Media Representations of Police Violence:
A Content Analysis of Newspaper Articles

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction

Media coverage of police use-of-force has grown over the years in the U.S., spurred in part by social media and public outcry over these incidents. As people throughout the country watched the events of these incidents unfold on cable news, they likely became more invested in news regarding these incidents. These police shootings not only prompted demonstrations throughout the country, but were also the major catalysts behind the Black Lives Matter movement, Blue Lives Matter countermovement, and series of police reforms. However, while studies have analyzed media representations of police violence incidents decades ago, little is known about such representations today. News consumption has evolved over the years, with social media helping to disseminate news stories at a much faster rate than in the past and providing greater access to news stories on police violence (Wolf and Schnauber 2015). Existing research suggests that media coverage of more recent police violence may be having a larger impact than coverage of such incidents in the past (Weitzer 2015). Furthermore, the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception of police officers and police use-of-force (Lawrence 2000). Coverage of multiple occurrences of police violence during the same timespan can damage the reputation of police in the cities where the incidents occurred as well as nationwide (Weitzer 2015). "This contamination-by-association is occurring today in a cumulative manner – with each incident pollinating subsequent ones – in part because activists and the media are drawing connections between them" (Weitzer 2015:475).

Using a bivariate approach, this study analyzes newspaper coverage of recent controversial incidents that occurred in three cities within a similar timespan: the police

killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina, and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland. Three *research questions* drive this study: First, what are the main themes appearing in newspaper coverage of these incidents across the three cities? Second, does each newspaper report these themes in a similar proportion of its articles? Third, does this proportion change over time?

Brief Description of the Incidents

Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black man, was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a 28-year-old white police officer, on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. Unlike the other two incidents in this study, the events leading to Brown's shooting were not video recorded. While Ferguson has a predominantly black population, the police force is largely white, with 50 out of 53 being white officers (US Department of Justice Civil Rights Division 2015). The circumstances of the shooting were widely disputed, as Brown was unarmed, and the shooting sparked protests throughout the country drawing attention to the relationship between law enforcement and minorities, along with larger issues such as police justifications for using force on citizens. A grand jury was convened that ultimately elected not to indict Wilson on November 24, 2014 (Taslitz and Henderson 2014). Meanwhile, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) conducted its own investigation, and cleared Wilson (on March 4, 2015) of civil rights violations during the shooting.

In the second case, Walter Scott was shot and killed by police officer Michael Slager on April 4, 2015 in North Charleston, South Carolina. Scott was 50 years old and black, while Slager was 33 years old and is white. On the morning of April 4, Slager

stopped Scott for a non-functioning brake light. When Slager returned to his patrol car, Scott ran from the scene. Slager caught Scott, and the two men were involved in a physical altercation that included Slager's use of his taser. Scott fled again and Slager fired his handgun eight times, fatally hitting Scott five times. This case differed from the Brown incident in that a bystander recorded a video of the shooting on his cell phone. The video contradicted Slager's police report of the shooting, and after it surfaced in the media, Slager was charged with murder on April 7, 2015. Additionally, South Carolina's State Law Enforcement Division (SLED), the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), and the DOJ launched their own investigations into the shooting. The Charleston County grand jury indicted Slager on the murder charge, and the trial is scheduled to begin on October 31, 2016.

On April 12, 2015, just eight days after the Scott shooting, Freddie Gray was arrested in Baltimore, Maryland, for allegedly possessing an illegal switchblade. While being transported to the police station in the back of a police van, Gray fell into a coma and died of a spinal cord injury on April 19, 2015 (Wen et al. 2015). Gray was in the custody of police officers Caesar Godson, Garret Miller, Edward Nero, William Porter, Brian Rice, and Alicia White on the morning of the incident. Police Commissioner Anthony Batts stated that the officers violated the department's policy by failing to secure Gray inside the van. The officers also failed to provide Gray medical attention even after Gray, who had asthma, requested an inhaler and appeared to have trouble breathing (Cohn 2015). Like in the Scott case, a bystander recorded a video of the Gray incident, but only recorded the officers placing Gray into the police van, which is not when Gray sustained the injuries that led to his death. However, the video showed Gray

being dragged to the van, with his legs appearing to be broken. On May 1, 2015, Baltimore City State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby filed charges against the six police officers after the medical examiner's report ruled Gray's death a homicide. The charges against the officers ranged from second-degree murder (depraved heart) to assault and illegal arrest. On May 21, 2015, a grand jury indicted the officers on most of the charges filed by Mosby, removing two charges from three of the officers and adding charges of reckless endangerment against all the officers. (Additionally, the DOJ is conducting three probes, including a civil rights probe, into the Baltimore Police Department). Each officer will be tried separately.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

News Media Construction of Public Problems

The media helps define public problems through their selection of events they prioritize and the narrative they communicate regarding those events. Gurevitch and Levy (1985:19) note that "various social groups, institutions, and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality" in the media. As managers of the media, journalists determine what becomes news, provide certain types of people with more news coverage, and restrain or mute other voices entirely (Gans 1979; Wolfsfeld 1997). Cottle (2000:2) argues that by selectively giving a voice to certain populations, the media actively establishes a binary of "us" versus "them," which reinforces societal divisions. By addressing or disregarding certain issues, the media provides and denies power to different groups' versions of reality. Lawrence (2000:5) points out that "when this perspective is applied to the study of public-policy issues in the news, the question

becomes: What kinds of 'realities' are represented in news coverage of policy issues? And whose realities are they?"

