. Fitzsimmons, “Video Shows Cleveland Officer Shot Boy Within 2 Seconds,” *The New York Times*, November 26, 2014.

⁷¹ Timothy Williams, “Ohio: Shot Boy’s Toy Looked Real, Police Say,” *The New York Times*, November 24, 2014.

⁷² Williams, “Ohio: Shot Boy’s Toy Looked Real, Police Say.”

⁷³ Fitzsimmons, “Video Shows Cleveland Officer Shot Boy Within 2 Seconds.”

⁷⁴ Fitzsimmons, “Video Shows Cleveland Officer Shot Boy Within 2 Seconds.”

⁷⁵ Richard A. Oppel Jr., “Cleveland police Cited for Abuse by Justice Department,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2014.

⁷⁶ Oppel Jr., “Cleveland Police Cited for Abuse by Justice Department.”

the different treatment of African Americans by the police compared to white people. The article recalls an event in which a shooter “wearing body armour” and “firing multiple shots out her window at people and cars,” was chased down by police and eventually “taken into custody without incident or injury.”⁷⁷ The shooter in question was Julia Shields, a 45-year-old white woman. The article asks why Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, John Crawford, Antonio Martin, and Jerame C. Reid did not share this privilege of being arrested “without incident or injury.”⁷⁸ The common denominator between these names is that “they were all black, all killed by police officers.”⁷⁹ The author argues that police use-of-force should be colour- and gender-blind and closes with the question: “Why weren’t these black men the recipients of the same use-of-force – or lack thereof – as Julia Shields?” Another opinion piece argues that “law enforcement allows police officers to be a threat to those they are sworn to protect.”⁸⁰ By publishing thematic coverage on the issue of police brutality, the *New York Times* signals to their readers that race is a dominant factor in how the police treat their suspects, and as such addresses the systemic racism that permeates policing in the United States.

The Washington Post

Most articles published in *The Washington Post* did not explicitly highlight the racial differences that played a role in the unfolding of Tamir Rice’s death. Only three out of twelve articles (25%) explicitly referred to Tamir Rice’s race.⁸¹ Two out of three articles that explicitly referenced race used the racial descriptor “white.” The majority of the coverage on the Tamir Rice shooting does not allude to these racial disparities at all. Instead, articles overemphasised Tamir’s age instead of his race. By not referring to the racial disparities between the victim and the police, the *Washington Post* almost situates the event outside the larger context of police brutality against African Americans. In doing so, the *Washington Post* also fails to address the critical role race plays in the unfolding of this event.

The coverage in the *Washington Post* also included information that expurgates the victim. One article describes how the video footage taken by a surveillance camera shows Rice “swinging the gun in his hands” and “pointing it a few times.”⁸² Another writes how the police had ordered

⁷⁷ Charles M. Blow, “Privilege of ‘Arrest Without Incident,’” *The New York Times*, January 4, 2015.

⁷⁸ Charles M. Blow, “Privilege of ‘Arrest Without Incident.’”

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Tom Koch, “What’s Worse Than Sad?” *The New York Times*, January 24, 2015.

⁸¹ For a list of all articles consulted, see appendix B

⁸² Elahe Izadi and Peter Holley, “Video Shows Cleveland Officer Shooting 12-Year-Old Tamir Rice within Seconds,” *The Washington Post*, November 26, 2014.

Rice to raise his hand, but “he raised his shirt instead – reaching for the gun.”⁸³ These statements paint Rice as a threat and thus count as expurgation of the victim. Other articles mention how Rice was non-cooperative during his encounter with the police by writing that “instead of taking a step back, Tamir stepped toward the officers.”⁸⁴ This caused the police officers to “fear for their lives” because Tamir moved “toward the vehicle while reaching toward his waist.”⁸⁵ The journalists of the *Washington Post*, however, used the video evidence to point out the unlikelihood of the police statements being true. They used the video footage to write how it was unlikely for the police to have asked Tamir to raise his hands three times before firing since Rice was shot within seconds of the police’s arrival at the scene. In doing so, the *Washington Post* limits the expurgating effects of the police statements and lessens the chance of them reinforcing damaging racial stereotypes of African Americans.

The coverage in the *Washington Post* on the shooting of Tamir Rice directed their readers to the broader issue of police brutality by referring to other instances of police brutality against African Americans. The name that resurfaced the most in articles discussing the Tamir Rice shooting was that of Michael Brown. The *Washington Post* compared Tamir’s death to that of Michael Brown because of some similarities, namely, that they were both unarmed black teenagers who were fatally shot by police.

