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# Pulling the Trigger: Dehumanization of African Americans and Police Violence

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The following research would not have reached fruition if not for the support, guidance, and editorial assistance of Dr. Andrew Stewart, at Clark University, Worcester MA.

## PULLING THE TRIGGER: DEHUMANIZATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS AND POLICE VIOLENCE

Themal Ellawala '17 | Psychology Major



### ABSTRACT

Police shootings and killing of African American targets has reached epidemic proportions and has captured the attention of the entire country. Research in social psychology has studied many dimensions of this layered issue, and has generated disparate findings regarding the role of racial bias in police violence. The process of implicit dehumanization of African Americans, especially youth, has been proposed as particularly salient in making shoot/don't shoot decisions. This paper suggests that the paradigm of dehumanization could complete the understanding of racialized police violence and reconcile contradictory research findings, while highlighting areas for future research.

### INTRODUCTION

Sandra Bland. Mya Hall. Tamir Rice. Michael Brown. They are four African Americans killed by police officers since the beginning of 2014, part of an ever growing list of casualties. Analysis of the statistics on justifiable homicides, the term used to represent such deaths, reported by the FBI – which only about 750 of the 17,000 law enforcement agencies contribute data to – shows that over a seven year period ending in 2012, an average of 96 Black targets were gunned down by White police officers annually, translating to approximately two deaths per week (Johnson, Hoyer, & Heath, 2014). Meanwhile, controversy surrounds the FBI's admission that over 50% of such justified homicide statistics have gone unaccounted for over the past decade (McCarthy, 2015). The response of racial minorities to such violence in the form of protests staged nationwide garnered significant media attention and has galvanized the White House and the Department of Justice to call for reforms in law enforcement.

Social psychology, too,

has contributed to this reform effort by exploring the various dimensions of police-civilian interactions and the decision to shoot (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Greenwald, Oakes, & Hoffman, 2003; Payne, 2001). However, an analysis of the extant literature demonstrates that there are several missing links that need to be investigated further. The construct of dehumanization, which speaks to the placing of others “outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply” (Opatow, 1990, p. 1), may be particularly salient to the study of racialized police violence and has the potential to bridge the gaps in the field and unite disparate findings. This review will begin by summarizing the dominant lines of research on police violence in social psychology. It will then review the literature on the topic of dehumanization in situations of police violence against African Americans, particularly how processes of dehumanization may underpin decisions to shoot Black civilians, and highlight how further study of this phenomenon

could augment our understanding of racialized police violence. This will be further emphasized by highlighting areas for future research.

### RESEARCH ON RACIAL BIAS IN STATE-SANCTIONED VIOLENCE

The stereotype of Black criminality has been studied for several decades (Allport & Postman, 1947; Devine, 1989; Duncan, 1976; Payne, 2001; Sagar & Schofield, 1980). Countless experiments have demonstrated White America's association of African Americans with crime as one that is frequent, consistent, and automatic (Payne, 2001; Payne, Lambert, & Jacoby, 2002). Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie & Davies (2004) discovered a significant bi-directionality in this African American-crime association, such that being primed with the concept of crime produced an attentional bias towards Black faces and vice versa. The dominant paradigm in the area of racialized police violence is examining shoot/don't shoot decisions in virtual simulations, in which civilian participants are presented with scenes and instructed to

shoot only at armed targets both quickly and accurately. Such studies have discovered a significant effect of racial bias on shoot/don't shoot decisions (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2007; Correll, Urland, & Ito, 2006). A majority of these studies found that participants tended to shoot faster and more accurately at an armed Black man than an armed White man, while being slower and less accurate in responding to the "don't shoot" command when presented with an unarmed Black target compared to an unarmed White target. If tenable, these results complicate the logic of Stand Your Ground laws, which remove the duty of civilians to retreat before force is used in self-defense. These findings suggest that as civilians are more likely to make shoot/don't shoot decisions based on racial biases, such laws may carry dire consequences for people of color. Many have argued that this was the fate of Trayvon Martin, as Florida was the first state to enact Stand Your Ground legislation (Coates, 2013).