Primary Definers and Marginalized Voices

Researchers have found that certain groups of people play a role as the primary definers of events and issues, which results in the media representing those groups' versions of reality (Graber 1993). Decades of communications research demonstrates that these groups typically consist of institutionally positioned officials, such as police officers or other authority figures (Hall et al. 1978). Journalists perceive these officials as the authority on knowledge and rely heavily on them as sources for news (Bennett 1996; Cook 1998; Tuchman 1978). Relaying news through the viewpoint of officials is considered normal and routine.

Paul Hirschfield and Daniella Simon (2010) find that officials provide the authoritative voice to the media due to the organizational routines of news corporations. In this routine, editors assign certain reporters to repeatedly cover local crime stories, also called a "crime beat" (Hirschfield and Simon 2010:158). These reporters then foster relationships with authority figures, such as police officers, to gain rapid and timely access to information on crimes. Studies reveal that as reporters develop positive relationships with police officials, some reporters begin to identify with police values and consequently distort news stories in favor of the police (Barak 1994; Ericson 1995; Lawrence 2000; Chermak and Weiss 2005). Similarly, Lawrence (2000) finds that news reporting of police use-of-force has the potential to portray, and even promote, public tolerance for police violence. This further normalizes police use-of-force against citizens.

On the other side of the spectrum are the non-official sources. David Paletz and Robert Entman (1981) note that journalists marginalize the voice of non-officials, such as activists, due to their lack of political clout. Therefore, non-officials traditionally receive minimal news coverage. Unlike officials, non-officials rarely act as primary definers of events and issues. Lawrence (2000:6) summarized this dichotomy by stating "the news is best viewed as a product of (unequal) struggle among competing news sources who often press competing politically charged claims about issues and events."

However, some scholars continue to debate how media portrays lethal police violence and its impact on the public and in society. On the one hand, scholars argue that newspaper coverage of these encounters reflect tolerance for police violence (Hirschfield and Simon 2010). On the other hand, researchers contest that news stories of police use-of-force shift away from the normal representation of the police as the authoritative voice and recast police officers into antagonistic roles (Cerulo 1998; Ross 2000). In these instances, non-officials are depicted as the protagonists, and police use-of-force is reframed as a public problem (Lawrence 2000; Ross 2000). When news stories of police violence become sensational, the media grants non-official sources an opportunity to provide their critical interpretations of these incidents, thereby altering the representation of the news (Ross 2000). Despite finding the opposite of this, Hirschfield and Simon (2010:156) concur with other scholars in that "major events like a sensational police killing can shift patterns of symbolic construction in police violence news, even if only temporarily." This notion will be examined in this study, as the killings I have chosen represent local news stories that gained national attention.

Media Impact on Public Perceptions

Some scholars have argued that while the media represents a certain reality portrayed to the public, the public does not necessarily adopt these realities. Many scholars contend that the public, not the media, has the power to make meaning of the news (Fiske 1994; Morley 1992; Neuman, Crigler, and Just 1993). However, other studies have found that by setting the agenda for what is defined as news, relaying the significance of this news, and dictating how this news should be perceived, the media frequently influences public perceptions of events and issues (Iyengar 1991; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972). At the very least, the media provides cues to the public that guides its construction of meanings. Weitzer and Tuch (2006) confirmed this in a study that found that public perceptions of police misconduct and support for reforms could be predicted based on a person's exposure to news stories on police misconduct. Individuals who are heavily exposed to such reporting were more likely to view police misconduct as widespread and to endorse a host of reforms in policing.

Little research has been conducted on how the media portrays *recent* occurrences of police violence. Therefore, I examined media representations of recent incidents in the three cities in order to contribute to a contemporary understanding of this important issue.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to answer the research questions – the main themes appearing in newspaper coverage of these incidents across the three cities, whether the three newspapers differed significantly in the proportion of themes they presented, and whether this proportion changed over time – I conducted a content analysis of newspaper articles

from the major newspapers where the events occurred. These newspaper articles consist of straight news reporting, editorials, op-eds, and Associated Press articles published in these newspapers. The three incidents were selected because they occurred in roughly the same 12-month time period and involved a police killing of a civilian. The sources were the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* for Michael Brown, the *Post and Courier* for Walter Scott, and the *Baltimore Sun* for Freddie Gray. Furthermore, in order to assess whether the proportion of each newspaper's articles reporting of main themes changed over time and potentially altered subsequent coverage (e.g., cross-fertilization), articles were categorized into three distinct time periods: articles written after the Brown incident (August 2014); between the Scott and Gray incidents (both in April 2015); and after the Gray incident (April 2015).