The *Washington Post* picked up on this pattern of young black men dying at the hands of police at a disproportionate rate compared to their white peers. An opinion piece titled “In America, black children don’t get to be children” stated that “black America has again been reminded that its children are not seen as worthy of being alive.”⁸⁶ The article argues that this is partly because black children “are not seen as children at all, but as menacing threats to white lives.”⁸⁷ Articles alluded to the fact that Tamir was tall for his age, which caused police officers to think of him as older than he was.⁸⁸ Another article recalls how Michael Brown was also thought to be much older than he was. White police officer Darren Wilson, who is 6-foot-4 himself and weighs 210-pound Wilson told the jury that he felt like “a 5-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan” during the altercation with the teenager that occurred before the shooting.⁸⁹

⁸³ Lindsey Bever, “Cleveland Police Kill 12-Year-Old Boy Wielding BB Gun That Looked Like a Semiautomatic Pistol,” *The Washington Post*, November 24, 2014.

⁸⁴ Wesley Lowery, “Cleveland Police Hand Off Investigation to Tamir Rice Shooting to County Sheriff,” *The Washington Post*, January 2, 2015.

⁸⁵ Lowery, “Cleveland Police Hand Off Investigation to Tamir Rice Shooting to County Sheriff.”

⁸⁶ Stacey Patton, “In America, Black Children Don’t Get to Be Children,” *The Washington Post*, November 26, 2014.

⁸⁷ Patton, “In America, Black Children Don’t Get to Be Children.”

⁸⁸ Bever, “Cleveland Police Kill 12-Year-Old Boy Wielding BB Gun That Looked Like a Semiautomatic Pistol.”

⁸⁹ Bever, “Cleveland Police Kill 12-Year-Old Boy Wielding BB Gun That Looked Like a Semiautomatic Pistol.”

Research has found that perceptions of children can be moderated by race.⁹⁰ Black boys are misperceived as older than they are, which results in them being held responsible for their actions during a developmental period, whereas their white peers receive “the beneficial assumption of childlike innocence.”⁹¹ Black children may be seen as adults at the age of thirteen.⁹² On average, the age of black is overestimated by four and a half years.⁹³ In his book *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, sociologist Michael Kimmel writes about how the time allotted to white males to enjoy their youth without responsibilities exceeds that of black children. “Guyhood,” as Kimmel defines it, starts at the age of 16 and lasts up until the age of 26, meaning that white men are not entirely responsible for their actions until they are well in their late twenties.⁹⁴

Critical Race Theory becomes applicable here when looking at these cognitive biases within the police as this negatively impacts African Americans and as a result, helps sustain systemic racism. The different treatment of African American juveniles by police can be traced back to this cognitive bias. This unconscious bias generally takes the form of an assertion that almost everyone exhibits a strong racial preference.⁹⁵ Race theorists suggest that resentment towards racial minorities remains deeply embedded in society. These negative attitudes toward racial minorities are often not acquired through personal experience.⁹⁶ Rather, they are taught and then perpetuated through negative stereotypes in the media.⁹⁷ The fact that these negative associations of African Americans as being older and more dangerous are taught shows how deeply embedded racism is within American society and how these biases lead to the implementation of racism in the field.

Conclusion

This second chapter has analysed the role of race in the news coverage of the Tamir Rice shooting in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. This chapter has found that the use of racial descriptors to highlight racial disparities in the coverage of Tamir Rice’s death has not increased compared to the coverage of the King beating in 1991. The *New York Times* used racial descriptors in six out of twenty (30%) articles discussing Tamir Rice, which is a sharp drop compared to the 85,7% in the Rodney King case. The *Washington Post* explicitly highlighted the racial disparities in

⁹⁰ Phillip Atiba Goff et al., “The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106, no.4 (2014): 540.

⁹¹ Goff et al. “The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children,” 540.

⁹² *Ibid*, 541.

⁹³ *Ibid*.

⁹⁴ Michael Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008): 160.

⁹⁵ Mike Noon, “Pointless Diversity Training: Unconscious Bias, New Racism and Agency,” *Work, Employment and Society* 32, no. 1 (February 2018): 200.

⁹⁶ Noon, “Pointless Diversity Training: Unconscious Bias, New Racism and Agency,” 200.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 201.