However, a long-standing controversy in this paradigm of research is the existence of studies that contradict these findings, demonstrating null results and even a shooter bias towards White targets (Correll, Park, Judd, Wittenbrink, & Sadler, 2007; Harmer, 2012; Hunsinger, 2010; Taylor, 2011). One proposed approach to reconciling these conflicting findings is to move past recruiting college student samples to studying populations that are trained as first responders and have experience in dealing with suspects, such as police officers

(Correll, Park, Judd, Wittenbrink, & Sadler, 2007; Steinberg & Scott, 2003). It is hypothesized that such populations would perform in qualitatively different ways to civilians. However, the most recent review of shoot/don't shoot literature (Mekawi & Bresin, 2015), analyzing 42 different studies, indicates that while ample evidence exists for shooter bias in general, the differences in shooter bias between civilian and law enforcement samples are not as significant as is claimed to be. Rather, this meta-analysis posits that factors such as stringency of gun laws and the racial diversity of one's geographic location have a significant impact on shooter bias (permissive gun laws and more racially diverse cities correlate with a greater shooter bias, which the authors use to explain part of the variance between the results of various studies in the field). Thus, it is safe to surmise that there is much that is missing in our psychosocial understanding of police violence. One piece of this puzzle may very well be dehumanization.

#### DEHUMANIZATION AND STATE-SANCTIONED VIOLENCE

Dehumanization has long been studied by historians, anthropologists, and philosophers, given its use in justifying violence against groups such as Jews in Nazi Germany and Africans in slavery (Haslam & Loughnan, 2012). However, it was the research of Leyens (2001) on the attribution of humanness that marked the beginning of the most recent wave of research on dehumanization in social psychology. This research focused on the attribution of primary emotions (e.g. happiness, anger, sadness) and secondary

emotions (e.g. jealousy, sympathy, hope) to in-group and out-group members. It has been discovered that secondary emotions, which are perceived to distinguish humans from nonhumans, are consistently denied to those who don't belong to one's social group (out-group members) and preferentially attributed to members of one's own group (in-group members; Demoulin, et al., 2004; Gaunt, Leyens, & Demoulin, 2002; Leyens, et al., 2001). Goff et al. (2008) expanded this paradigm beyond primary and secondary emotions to consider the history of African American-White relations in the United States, and shed new light on the implicit dehumanization of the former. This research maintains that historically-informed representations of African Americans as ape-like, less phylogenetically advanced beings have an unconscious effect on social perceptions, in spite of the absence of any conscious awareness of such an association. This seminal study set the foundation for much of the research that has been conducted on the influence of dehumanization on the policing of Black citizens.

Associating African Americans more closely with the ape metaphor enables individuals to deny them a human essence (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008). This carries significant implications for the treatment of African Americans. Using several samples of predominantly White undergraduate males, Goff et al. discovered that this implicit association was bi-directional – being primed with ape stimuli improved attention to Black faces and vice versa – and

independent of explicit or implicit bias against African Americans (2008). However, their most significant finding was that those primed with ape-related stimuli were more likely to endorse violence against a Black individual, specifically a single Black suspect being violently subdued by a group of police officers. This finding bears a direct connection to the question of the conditions in which racialized police violence occurs, and the cognitive processes that underpin such actions.

Much of the research on dehumanization utilizing samples of police officers has focused on the dehumanization of Black youth and subsequent criminal justice outcomes. Together, these studies form an alarming picture of the various essentializing processes at play when dealing with a young suspect of color. The theory of psychological essentialism explicates the cognitive processes at play when one perceives certain individuals or groups as having a fixed, immutable underlying nature (Medin & Ortony, 1989). It has been theorized that children are generally perceived as an essential category, distinct from adults due to fixed characteristics such as age and innocence (Giroux, 2000; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Hendrick, 2003; Kitlinger, 2003). However, a study employing mostly White female undergraduate and mostly White male police officer samples has shown that Black children are considered to be less innocent than White children and children in general, from the age of 10 years onwards (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014). Moreover, police officers tend to overestimate the age of