The articles were collected in two ways, depending on the newspaper. The first involved the use of the online database Lexis Nexis for articles from the *Baltimore Sun* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Keywords used to search for articles were "police" and the full names of the victims (in quotation marks to ensure that the name is searched for as a whole and not separated by the search engine). For example, articles on Michael Brown were searched for with the key words, "Michael Brown" and "police." Lexis Nexis does not contain articles from the *Post and Courier*, so that newspaper's articles were accessed through an online subscription. Similar to articles on Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, the Walter Scott articles were gathered by searching in the *Post and Courier* website's search engine for the key words, "Walter Scott" and "police." In order to capture all articles pertaining to these three police violence incidents, a search with just the full name of the victim and without the key word "police" was also conducted to account for any

other articles on the incidents that may have been missed in the first search. Finally, until the first few articles began naming the victims, a search with only the key word "police" was conducted for the first couple of weeks of each incident to collect articles that immediately reported on the incidents, but had not yet stated the victims' names. In each search result, all articles were sorted by date to more effectively eliminate duplicate articles. The timespan of the articles used for this research is from August 9, 2014 to September 30, 2015. A total of 578 articles were collected – 267 from *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 119 from *Post and Courier*, and 192 from the *Baltimore Sun*.

Once the articles were collected, I used a grounded theory approach to construct the list of codes based on common themes that emerged from the articles. These codes were tagged to each article if they were mentioned at any time within the article; all other codes were marked as "not mentioned." Additionally, I paid close attention to certain aspects of the newspaper coverage, such as what the newspapers identified as the *cause* of the incident, since this was vital to answering my research question on how the newspapers represent police violence. The result of the coding process yielded 49 themes, of which 26 were main themes with some of these themes categorized into groups based on a common topic (e.g., the "Institutional Racism" and "Racial Profiling" codes were sub-codes of "Racism"). In order to ensure inter-coder reliability, a randomly selected sample of 10% of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles were analyzed by a criminology graduate student at George Washington University, using the coding structure I constructed. This resulted in a 99% match.[1] My analytic plan consisted of two

[1] I used a website to assign a random selection of these articles. Each article was automatically associated with a number, and these numbers were then entered into the

approaches. First, I used a univariate approach to identify the prevalent themes

highlighted among all three incidents. I then used Pearson's Chi-Square tests to examine

bivariate relationships between the major reported themes between the specific incidents

and across time periods. The computer program Atlast.ti was used to manage the coding

process and Stata for statistical analyses.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

What are the main themes in newspaper coverage of these police violence incidents in the three cities?

Out of the total sample of 578 articles, 267 articles appeared in the *St. Louis Post-*

Dispatch, 119 articles in the *Post and Courier*, and 192 articles in the *Baltimore Sun*. By

the end of the coding process, 26 main themes emerged. Some themes that initially

appeared could have been labeled as more than one theme, but by appearing in the

articles in slightly different contexts, one specific code was isolated.

Some main codes appeared in a similar proportion of articles across the

newspapers. Despite the different nature of each of the incidents, these coded themes

point to broad issues that appear to transcend city context and may reflect even wider

constructions of the problem of police misconduct elsewhere in the nation. This helps

illustrate how the newspapers, and perhaps the public, may perceive police violence. One

of these is Police-Community Relations, which indicated that people lacked trust in the

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website http://www.random.org, which generated a random listing of the numbers. The

first 27 articles, which consist of 10% of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles on Brown,

were then given to the other coder.

police force or relations between the police and communities worsened after the incident. Seventeen percent of the 578 articles in the entire sample mentioned this theme, with 18% of the Brown articles, 13% of the Scott articles, and 16% of the Gray articles mentioning Police-Community Relations. And although these proportions are not statistically significant differences from the overall proportion, Police-Community Relations was clearly a notable theme that emerged in newspaper coverage across all three incidents. For instance, when discussing the killing of Scott, a *Post and Courier* (2015) editorial noted, "It has shaken the community's confidence in law enforcement," and another article highlighted "strained relations between the local police force and black community members" stemming from the Scott killing (Knapp 2015c). Other main themes that emerged in a similar proportion of articles across the newspapers were issues of Racial Disparity in criminal justice processing; Character Assessments of the officer or victim; Reform measures (reintegration of ex-offenders and more effective police training); and the effects of the War on Drugs.