3 out of twelve articles (25%) on Tamir Rice. In contrast, their coverage of Rodney King included explicit references to race in six out of fifteen articles (40%). This drop in the employment of racial descriptors is striking considering Rice's death occurred at a time of heightened attention to police brutality against African Americans. Although surprising, it is not inexplicable since both newspapers emphasised Rice's age far more in their articles than they did the racial disparities.

Furthermore, this chapter has also found that both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* included police statements that expurgate the victim. Rice was described as non-cooperative and was assumed to be dangerous since he was perceived as older and was supposedly carried a weapon. Both newspapers, however, contested such claims by using the video footage. The most apparent finding in this chapter is the significant increase in attention paid to the larger issue of police brutality in the United States in both newspapers. Where the coverage of the King beating framed the racism primarily as being unique to the LAPD, the coverage of the Rice shooting deals with police brutality on a national level by making references to other cases of police brutality and publishing thematic coverage on the issue that investigates the roots of the problem.

The change in coverage since the Rodney King beating can be accredited to the fact that 2014 was a watershed moment in America's relation to policing. The frequency at which African Americans were dying at the hands of police did not go unnoticed by newspapers and the public. Critical Race Theory denotes that racism is inherent to American society, and racism is therefore also inherent to policing. The coverage of the Rice shooting aligns itself with Critical Race Theory by situating the event in the larger context of police brutality, thus highlighting the systemic racism within American policing.

CHAPTER 3: THE KILLING OF GEORGE FLOYD

On 25 May 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, was killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Someone had called the police because George Floyd had allegedly used a counterfeit 20-dollar bill. Upon their arrival, the police officers removed George Floyd from his car and handcuffed him in their arrest. At this point, Floyd was already displaying signs of distress. The police officers walked him across the street, where more police officers arrived at the scene. He was then placed on the ground by the police. A white police officer, later identified as Derik Chauvin, pressed his knee into Floyd's neck for nine minutes. George Floyd expressed his difficulty breathing by repeating the words "I can't breathe." The officer, however, did not remove his knee. Instead, he kept his knee on the victim's neck for minutes, even after Floyd had already become limp and unconscious. A few hours after the event, a bystander posted a video recording of the event on Facebook. The ten-minute graphic video which circulated widely on social media, left no ambiguity about what happened. A white police officer is seen kneeling on a black man's neck for more than nine minutes while bystanders and the victim himself pleaded for the officer to stop. The video gained much traction online. The death of yet another African American at the hands of police caused thousands of people to take to the streets and protest, regardless of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

Floyd's death bears eerie similarities to that of Eric Garner, a 43-year-old African American man, who died after being placed in a chokehold by a white police officer in Staten Island, New York, in 2014. Garner's last words, "I can't breathe," became a slogan associated with the Black Lives Matter Movement. This same slogan was chanted worldwide at protests dedicated to George Floyd's death. The Black Lives Matter Movement has become a powerful social movement that stands at the forefront of what has frequently been called a new Civil Rights Movement.⁹⁸ The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s emerged from the systemic oppression of African Americans through the Jim Crow legislation, whereas the Black Lives Matter movement focuses on ending police brutality against African Americans.⁹⁹ Using a militant approach, the Black Lives Matter Movement instills fresh urgency into discussions on American race relations.

Since the Tamir Rice event in 2014, the United States has seen many changes. George Floyd's death came at a time of heightened difficulty for African Americans in the United States. Historically, African Americans have held a disadvantaged position in American society compared to their white peers and other non-black minority groups. African Americans have higher

⁹⁸ Erik K. Arnold, "The BLM Effect: Hashtags, History and Race," *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 21 no.2 (2017): 10.

