Black Lives Matter: Role of Race in Police Violence

The purpose of my research is to determine the extent to which race plays a role in how people view police violence against citizens, as well as how people view citizen violence against police officers. The seemingly innumerable murders of young African American males and females at the hands of, more often than not, white police officers in recent years has made this particular research increasingly relevant. Such instances have also led to the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement, soon after followed by the creation of the Blue Lives Matter movement. I will be investigating how Villanova students react to the following hypothetical scenarios: white police officer violence against a black citizen; black police officer violence against a white citizen; white citizen violence against a black police officer; and black citizen violence against a white police officer. Given my studies of racial attitudes in the United States and previous literature I have consulted on the topic, I believe that this research will further indicate that people are more inclined to justify violence perpetrated by whites against blacks than that of violence perpetrated by blacks against whites, despite the instances of violence in my scenarios being exactly the same, aside from the race of the perpetrator. In addition, I will present respondents with the mission statement of the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the mission statement of the Blue Lives Matter movement, however I will present these statements without indicating which organization they belong to, to remove potential preconceived biases against one organization or the other.

Introduction

On February 26, 2012, sixteen year old Trayvon Martin was gunned down by George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida. Though it was quite far from the first publicized instance of police violence against an African American male, this particular instance became a national conversation about police brutality against minorities. In the several years that followed, the murders of Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and Tamir Rice, among many other young African Americans at the hands of white police officers spawned the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement, among other activist movements. Black Lives Matter seeks to “build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on black communities by the state and vigilantes” (Black Lives Matter). Unfortunately, like most movements which are started by oppressed minorities, parts of white America were quick to villainize Black Lives Matter, most likely out of fear of their capabilities and reach as a social movement. Such animus can clearly be seen and felt in the words of Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke, who has been on record as calling members of the Black Lives Matter movement, “purveyors of hate” (The Economist). These very same fearful whites, particularly police officers who see Black Lives Matter as a direct indictment of their conduct, would eventually respond by creating their own movement, Blue Lives Matter. As this issue of police brutality against minorities, particularly African Americans has increased in relevance and has been increasingly reported on, an abundance of research has been conducted to see how such instances of violence affect the attitudes of the black community toward law enforcement, and the black community in general. Where such literature has fallen short, however, is in seeing how public opinion is the same, or different, in scenarios that differ from the oft reported stories of violence by white police officers against African Americans. As such, I believe that it would be beneficial to compare public reaction to violence by: black police officers against white citizens, black citizens against white police officers, and white citizens

against white police officers to the commonly retold scenario of violence by white police officers against black citizens. My research paper will seek to compare these reactions, as well as assess the external factors that contribute to such reactions.

Literature Review

As I mentioned before, there is a vast amount of research and polling that has been conducted to gauge public reaction to, and the effects of, police brutality against black citizens. Most of this polling and research indicates that people view these instances of violence through a racialized lense, often depending on their own skin color. Though such research is certainly important and beneficial, it has not been quite as comprehensive as it should and can be. Little research and polling has been conducted to find out how public reaction differs when the typical scenario of violence, and the races of those on either side of the violence, differs.

An important piece of literature that not only gave me the inspiration to conduct this current research, but also demonstrates clear examples of racial animus toward African Americans is Jason Smith and David Merolla's, "Black, Blue and Blow: The Effect of Race and Criminal History on Perceptions of Police Violence." A striking piece, Merolla and Smith used a sample of 595 white respondents and presented them with several hypothetical scenarios involving an altercation between a motorist and a police officer. In two of the scenarios, one in which the motorist is white and one in which the motorist is black, the motorist had a criminal record, while that was not the case in the other two scenarios, one involving a black motorist and one involving a white motorist. Merolla and Smith hypothesized that, "individuals will view police violence as more justified when targeted at black citizens and those with criminal histories" (Merolla, Smith, 624). They also included a method of measuring racial prejudice and further hypothesized that, "individuals who have higher levels of racial prejudice will view police violence as more justified" (Merolla, Smith, 624).