There were also important differences in the proportion of themes reported between the three incidents, including Accountability Problem, Causes (Victim Precipitation, Rotten Apple, Racism), Ferguson Effect, Officer's Previous Misconduct, Blame for the Incident (Police and Victim), Police Violence, Questioning Investigation, Racism (Institutional Racism and Racial Profiling), Reform (Body Cameras, Citizen's Review Board, and Revenue Reform), and Zero Tolerance/Broken Windows.

Does each newspaper report these main themes in a similar proportion of its articles?

Table 1 displays the proportion of articles that mentioned the 16 coded themes for the entire sample as well as by newspaper that I examined. Pearson's Chi-Squared tests were used to assess the associations between themes and the newspapers covering each incident. This section focuses exclusively on the statistically significant differences in the proportions of themes reported between newspapers

Table 1. Main Themes in Each Newspaper

Variable	Total Sample	St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Brown)	Post and Courier (Scott)	Baltimore Sun (Gray)	Statistical Significance (Chi-Square)
	N = 578	N = 267	N = 119	N = 192	
Accountability Problem	15%	12%	24%	14%	*
Causes					
Victim Precipitation	15%	9%	31%	14%	***
Rotten Apple	6%	6%	10%	2%	**
Racism	6%	8%	8%	2%	*
Ferguson Effect	6%	3%	1%	12%	***
Misconduct					
Officer's Previous Misconduct	2%	0%	8%	1%	***
Incident					
Blaming Police	33%	25%	50%	32%	***
Blaming Victim	15%	20%	10%	9%	**
Police Violence	40%	33%	41%	48%	**
Investigation					

Questioning Investigation	26%	26%	9%	37%	***
Poverty or Economic Inequality	15%	21%	8%	15%	***
Racism					
Institutional Racism	18%	20%	19%	14%	NS
Racial Profiling	18%	21%	23%	10%	**
Reform					
Body Cameras	21%	15%	51%	10%	***
Citizen's Review Board	9%	14%	8%	3%	***
Revenue Reform	11%	23%	2%	1%	***
Zero Tolerance/Broken Windows	5%	2%	7%	8%	**

Note: *** p≤0.001, ** p≤0.01, * p≤0.05.
NS = not significant.
N refers to the total number of articles in the given sample.

Accountability Problem

Accountability Problem refers to the newspapers mentioning the police as rarely being held accountable for their misconduct, outside of the incidents studied for this research. For example, the *Post and Courier* reported: "Too many times communities across the country have watched officers exonerated in controversial shootings" (Hicks 2015). This is an example of the Accountability Problem theme, as it mentioned officers being absolved of potential misconduct. Another example appeared in an editorial in the *Baltimore Sun* (2015b:16A): "Baltimore has paid more than $6 million in judgments and settlements in civil suits against police during the past five years…. Police are rarely charged after encounters that result in deaths and are even more rarely convicted as a result." This quotation appeared in an editorial, illustrating the media-elite opinion that

police are rarely held accountable for people they kill while on duty. Since editorials reflect the views of the editorial board of a newspaper, they may have more of an impact on subsequent coverage than ordinary news articles. The newspapers discussed the Accountability Problem theme in 15% of all articles. While this theme appeared in newspaper reports of all three incidents, the *Post and Courier* mentioned this theme in a higher percentage of articles (24%).

Causes

Three main causes were presented in the newspapers as reasons for the Brown, Scott, and Gray incidents having occurred. Victim Precipitation is when a civilian allegedly behaved in a way that precipitated or escalated the incident and resulted in the police officers using force against the person. Mentions of the victim resisting the officer, attacking the officer, fleeing the scene, or brandishing a weapon were coded as Victim Precipitation. In a sense, victim precipitation portrays the officer's use-of-force as justifiable. Victim precipitation accounted for 15% of the total 578 articles. However, in the case of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, only 9% of articles revealed victim precipitation as a cause of the incident. These articles stated that Brown and Wilson became involved in a physical altercation when Wilson stopped Brown and his friend on the street. These articles also stated that after being shot, Brown's body lurched forward as if he were going to charge at Wilson. All of these movements were reasons the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* cited for Wilson shooting Brown. As for the *Post and Courier* articles on Scott, nearly all articles that discussed victim precipitation reported Scott as fleeing the scene. The *Post and Courier* described Scott as fleeing the scene when Slager pulled him over

as a part of a routine traffic stop for a non-functioning brake light. When Slager caught up to Scott, the two became involved in a physical struggle, and Slager tased Scott. When Scott fled again, Slager fired eight bullets, five of which struck Scott, effectively killing him. Victim precipitation was evident at several points during the Scott incident – when Scott fled the scene the first time, resisted and attacked the officer, and fled the second time. Regarding Gray, the *Baltimore Sun* articles (14%) stated that Gray reportedly fled the scene when he made eye contact with one of the officers present, so the officers chased Gray and arrested him. While the newspapers reported victim precipitation as a cause of the incidents in each of these cases, it was reported in a higher proportion of the *Post and Courier* articles (31%).