⁹⁹ Aldon Morris, "From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter," *Scientific American*, February 3, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/from-civil-rights-to-black-lives-matter1/>.

unemployment rates.¹⁰⁰ Black children have less access to high-quality education and experience the lowest graduation rates of any subgroup in the United States.¹⁰¹ These are a few examples in the extensive list of many socio-economic disadvantages of being African American in the United States. Obama's two terms were directly followed by that of Donald Trump, whose presidential campaign was built on racial demagoguery. Trump's presidency can be characterised by blatant racial discrimination and polarisation. A study by the Pew Research Centre found that nearly two years into Trump's term, 60 percent of Americans believed that Trump's election has worsened American race relations.¹⁰² When Obama was elected, voters were optimistic since 52 percent of those questioned believed that Obama's election would improve the country's race relations.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a disproportional impact on African Americans. According to the World Health Organisation, "poor and unequal living conditions are the consequences of deeper structural conditions that together fashion the way societies are organised."¹⁰³ Racial inequalities that prevail in society impact on the degree to which African Americans have access to healthcare. Factors such as poverty, poor living conditions because of residential segregation, homelessness, and underlying health conditions that affect African Americans more than other minority groups have affected how Covid-19 impacted African Americans communities. The Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted African Americans because they do not have access to safety nets and are not able to afford healthcare because of lower incomes.

The rise of social media has greatly dramatically American society. From 2005 until 2019, the percentage of US adults who used social media surged from 5% to 79%.¹⁰⁴ Smartphones allow citizens to film police misconduct up close, and social media has allowed this footage to be shared with millions of others on the internet. As a result, the public has started to police the police simply by using their phones. In the last ten years, police departments across the United States have equipped their officers with body cameras to document police encounters with civilians. However, these images are not released to the public nearly as much as the videos taken by bystanders.

This chapter analyses the role of race in newspaper coverage of George Floyd's death in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to better understand the matrix of journalism, police brutality, and race relations in the United States. The analysis of the newspaper coverage has

¹⁰⁰ Thomas A. LaVeist, "Segregation, Poverty, and Empowerment: Health Consequences for African Americans," *The Milbank Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (1993): 41.

¹⁰¹ Tyrone C. Howard, "Why Black Lives (and Minds) Matter: Race, Freedom Schools & the Quest for Educational Equity," *The Journal of Negro Education* 85, no.2 (2016):101-113, 102.

¹⁰² Pew Research Centre, "Most Americans Say Trump's Election Has Led to Worse Race Relations in the U.S.," December 19, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/12/19/most-americans-say-trumps-election-has-led-to-worse-race-relations-in-the-u-s/>

¹⁰³ World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, *Closing the Gap In a Generation: Health Equity Through Action on the Social Determinants of Health*, (Geneva: World Health Organization; 2008): 1.

¹⁰⁴ Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, "The Rise of Social Media," *Our World in Data*, September 18, 2019. Retrieved from <https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media>.

focused on the use of racial descriptors (i.e., “black,” “African American,” and “white”) in the articles, expurgation of the victim, and whether newspapers situate George Floyd’s death within a larger context of police brutality against African Americans by referring to other cases.

The New York Times

The coverage of George Floyd’s death in the *New York Times* indeed alluded to the importance of race. All articles published in the *New York Times* explicitly referred to George Floyd’s race employing the racial descriptor “black” or African American.”¹⁰⁵ Moreover, Derik Chauvin was referred to using the racial descriptor “white” in most of the articles the *New York Times* published on the topic. Racial disparities between the victim and police were most highlighted by using a racial descriptor for both parties involved. One article titled “‘I Can’t Breathe’: 4 Minneapolis Police Officers Fired After Black Man Dies in Custody” even used the racial descriptor “black” in the headline, thus immediately drawing attention to the importance of race in the unfolding of this event. From that moment onwards, George Floyd’s name is used in headlines rather than remaining as an unnamed black man. However, the racial descriptor “white,” however, was not used in headlines. By including the racial descriptor “white,” in all of their articles, the *New York Times* problematises whiteness in the context of police brutality and reinforces the integral role of race in this issue. In the United States, race is taken as a social fact but historically, whiteness has functioned as a non-racialised category, as it is often ignored in conventional approaches to race.¹⁰⁶ By erasing the presence of whiteness, it operates as “the unacknowledged standard or norm against which all so-called minorities are measured.”¹⁰⁷ The social and political significance of whiteness plays a critical role in American race relations and, therefore, in instances of police brutality too. Henry Giroux suggests a close relationship between whiteness, domination, and invisibility.¹⁰⁸ According to Giroux, whiteness functions as a historical and social construction, but the dominant culture’s inability or reluctance to see it as such is the source of its hidden authority.¹⁰⁹ Whiteness is an unrecognised and unacknowledged racial category “that secures its power by refusing to identify itself”¹¹⁰ By consistently using the racial descriptor “white” in articles discussing George Floyd’s death the invisibility aspect of whiteness is removed. As such, the hidden authority that

¹⁰⁵ For the full list of articles consulted, see Appendix C.