Sadly, they found that they were entirely correct on both fronts. They found that whether or not the motorist had a criminal record, regardless of their race, was a huge factor in whether or not the respondents felt that the police violence was justified. They also found that respondents who were above a "critical value of .370" (Merolla, Smith, 636) "viewed police violence against a black motorist as more justified compared to white motorist" (Merolla, Smith, 636). These results, while disheartening were not surprising to me, nor were they surprising to Merolla or Smith, seeing as both of their hypotheses were entirely accurate.

Though this piece is certainly informative and crucial to the body of literature concerning police violence against minorities, I believe that it falls short in certain respects. First, I think that, while it was fascinating to see how criminal record factors into how people feel about police violence, I feel as though it served as something of a confounding variable in this instance. While they attempt to compensate for this by using the SRS (Systematic Racism Scale) to measure racial animus, I believe that the criminal record or lack thereof in their scenarios may have played a more significant role in how people felt about the violence than race did. I also think it would've been beneficial for them to specify the extent of the violence used against the motorist, which the Smith and Merola acknowledge themselves, saying, "this experiment did not manipulate the level of police violence as an experimental variable; instead we presented an intentionally ambiguous situation" (Merola, Smith, 639). Perhaps if they had measured the extent to which respondents justified police violence in an altercation between the motorist and police officer in

which the motorist is killed, their results would've been even more poignant and striking.

I also believe that it would have benefited their research to include scenarios in which the motorist inflicts violence upon the police officer, as I will include in my research. I believe that this would be important in that it would even further demonstrate how people view conflicts between white and black people through a racialized lense, rather than viewing them without prejudice. People should view nearly all violence against police officers as unjustified, but I think it would be interesting to see how many people would attempt to justify violence by a white citizen against a black police officer versus violence by a black citizen against a white police officer. If the number of respondents who attempted to justify either scenario is not equal, then I think that would speak volumes about underlying racial attitudes in the United States.

Theory/Hypothesis

It is often thought that people's views concerning police violence depends on the race of the person you ask, the race of the offending officer, and the race of the victim of the violence. As such, the belief would follow that black people are exclusively outraged by violence against other black people, and it would follow that white people are exclusively outraged by instances of violence against whites. It would also follow that these feelings of outrage are further exacerbated when the race of the perpetrator of the violence is different from that of the person against whom the violence occurred and different from the person being asked about the violence. Though such beliefs are probably more often true than not, it is lazy to simply assume that people are only outraged by violence against their own race without concrete proof. I believe that part of the reason people think this way because of the ways in which society has seemingly pitted the Black Lives Matter movement against the Blue Lives Matter movement, as if they are mortal enemies. Though it is evident that they diverge in many ways, I don't think that one movement was created solely for the purpose of vanquishing the other, but rather than both seek to correct perceived injustices.

In order to test the validity of these beliefs, I will present my respondents with four scenarios, each one with the same general conditions as the others. These scenarios are as follows: violence by a white police officer against a black citizen, violence by a black police officer against a white citizen, violence by a white citizen against a black police officer, and violence by a black citizen against a white police officer. I hypothesize that the majority of respondents that are analyzed will deem the two scenarios in which violence occurs against a black person, whether it be the black citizen or black police officer, as being more justifiable than the violence in the other two scenarios against a white person, whether it be against the white police officer or the white citizen. In addition, I believe that there will be a very strong correlation between which instances of violence the respondents find more palatable, and which social activist movement (Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter) they support more, though the respondents will not know which movement they are supporting, since they will only read the mission statements of the two organizations, independent of the names of organizations which they represent. I strongly believe that such findings would definitively prove the extent to which people view these instances of violence through an exclusively racial lens, rather than viewing these instances objectively, independent of racial bias.