Another one of the causes also revealed a great variation between newspapers. Rotten Apple refers to the police officer involved in the incident being an irresponsible or otherwise problem police officer – a "bad cop." In this case, the cause of the incident was due to the officer's alleged character, specific only to the officers involved in the incident. This code emerged in 6% of the total number of articles. When this code was mentioned in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles regarding Brown, the articles portrayed Wilson as a callous officer who made poor choices. For example, an article reported that Wilson "pulled up and ordered [Brown and his friend] to 'get the F on the sidewalk' and grabbed Brown, 18, in the throat" (2014:A9). Later, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* quoted Police Chief Frank McCall referring to Wilson: "You've come across a bad apple…. There are methods and ways of going about getting that bad apple plucked out" (Bock 2014:A11). Rotten Apple was mentioned in a higher proportion of *Post and Courier* articles (10%) than in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (6%) and *Baltimore Sun* (2%). The

higher percentage of articles in the *Post and Courier* was as expected because the majority of these articles concluded that Slager unjustifiably shot Scott, as was revealed by a bystander's video. Due to the video, not much could be disputed regarding Slager's actions. Therefore, the vast majority of the *Post and Courier* articles blamed Slager for the shooting – a code I will discuss later – and portrayed this incident as having occurred due to Slager being a "rotten apple."

Finally, racism was depicted as another cause of the incidents and accounted for 6% of the total number of articles. This theme emerged when the newspapers cited racism, either on the part of the individual officer or entire police department, as the driving force behind the incidents. This code was mentioned in 8% of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles, sometimes appearing literally, such as in an article that quoted a woman stating, "Racism killed Brown" (Deere 2014:A1). The code also materialized in more subtle ways, such as when the *Post and Courier* gave voice to William Barber, president of the North Carolina chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), regarding Scott's death: "All of these things should force us to recognize that we still have systemic racism… When you see an officer shooting eight times at a running man, you have to ask, 'What is he really shooting at? What is he really afraid of?'" (Hicks 2015). The same article later stated, "In America a black man can be killed for having a faulty brake light on his car" (Hicks 2015). In cases like these, the newspaper supported racism on the part of the police as a cause of Scott's death.

Blaming Police vs. Blaming Victim

This is an important theme, as it most directly reveals whose side the newspapers supported – the police officer's or victim's. As Lawrence (2000) and Hirschfield and Simon (2010) found, the media frames authorities as the protagonists in news stories. However, this may have changed recently. As the media covered recent incidents of police violence, coupled with an emerging movement that places police use-of-force tactics under intense scrutiny, reporting may involve increased questioning of the authorities, as discussed below. Indeed, this content analysis revealed that the police were blamed in twice as many articles (33%) as those where the victim was blamed (15%).

Blaming Police was evident when North Charleston Mayor Keith Summey stated that Slager had made a "bad decision. 'When you're wrong, you're wrong,' Summey said. 'If you make a bad decision, don't care if you're behind the shield or just a citizen on the street, you have to live by that decision'" (Knapp 2015d). This statement was quoted by the *Post and Courier* in a sizable portion of its articles, and coded Blaming Police. An example from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* includes an editorial referring to Officer Wilson: "We've got some John Wayne cops who don't know that 'tactical withdrawal' is an honored military strategy" (St. Louis Post-Dispatch 2015a:A14). When the *Baltimore Sun* blamed officers, it typically described their behavior as violent and highlighted their failure to grant Gray's requests for medical attention. One article (Cohn 2015:14A), for example, described a bystander's video:

> The video shows the 5-foot-8, 145-pound Gray screaming on the ground with police kneeling beside him before he's dragged to the police van, where he appears to stand briefly. Witnesses have said Gray's legs looked broken and suggested the injury may have occurred during his arrest. Police acknowledged Gray was having trouble breathing and asking for an inhaler for asthma. Police now say he should have received medical treatment before being loaded into the van, where they also say they failed to buckle him in.

17

And an editorial challenged the officers' rationale for arresting Gray: "Officers had no probable cause to chase Gray when he ran after making eye contact with one of them, and no probable cause to restrain, search, and arrest him" (*Baltimore Sun* 2015c:20A).

The Scott incident was resolved swiftly by authorities, who arrested and charged Slager immediately after video evidence surfaced, as the video contradicted Slager's police report regarding Scott's death. The video helped clarify what happened during the incident, leaving little to debate. Although a video exists of part of the Gray incident as well – Gray being dragged to a police van – the video does not capture injuries that Gray sustained while inside the van. Unlike the Brown and Gray incidents, the fact that a video documented the shooting of Scott may explain why the theme of blaming police is reflected in a much higher proportion of the *Post and Courier* articles (50%) compared to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (25%) and *Baltimore Sun* articles (32%).