¹⁰⁶ Teresa J. Guess, “The Social Construction of Whiteness: Racism by Intent, Racism by Consequence,” *Criminal Sociology* vol 32, no. 4 (2006): 649-673: 651.

¹⁰⁷ AnnLouise Keating, “Interrogating “Whiteness,” (De)Construction of “Race,” *College English* 57, no. 8 (1995): 905.

¹⁰⁸ Henry Giroux, “Post-Colonial Ruptures and Democratic Possibilities: Multiculturalism as Anti-Racist Pedagogy,” *Cultural Critique* 21 (1992): 15.

¹⁰⁹ Giroux, “Post-Colonial Ruptures and Democratic Possibilities,” 15.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

accompanies whiteness is uncovered, meaning this can now be appropriately challenged. Including whiteness in discussions of police brutality against African Americans helps challenge the systemic racism within American policing by bringing the authoritative power of whiteness to light.

The *New York Times* articles included some information that was retrieved from the official police statements that expurgate the victim. Police were called to the scene because of a “man suspected of forgery.”¹¹¹ Floyd was thus suspected of criminal behaviour, meaning that this inclusion in the article can be considered expurgation. However, one needs to proceed with caution when pointing out expurgation. In this case, the police were called to the scene because of a suspicion of criminal activity, which could have led them to act with violence more intently. Therefore, the inclusion of this in the articles can be considered expurgation, although the police were fulfilling their duty, namely dealing with criminal activity. Statements claiming Floyd was under the influence can be considered expurgation.

Additionally, articles mentioned how George Floyd “appeared to be under the influence.”¹¹² What he might have been under the influence of is not specified in any of these articles. However, the disclosure of this information can be a mild form of expurgation as it might have contributed to his alleged uncooperativeness. Furthermore, many of articles also painted George Floyd as non-cooperative by mentioning that he “physically resisted officers.”¹¹³ Typically, this expurgating information would harm the public’s perception of the victim. However, these statements are followed by a disclaimer that these claims came from the official police reports. The *New York Times* journalists, however, did use the existing video footage to counter the police narrative saying the video told a “drastically different story.”¹¹⁴ Finally, some articles also included statements from people who were close to the victim, which reflected positively on the victim. George Floyd’s employer was referenced, for example, who stated that “no one had nothing bad to say about him” and that “he never caused a fight or was rude to people.”¹¹⁵ As such, the *New York Times* tried to minimise the effects of the expurgation of the victim.

Lastly, the coverage in the *New York Times* situated the death of George Floyd in the larger context of police brutality by referring to other cases. George Floyd’s death quickly prompted comparisons to other police killings, as nearly every article referred to at least one other instance of police brutality. In an article titled “The Persistence of Police Killings,” the author opens by

¹¹¹ Christine Hauser, Derrick Bryson Taylor, and Neil Vigdor, “‘I Can’t Breathe’: 4 Minneapolis Police Officers Fired After Black Man Dies in Custody,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2020.

¹¹² Audra D. S. Burch and John Eligon, “Bystander Videos of George Floyd and Others Are Policing the Police,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2020.

¹¹³ Christine Hauser, Derrick Bryson Taylor, and Neil Vigdor, “‘I Can’t Breathe’: 4 Minneapolis Officers Fired After Black Man Dies in Custody,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2020.

¹¹⁴ Burch and Eligon, “Bystander Videos of George Floyd and Others Are Policing the Police,” *The New York Times*.

¹¹⁵ Hauser, Bryson Taylor, and Vigdor, “‘I Can’t Breathe’: 4 Minneapolis Officers Fired After Black Man Dies in Custody.”

recalling the four separate police killings of African Americans that occurred within six months and left the United States in a state of turmoil in 2014. The article remembers Eric Garner, who died in New York after being put in a chokehold, while “Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo.; Laquan McDonald in Chicago; and 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland were all shot.”¹¹⁶ The author argues that there is no sign of meaningful change in American policing six years after their deaths because the number of police killings has hovered around 1,100 every year since 2013.¹¹⁷ Another example recalls the deaths of 68 others who, like Floyd and Garner, have died in police custody after uttering the same last words. More than half of these seventy cases were black, the article writes.¹¹⁸ The article offers a critique of police tactics and the belief that exists within the police force that “a person who can talk can also breathe.”¹¹⁹