Research Design

Participants

One need not spend much time at Villanova to see that there is not a ton of diversity of the student body. Though I don't know the exact demographics of the student population, it is evident that there are far more white people than there are people of color. As such, I will be using a sample of 200 Villanova students, keeping in mind that the majority of my respondents will be white, by conducting a survey with every tenth person to walk into Bartley Hall on any given week day. No academic hall on Villanova's campus sees more traffic on any given day than Bartley, so I feel that this method of acquiring my sample will yield a sample that is most representative of the Villanova student population. Seeing as most Villanova students are very busy on weekdays, I will compensate students for participating in my survey by entering their names into a raffle for courtside seats for a men's basketball game at Finneran Pavilion.

Procedure

In my survey, respondents will randomly be presented with one of four conditions involving an altercation between a citizen and a police officer, without including any indication of who is at fault for the altercation occurring. Each scenario will be presented as a newspaper article describing an altercation that occurred between a citizen and a police officer. Each of the "articles" does not indicate what precipitated the altercation, but merely reports the events of the altercation in order to remove that potential confounding variable. In two of the altercations, one in which the citizen is black and the officer is white, and one in which the citizen is white and the officer is black, the officer takes more physical harm than that of the citizen. In the latter two scenarios, again, one in which the citizen is black and the officer is white, and one in which the citizen is white and the officer is black, more harm is inflicted on the citizen than that of the officer. In each of the articles, the police officer in question has no known history of racial prejudice and the citizen in question has no known prior criminal record, once again to remove potential confounding variables.

In order to find our answer in regards to how people view such instances through a racialized lense, I will simply asked respondents: "If you had to give a guess, who would you guess is at fault for this altercation occurring?" Respondents will have three options to choose from for each scenario: "the citizen," "the police officer," or "Either one could be at fault" For any person who is presented with this particular scenario, the third answer is obviously the right one, since the article did not include the events that led up to the altercation. I believe that respondents who choose either of the first two choices will choose based on who in the scenario is white and who is black, which would make clear their racialized views of issues such as these, and race related issues in general.

In addition, another component of my survey will come before the respondents read their "article" and make a choice about who they assume was at fault for the altercation. I will present respondents with the mission statements of both the Blue Lives Matter and Black Lives Matter movement, without indicating which statement belongs to which organization. I will ask respondents which of the two statements they feel is more important in our contemporary society, while also giving them the option to say that both are equally important. Doing so will benefit my research in that it will show if respondents value the safety of black lives over that of police lives, or if they believe that all lives are of equal importance, as they and everyone else should. Not only will this component speak to the general racial attitudes of the respondents, but

it will also serve as a nice compliment to the other component of my survey, as I'll have something of a baseline to compare to the responses to the "article" part of the survey.

Conclusion

Racial animus toward African Americans has existed since the inception of our Republic, evolving over the course of several hundred years, as our country has ever so gradually moved toward the ideal of "all men" being "created equal" outlined in our Declaration of Independence. In recent decades, this racial animosity has manifested itself in more subliminal forms, such as police brutality by white officers against black citizens. I hope that by making direct, tangible comparisons between violence by white officers against black citizens and the violence occurring in my other three scenarios, that my research will be a valuable contribution to the plethora of literature concerning such instances of this violence and their effects. Though I feel that my research is largely comprehensive, I think it would've been beneficial to get the reactions of respondents in additional scenarios to the ones which I laid out in this experiment. There's a variety of ways in which the scenarios could've been tweaked, or other scenarios following the same four underlying conditions could've been added that perhaps would've made my research even more comprehensive, and the meaning of my findings even more undeniable. I believe that making the comparisons that I did, as well as these potential additional comparisons, would shine light on how people tend to view these instances of violence through a racial lens, while also removing the ground on which the naysayers and critics of the Black Lives Matter movement stand. Doing so would be a step in the right direction toward the ultimate goal of finally truly rectifying these issues that continue to plague our society.