As previously mentioned, a lower percentage of articles overall contained the theme of blaming the victim than blaming the police. As was expected, a low proportion of the *Post and Courier* articles (10%) mentioned blaming the victim. Of these articles, the newspaper reported that Scott posed a threat to or endangered the life of Slager, which justified Slager's shooting of Scott. This angle was more common in the early *Post and Courier* articles before the video of Scott's shooting was released. For example, an article stated, "Police allege that during the struggle the man gained control of the taser and attempted to use it against the officer. The officer then resorted to his service weapon and shot him" (Elmore and MacDougall 2015). Blaming the victim was evident when the newspaper described a struggle followed by the victim amassing control of the officer's taser.

Meanwhile, the articles in the *Baltimore Sun* mentioned Gray's possession of a knife, which police alleged to be illegal, Gray's testing positive for opiates and cannabinoid during the time of his arrest, or Gray's previous schemes to injure himself while in police custody in order to collect settlement. Similar to the *Post and Courier* articles, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that the victim struggled with the officer prior to being shot. Additionally, the newspaper often cited security video footage of Brown stealing cigars from a convenience store and shoving the store attendant, thus portraying Brown as dangerous and thereby defending Wilson's actions, especially after the two men fought. This security video footage eventually became its own topic in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* because it was released to the public by authorities at the same time as Wilson's name, which could have been released at a separate time and much sooner than the video. This may account for this theme materializing in twice the percentage of articles in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* than the other two newspapers. Moreover, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* mentioned some people who theorized that authorities released the officer's identity, which was long overdue, in conjunction with the security footage to shift attention from the officer to victim, and therefore sway the jurors in favor of the officer.

Ferguson Effect

The Ferguson Effect is a term that suggests a causal relationship between increased public attention to police misconduct and crime spikes; to avoid further criticism, police officers reduce their activity, emboldening offenders and resulting in increased crime (Pyrooz, Decker, Wolfe, and Shjarback 2016). The Ferguson Effect was

alluded to in 6% of all articles, but this percentage varied among the newspapers. The lower proportion of *Post and Courier* articles (12%) mentioning this is understandable considering that the authorities resolved the Scott incident swiftly compared to the incidents of Brown and Gray.

Officer's Previous Misconduct

The "Officer" in this theme was defined as the police officer or officers who were directly involved during the incidents. In the Brown and Scott shootings, this was Officers Wilson and Slager, respectively. In the Gray incident, this consisted of Officers Godson, Miller, Nero, Porter, Rice, and White. This code refers to any mentions of when these officers committed any wrongdoing in the past.

The *Post and Courier* reported that previous complaints had been filed against Slager for misusing his taser. One complaint came from Mario Givens who reported being tased for no reason in September 2013. The larger percentage of *Post and Courier* articles (8%) depicting this theme may be explained by the fact that the newspaper more generally blamed Slager for the incident and is driven by Slager's apparent history of using excessive force, "Last year, the 108 officers who acted with any type of force used it an average of 2.6 times each. Slager alone used force seven times, one of which involved an arm technique" (Knapp 2015a). In Baltimore, Officer Rice, who was accused of threatening to kill an ex-girlfriend in 2008, accounted for the 1% of *Baltimore Sun* articles discussing this theme. This event led to Rice having his weapons seized by Carroll County sheriff's deputies. This theme was not present in the *St. Louis Post-*

Dispatch articles, perhaps because Wilson did not have a record of misconduct prior to the Brown shooting.

Police Violence

The newspapers mentioned police use-of-force in 40% of all articles. This code refers to any mention of police violence *outside the incidents being studied* and usually associated police violence as a problem. These mentions could be specific, prior incidents of police violence *in any city* or a *general critique* regarding police use-of-force actions. In all mentions of this theme, the newspapers portrayed the police in a negative light. Of the times the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles (33%) on Brown discussed this code, many cited VonDerrit Myers and Kajieme Powell, who both died at the hands of the police in St. Louis shortly after the Brown incident occurred. Myers was shot and killed by police on October 8, 2014 after shooting an officer. Powell was shot and killed by police on August 20, 2014 after provoking them by brandishing a knife and yelling at the officers to shoot him. These incidents coincided with the already heavy newspaper coverage of Brown and were incorporated into some of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles as stories on police violence and race, since both Myers and Powell were black, or as stories framing Brown as innocent because, unlike the Myers and Powell incidents, Brown was unarmed at the time of his shooting.