Black targets and consider them more culpable for their actions than White or Latino targets, particularly when those targets were accused of felonies. Black felony suspects were thought to be 4.59 years older than they actually were, meaning that boys would be misperceived as legal adults at approximately the age of thirteen and a half years. The researchers found the implicit dehumanization of Black youth predicted the degree to which their age was overestimated and how culpable they were perceived to be. Most significantly, a correlation between these results in the laboratory and the actions of participants in the field was demonstrated. Implicit dehumanization predicted the likelihood of force used by police officers against Black suspects compared to those of other racial identities, even after controlling for the degree of resistance displayed by the suspect and the nature of the location (i.e. high-crime neighborhood; Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014).

The above study generates empirical evidence that Black children are considered to be less essentialized as a group, and thus afforded fewer protections than what is typically granted to children. This conclusion was explicitly measured, and the results have shown that those primed with dehumanizing associations of African Americans were less likely to endorse a distinction between Black children and Black adults, compared to White children and White adults (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014). Replications of this study reveal that police officers primed with dehumanizing stimuli are

less likely to judge a Black male offender as immature and more likely to perceive him as culpable and deserving of punishment (Graham & Lowery, 2004; Rattan, Levine, Dweck, & Eberhardt, 2012). Taken together, these independent studies create a picture of Black youth as those who are denied the essential category of children and are characterized as less human. This non-human attribution could stem from the ape metaphor that has long been used in conjunction with Blackness. However, another metaphor historically associated with Black youth is the pickaninny stereotype, which achieved a derogatory connotation by the nineteenth century (Bernstein, 2011). This trope characterizes African American children as inviting violence and resistant, if not immune, to pain. It is possible that these stereotypes of Black youth as hardened, both physically and in terms of criminality, may elicit effects of dehumanization.

This theory raises interesting questions concerning the role of dehumanization during the killing of 12-year old Tamir Rice by Cleveland police. Indeed, one needs to look no further for the real world dimensions of this theory than the daily realities of the U.S. criminal justice system. According to CDC (Center for Disease Control) statistics on law enforcement killings between 1999 and 2011, Black youth between the ages of 15 and 19 are nearly 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than the national average for all races and age groups (Males, 2014). An estimated 250,000 children are sent to adult correctional facilities every year (Parsell, 2012; Redding, 2010), to the detriment

of their physical and mental well-being. Compared to those sent to juvenile facilities, children sentenced as adults are twice as likely to be assaulted by a correctional officer, five times as likely to be sexually assaulted, and eight times as likely to commit suicide (Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2007; Young & Gainsborough, 2000). While dehumanization may not be the sole causal factor behind individual cases such as Tamir Rice's killing or systemic realities such as the incarceration of Black youth, it may be one of a myriad of factors, and an understudied one at that.

It could be argued that the theory of dehumanization is supported by some of the conceptual underpinnings of other lines of research. For instance, Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie & Davies (2004) argue for the importance of social knowledge (e.g. dehumanizing associations such as ape metaphors) in visual perception, which plays a critical role in a police officer's assessment of situations for potential threats. Similarly, Correll et al. (2002) found that participants shot armed Black targets more quickly than armed White targets, irrespective of individual differences in racial attitudes, which speaks to the high degree of automaticity in this process of decision-making. This aligns with the non-conscious nature of dehumanization processes. It has been argued that dehumanization is a more likely pathway to moral exclusion, killings, and genocide than is prejudice (Staub, 1989; Staub, 1990). In all of the studies reviewed above, implicit dehumanization and its behavioral outcomes were observed to be independent of both explicit and implicit bias.

Given that much of the studies in broader social psychology have focused on stereotypes and prejudice (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2007; Correll, Park, Judd, Wittenbrink, & Sadler, 2007; Correll, Urland, & Ito, 2006), dehumanization could be a missing link that deserves further study. It would be interesting to see if the outcomes of those studies with null results will change if participants are primed with dehumanizing stimuli. Could it be that the priming of cognitive schema that liken African Americans to apes override the training, controlled processing capacities, and anti-prejudice attitudes of law enforcement officials? Could it influence split-second decision making and contribute to shooter bias?