Journalists were swift to place the death of George Floyd within the larger context of police brutality in their coverage of George Floyd’s death. The thematic coverage of police brutality and systemic racism focused on many different aspects and varied widely. One article focused on how the judicial system helps sustain systemic racism by letting cops get away with murder, even when there is video evidence.¹²⁰ Another criticises the police for sustaining negative racial stereotypes about African Americans by claiming that drugs played a role in the death of George Floyd.¹²¹ However, the author argues that drugs were not responsible for George Floyd’s death since they did not make him act so “violently that lethal force was necessary nor did it cause some fatal medical condition.”¹²² One article even traces the issue of police brutality back to the mistakes of the policymakers in the 1960s, saying they “pursued a misguided policy path that has failed to keep communities of colour safe for more than 50 years.”¹²³ These are but a few examples in which the *New York Times* coverage concerned itself with addressing underlying issues in police brutality that led to George Floyd’s death.

The Washington Post

The coverage of George Floyd’s death in the *Washington Post* clearly referred to the racial differences between the victim and perpetrator. All the articles that discussed the death of George Floyd have explicitly referred to his race employing the racial descriptor “black” or “African

¹¹⁶ David Leonhardt, “The Persistence of Police Killings,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 2020

¹¹⁷ Leonhardt, “The Persistence of Police Killings.”

¹¹⁸ Mike Baker, Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, Manny Fernandez and Michael LaForgia, “Three words. 70 Cases. The Tragic History of ‘I Can’t Breathe,’” *The New York Times*, June 28, 2020.

¹¹⁹ Baker, Valentino-DeVries, Fernandez and LaForgia, “Three words. 70 Cases. The Tragic History of ‘I Can’t Breathe.’”

¹²⁰ Editorial Board, “How the Supreme Court Lets Cops Get Away with Murder,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2020.

¹²¹ Carl L. Hart, “We Know How George Floyd Died. It Wasn’t from Drugs,” *The New York Times*, June 25, 2020.

¹²² Hart, “We Know How George Floyd Died. It Wasn’t from Drugs.”

¹²³ Elizabeth Hinton, “George Floyd’s Death Is a Failure of Generations of Leadership,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 2020.

American.”¹²⁴ Similarly, most articles made an explicit reference to the race of Derik Chauvin using the racial descriptor “white.” The most common was the usage of racial descriptors “black” and “white” to highlight the racial disparities between the victim and the police officer. Using both racial descriptors, instead of simply using one to define the victim’s race, helps fight the overrepresentation of African Americans as criminals and the overrepresentation of white people as victims that exist in crime-related news reports. Like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* brings whiteness into discussions of police brutality by explicitly mentioning whiteness.

Furthermore, the *Washington Post* also used the racial descriptor “black” in a headline, which reads, “Four Minneapolis officers are fired after video shows one kneeling on neck of black man who later died.”¹²⁵ After this one article, however, the headlines in the *Washington Post* used George Floyd’s name instead of a racial descriptor. In addition, the racial descriptor “white” is not used in any of the headlines in the *Washington Post*.

News coverage in the *Washington Post* included information that expurgates the victim. First, articles write about how George Floyd was suspected of criminal behaviour. For example, one article writes that the police stopped George Floyd because of a “report of forgery.”¹²⁶ Another article referred to the situation as “a suspected “forgery in progress.”¹²⁷ Considering these statements refer to a possible criminal activity performed by George Floyd before his encounter with the police, they can be considered expurgation of the victim. Moreover, articles referred to the official police statement claiming that George Floyd “physically resisted officers.”¹²⁸ Articles mentioning Floyd resisting arrest always included an accompanying statement saying this information came from the police statements. However, the *Washington Post* journalists used the footage recorded at the scene to counter the police narrative. Namely, articles writing how the video told the “real story” or a “vastly different story from the police statement.”¹²⁹ The official police statements depicted the victim as non-cooperative, but the video footage disproved this. Furthermore, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey was quoted stating that after the release of “additional information,” it became clear that the police statement was “not accurate.”¹³⁰ Statements that can be considered expurgation are African Americans by enforcing negative racial stereotypes is therefore limited in the coverage in the *Washington Post*.

¹²⁴ For the complete list of articles consulted, see Appendix C.

¹²⁵ Brittany Shammass, Timothy Bella, Katie Mettler, and Dalton Bennett, “Four Minneapolis Officers Are Fired After Video Shows One Kneeling on Neck of Black Man Who Later Died,” *The Washington Post*, May 26, 2020.