The *Post and Courier* articles (41%) conveying police violence consisted of specific incidents, such as Slager unlawfully tasing Givens and references of police treatment of civil rights protesters on "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, Alabama. At other times, mentions of police violence included general statements, such as when the *Post*

and Courier reported that the Scott incident "renewed scrutiny of police officers' use-of-force against black men and ignited challenges to patrolling methods that had long been criticized in North Charleston" (Knapp 2015b). In addition to specific police violence incidents and general statements on police violence towards black men, the *Baltimore Sun* articles (48%) reported the Baltimore police department's history of giving "rough rides" to suspects who had been arrested. A "rough ride" is when victims cannot protect themselves due to being handcuffed, or restrained by other means, and are violently thrown around inside a police vehicle while the driver intentionally drives the vehicle aggressively (O'Connor 2005). An article in the *Baltimore Sun* defined a "rough ride" as when "officers intentionally drive erratically, causing shackled passengers to bounce helplessly against the walls of the van" (Marbella 2015:1A). "Rough rides" was prevalent in many of the *Baltimore Sun* articles, as the newspaper speculated on how Gray sustained injuries in the back of the police van that ultimately led to his death.

Questioning Investigation

Despite studies finding that the media perceive authority figures as experts and often defer to them (e.g., Lawrence 2000), the theme of questioning or criticizing the official investigations regarding the deaths of Brown, Scott, and Gray was a theme that materialized in a higher proportion of all articles compared to most of the other codes (Hall et al. 1978). In the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles on Brown, this code typically emerged when reporting on the controversial decision of choosing a grand jury, a secretive process, and in mentions of the prosecutor presiding over the grand jury being biased. Regarding the process of the grand jury, a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* article quoted

Attorney Benjamin Crump saying that the prosecutor "had too much control over the grand jury. 'The grand jury will do whatever the prosecutor wants them to do…. This has always been about what evidence he presents and how he presents it'" (Hampel 2014:A8). When bringing forth the issue of prosecutor bias, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote about the prosecutor Robert McCulloch's father, a police officer who was killed in the line of duty while defending himself against a black man. Other statements of Questioning Investigation referred to the jurors being biased, such as in a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (2014e:A13) editorial:

> The grand jurors most likely are predominantly white; and the structural racism in St. Louis County, which is largely hidden from most white residents, is probably as bad as, if not worse than, structural racism anyplace else in the country. Under these circumstances, it would be reasonable to assume that at least some if not most grand jurors may have a bias - not necessarily a conscious bias but just a way of looking at the world - that might lead them to evaluate what happened in a manner favorable to Darren Wilson.

This is an important indictment because the editorial board is acknowledging that *implicit racism* exists, and the grand jurors' potential bias may color their perception of the shooting in favor of Wilson.

The *Post and Courier* noted Questioning Investigation in the lowest percentage of articles (9%). This is logical because the Scott incident, again, was resolved quickly when Slager was arrested and charged immediately after the video's release, which led to little criticism from the public. Of the *Post and Courier* articles that questioned the investigation, many gave voice to activists who demanded that Ninth Circuit Solicitor Scarlett Wilson recuse herself from the Scott case, contending that she had not been tough enough when prosecuting police officers in the past.

Meanwhile, a higher proportion of *Baltimore Sun* articles (37%) revealed this theme compared to articles from the other two newspapers. However, unlike the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *Post and Courier* articles that displayed concern on the side of the victim for a fair prosecution of the officer, the *Baltimore Sun* articles depicted concern for the officers involved. For example, in an article, Mosby faced criticism for her handling of the Gray incident: "Attorneys for the officers say that Mosby's public announcement of the charges has tainted the pool of potential jurors for their trial" (Duncan 2015:1A). Other articles in this newspaper stated that Mosby was too quick to issue an indictment against the officers, cherry-picked judges to get a search warrant approved, or contested her charges against the officers. Finally, the *Baltimore Sun* debated the issue of the officers being tried in Baltimore, arguing that this would not lead to a fair and impartial trial due to a presumption of prejudice in the city. Perhaps the important findings are not just that the newspapers highlighted this theme in a significantly different proportion of articles, but the context of the coverage; more specifically, that the *Baltimore Sun* criticized actions regarding prosecuting the officers on behalf of the officers while the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *Post and Courier* criticized actions regarding prosecuting the officers on behalf of the victim.