Additionally, some attempts have been made to reconcile these divergent findings in the field by attending to individual differences in cognitive processes and social perception, which could explain differences in responses to Black targets (Mekawi, 2014). This research, conducted using an entirely White and mostly female undergraduate sample, suggests that a high degree of fear of racial minorities and low perspective taking ability predicts a lower threshold for shooting at unarmed Black targets. A lower threshold was also predicted by a high degree of dehumanization and low empathic concern. The first result was justified by positing that perspective-taking mitigates the fear that one may have of minorities. While the individual may still fear minorities, the capacity to see things in their perspective prevents an individual from

shooting them. Conversely, a low perspective-taking ability will fail to mediate the fear of minorities. Meanwhile, the negative correlation between empathic concern and dehumanization is interpreted as the affective qualities of empathic concern moderating the denial of affective attributes to certain racial minorities. This research also presents evidence that these findings could be generalized to other racial outgroups, expanding the significance of this line of research beyond African Americans (Mekawi, 2014).

#### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

The limitations of this review are manifold, which to a great degree represent the dearth of literature on the impact of dehumanization on policing. Some of the findings discussed are of correlational nature, and thus require experimental research to explore the causal relationship between dehumanization and behavioral outcomes. While this review focused only on the first point of contact with the criminal justice system, the police, a few studies have charted the impact of dehumanization across subsequent stages of the judicial process. Bridges and Stevens (1998) found, through conducting a content analysis of written reports of probation officers concerning juvenile cases, that the crimes of Black youth were attributed to internal and enduring causes, such as negative personality traits (e.g. being unremorseful), signifying a denial of secondary emotions and of a human essence (Bridges & Steen, 1998). Graham and Lowery (2004) found that probation officers were as likely as police

officers to deny Black suspects a childhood essence and judge them as more culpable. Richardson and Goff (2013) have raised concerns of implicit dehumanization affecting decisions made by public defenders, in the face of high caseloads, as to which cases deserve attention and which do not. Lastly, correlational research shows that subtle media representations of Black convicts as ape-like predict the death penalty, the most severe of all judicial outcomes (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008). Coordinated research could potentially trace the impact of dehumanization throughout the cycle of arrest, prosecution, sentencing, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

Moreover, all of this research has focused on males and racial identity, and has done little to explore other intersecting identities that exist in the space of policing. Given the number of Black trans and cis women who have died at the hands of the police, it is crucial that research explores the dehumanization of various overlapping gender and racial identities. Smith (2004) suggests that a greater number of lethal police shootings occur in disadvantaged neighborhoods, thus highlighting the salience of socioeconomic status. Lower socioeconomic status has been found to be associated with animal stereotypes (Haslam, Loughnan, Sutton, & Spencer, 2014). Neuroimaging studies have also found that brain structures which typically activate during social cognition fail to do so when perceiving drug addicts and the homeless while those implicated in disgust reactions do. Thus, a constellation of traits and identities related to socioeco-

nomie status and race have been found to inspire dehumanization. However, more research exploring this intersection is necessary to better comprehend the cumulative effects of each of these independent processes. Lastly, more research should investigate the role of dehumanization in explaining inconsistencies in results between other studies examining police violence against African Americans, especially in shoot/don't shoot experiments.

Notwithstanding these limitations, existing literature on dehumanization provides insight to how Black youth have been disproportionately affected by policing, how Black men are excessively made the targets of police brutality, and how the racialization of law enforcement has contributed to some of the most significant racial atrocities in post-Jim Crow America.

## PULLING THE TRIGGER: Themal Ellawala

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Thamal Ellawala is a Psychology major with an interest in the intersection of clinical psychology, social theory, and social justice. He is particularly attentive to how stigma and discrimination lead to poorer mental health outcomes among racial and sexual minorities. In the interrogation of these topics, he seeks a unity of psychological epistemes with critical theory, notably queer theory, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies. He is currently involved in research in the Frances L. Hiatt School of Psychology involving racial and sexual minorities, and is designing a foundational study on queerness in Sri Lanka.