¹²⁶ Shammass, et al., “Four Minneapolis Officers Are Fired After Video Shows One Kneeling on Neck of Black Man Who Later Died.”

¹²⁷ Editorial Board, “Another Unarmed Black Man Died at the Hands of Police. When Will It End?” *The Washington Post*, May 26, 2020.

¹²⁸ Shammass et al., “Four Minneapolis Officers Are Fired After Video Shows One Kneeling on Neck of Black Man Who Later Died.”

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

The articles published in the *Washington Post* often referred to other instances of police brutality against African Americans. For example, the first article published on Floyd's death also mentions the death of Ahmaud Arbery, who was shot by white men when he was out on a run. Although his death did not happen at the hands of police, it did cause a "national conversation about the rush to judgement of unarmed black men."¹³¹ Other articles remember Philando Castile, who was shot and killed during a stop while his girlfriend and her four-year in his car in 2016, and Sandra Bland, who was detained after an alleged unsafe lane change and was later found hanging in her jail cell in 2015.¹³² Jamar Clark, who was fatally shot in 2015, and Justine Damond, an unarmed black woman who died in 2017, were also mentioned.¹³³ The coverage thus shows an awareness of the larger issue of police brutality.

This awareness shines through even more in articles the *Washington Post* published that were dedicated to addressing the problem of race within the American judicial system and the police. On June 11, 2020, the *Washington Post* published an article in which the author analyses how systemic racism and racial discrimination pervade nearly every aspect of American life, from policing to health care, employment, and housing. As such, the article aligns perfectly with the main tenets of Critical Race Theory. On June 10, 2020, an article was published under the headline "There's overwhelming evidence that the criminal justice system is racist. Here's the proof" was published. The headline perfectly reflects the article's contents since the author argues that the American justice system is racist in the body of the text. The article offers an extensive list of evidence from research that varies from the relation between race and incarceration rates, the death penalty, and even the school-to-prison- pipeline. By listing evidence of the negative impact of race on African Americans, the author highlights very clearly that systemic racism prevails in American policing and the American justice system.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the role of race in news coverage of the death of George Floyd in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. This chapter has found that in the coverage of George Floyd's death, both newspapers addressed racial differences most often by using the racial descriptors "black" or "African American" and "white" together. This signals development in the use of racial descriptors since the coverage of King and Rice employed the racial descriptors "black" and "African American" more frequently than "white" to highlight racial disparities. The frequent use of

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Donna F. Edwards, 'There Seems to Be Nothing Our Black Sons and Daughters Can Do to Remain Alive,' *The Washington Post*, 30 May 2020.

¹³³ Holly Bailey, Brittany Shammass, and Kim Bellware, "Chaotic Scene in Minneapolis After Second Night of Protests Over Death of George Floyd," *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2020.

the racial descriptor “white” in the coverage of Floyd’s death problematises whiteness in the context of police brutality contexts. Consequently, the invisibility of whiteness that buoys its dominant position in society is challenged.

Moreover, both newspapers included information from the official police statement that would have expurgated the victim if both newspapers did not use the video evidence to counter the police narrative. Lastly, both newspapers situated George Floyd’s within the larger context of police brutality that perpetuates systemic racism in American policing. Here we most clearly see a change over time from the Rodney King beating in 1991, the shooting of Tamir Rice in 2014, and the death of George Floyd in 2020. References to other instances of police brutality were sparse in the Rodney King case, and the event was framed as unique to the LAPD. However, the coverage of the Tamir Rice and George Floyd events quickly drew comparisons to other instances of police brutality, situating them in the larger context of police brutality against African Americans.

News coverage of police brutality in 2014 was a watershed moment. Public awareness of systemic racism and police brutality increased in 2014, as the coverage of Rice’s death demonstrated how the police are part of a system that oppresses African Americans. Since then, news coverage of police brutality has progressed by publishing more thematic coverage on the deep-rooted issues with American policing. By framing Floyd’s death within the larger context of police brutality, the coverage of his death aligns with Critical Race Theory as it shows how police brutality corroborates systemic racism.

CONCLUSION

This study has analysed news coverage in the New York Times and the Washington Post on three instances of police brutality against African Americans - the beating of Rodney King in 1991, the shooting of Tamir Rice in 2014, and the death of George Floyd in 2020. This research has closely read newspaper articles by focusing on three features to discover the role of race in the coverage of these events. Namely: the use of racial descriptors (i.e., “black,” “African American,” and “white”) to highlight the racial disparities between the parties involved; the mention of negative aspects of the victim’s background or their behaviour that could negatively impact the public perception of them; and lastly, whether the news coverage places the event within a larger context of police brutality and systemic racism by referring to other cases of police brutality.

This study has found that the racial descriptors “black” and “African American” are used significantly over the racial descriptor “white” to highlight racial disparities in the coverage of the Rodney King and Tamir Rice events. The coverage of the George Floyd event used the racial descriptors “black,” “African American,” and “white” equally. From the King beating to the Rice shooting, we see a drop in explicit references to race which can be explained by the overemphasis on Tamir’s age rather than his race in the framing of the event. Explicit references to racial disparities did increase in the coverage of Floyd’s death compared to the coverage of Rice’s death. These findings hold for both the New York Times and the Washington Post.

The usage of the racial descriptor “white” has increased over time. Whiteness has consequently started to become problematised in discussions on police brutality. Historically, whiteness has functioned as the dominant racial category, which has always enjoyed a great sense of invisibility in which the power of whiteness lies. The hidden authority that accompanies whiteness is what gives it this power. By consistently using the racial descriptor “white” in articles discussing police brutality the invisibility aspect of whiteness is removed. The hidden authority that accompanies whiteness is unveiled meaning this can now be appropriately challenged. Including whiteness in discussions of police brutality against African Americans helps challenge the systemic racism within American policing by bringing the authoritative power of whiteness to light.

Furthermore, this research has found that the existence of video footage aided journalists in countering official police statements that expurgate police brutality victims. So, technological advancements aid journalists in writing stories of police brutality more truthfully and prevent expurgating statements from reinforcing racial stereotypes and affecting public opinion. Lastly, this study found that coverage of police brutality over the years has framed instances of police brutality within a larger context of America’s problem with policing. Newspapers framed the Rodney King beating as a unique event within the LAPD. From the Tamir Rice shooting onwards, the coverage

frames the events as part of a larger problem of police brutality and systemic racism in the United States.

This research, of course, is not without limitations because it has studied a limited number of cases of police brutality against African Americans in two newspapers. Analysing a larger number of instances of police brutality in more newspapers, possibly including some with a different political slant than the ones selected in this study, could lead to the subsequent conclusions varying from the ones drawn in this study. Further research could thus build upon this study by filling in some of the gaps between these cases. This research focused on three cases over thirty years by adding more cases in between those to pinpoint precisely where changes occurred and why. Furthermore, additional research could address issues of intersectionality by analysing coverage of police brutality against African American women. In this case, Critical Race Feminism could be used as a framework to find out how gender plays a role in the coverage of police brutality against African Americans.

News coverage on instances of police brutality has the power to perpetuate racism inadvertently if not done carefully. Subconsciously, the framing in police brutality news stories can reinforce harmful racial stereotypes. How can the news media implement meaningful change to not further harm African American communities with the stories they write? How can the news media become catalysts for positive change? Omitting mentions of race altogether from coverage of police brutality does not solve the issue. Removing mentions of race may cause further harm to African American communities, as this would bolster ideas of “colour-blindness” in American society. Critical Race Theory warns against this since colour-blindness, the not addressing notions of race, increases the difficulty in solving race-related issues as it fails to acknowledge race in the first place. On the other hand, increasing mentions of race, specifically the inclusion of whiteness in coverage of criminal events involving white people, may aid the cause of racial minorities as it corrects the overrepresentation of African Americans in crime-related contexts.

Another solution to improve news coverage of police brutality is to grant journalists more freedom to steer away from the professed neutrality that the newspapers want them to adhere to. Suppose newspapers allow their journalists to raise fundamental questions on race-based violence and how race influences social structures, as well as allow them to make moral judgements on the very nature of racial oppression. In that case, they could ignite critical reflection in their readers regarding race relations. If newspapers step away from treating systemic racism as a “fact of life” in their news coverage, they could implement meaningful change and help challenge systemic racism. The denial of problems within racialised relations prevents meaningful action. Evidence shows that newspapers are at the forefront of levelling the playing field between black and white by framing police brutality stories as also involving whites.

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APPENDIX A.

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APPENDIX C.

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