Poverty or Economic Inequality

The Poverty or Economic Inequality theme links police misconduct and public distrust of the police to racial and socioeconomic disadvantage and the public policies that contribute to these outcomes. For example, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editor Gillbert Bailon was quoted as saying, "What has not grown with [Ferguson's black population] is

the political representation, the economic opportunity…. They feel very isolated and additionally, a deep mistrust for the police there. Many cities around the country…have similar issues" (Raasch 2014:A4). Other mentions overlapped with the Revenue Reform code, such as in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (2014d:A16) editorials stating that "81 municipal courts in St. Louis County trample on the constitutional rights of the poor" and criticizing a "police and court system that preys on the poor, treating them as chickens to be plucked rather than citizens to be served and protected." (2014c:A14). The *Post and Courier* also highlighted these issues, such as this op-ed: "Nobody should be jailed for being poor. This is society's problem. It goes beyond the police" (Moskos 2015). The *Baltimore Sun* (2015d:22A) elaborated on this issue in its editorials: "Why did Gray run? He had been arrested a number of times in the past on relatively minor charges. Did that make him a bad person, a shady character? His friends and neighbors say no. What it makes him is all too typical in a neighborhood where generations of crushing poverty and the war on drugs combine to rob countless young people like him of opportunities." The Poverty or Economic Inequality theme is important because it reveals the newspapers' construction of police misconduct as linked to larger socio-economic inequalities.

Racial Profiling

For the purposes of this study, Racial Profiling refers to the practice of police officers selectively, and without probable cause, stopping and searching people based on their race. The lower proportion of articles in the *Baltimore Sun* (10%) may be due to the police initially not targeting Gray as a suspect of crime; instead, Gray was the one who made eye contact with an officer and fled, thus triggering the suspicion of the officers.

Another possibility for the lower percentage is that Baltimore has a majority black

population and a majority black police force, whereas the Ferguson and North Charleston

police departments are majority white (Ashkenas and Park 2015). The newspapers

portrayed Brown and Scott, on the other hand, as having been stopped by Wilson and

Slager for being black. In an article by Bock (2014:A11), for example, the *St. Louis Post-*

Dispatch discussed the necessity of parents to explain racial profiling to their children:

> Many African-Americans consider it a rite of passage to have a
> talk with their father or parents about showing respect when
> stopped by a police officer. Johnson said he had the conversation
> with his kids, even though they are not old enough to drive,
> knowing that they could be questioned while out walking the dog
> around the block.

Meanwhile, the *Post and Courier* quoted Malik Shabazz, president of Black Lawyers for

Justice, as saying, "American police were hunting black men 'like a deer or a dog'"

(Knapp 2015e). Other *Post and Courier* articles raised the issue of racial profiling more

passively: "Some black friends…have long and frequently told me about being harassed

by police officers without credible cause. Those pals have been convinced of, and

convincing in their assertions of, racial bias in those encounters" (Wooten 2015).

Reforms

Lawrence (2000:117) states, "News events become key determinants of serious

policy discussions in the mass media…. Events matter not only because they often

catalyze policy debates but because those events and the problems they represent must be

defined." Clearly, the Brown, Scott, and Gray incidents sparked debates in implementing

reforms. The newspapers referenced three major types of reform in their reporting of the

incidents. Body cameras worn by police officers while on duty were cited as a sensible

reform measure in over half of the *Post and Courier* articles (51%) on Scott. This may be because the Scott shooting was caught on video by a bystander, which led to the immediate arrest and charging of Slager. In other words, the *Post and Courier* articles did not overlook the significance of the video, and the newspaper highlighted discussions on body cameras being worn by police officers as an important and necessary measure of reform. While the *Post and Courier* reflected the highest percentage of articles deliberating on body cameras, each city implemented body camera policies after the incidents occurred. Despite the *Baltimore Sun* (10%) revealing the lowest proportion of articles regarding this reform, the video footage of Gray being dragged into the police van could have influenced the public's perception of the Gray incident as well as prompted the body camera policy.

The citizen's review board refers to a group of people, who are not affiliated with the police, participating on a board that reviews police practices that range from officers' use of foul language or rude behavior to deadly force. This was proposed by each city as a means to monitor and hold police officers accountable for any misconduct. While each of the newspapers discussed a citizen's review board to some extent as an imperative accountability tool for police officers, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles on Brown largely framed the discussion around the issues with implementing these review boards. For example, an editorial by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (2015b:A12) stated: "There has been talk of adding a civilian oversight board to the St. Louis city police department, the largest police agency in the region. But it got caught up in political squabbles and remains on hold." A later article explained that the "political squabble" revolved around the issue of the board lacking subpoena power: "The review board would lack subpoena

power, which was a point that drew considerable debate over the past months" (Pistor and Bogan 2015:A1). The *Post and Courier* articles also discussed the need for these boards to have subpoena power, but not to the extent discussed in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles. Finally, mentions of the citizen's review board appeared in a lower proportion of the *Baltimore Sun* articles (3%), perhaps because Baltimore had already implemented these boards before the Gray incident occurred (Puente, Serrano, and Pierce 2015).

A different kind of reform targets the fines imposed on offenders. Although this is an issue with the courts per se, it can also influence police practices. The Revenue Reform code indicates calls to limit the amount of revenue municipal courts can collect. In Ferguson, a reform measure that resulted from the Brown incident was to lower this maximum from 30% to 10% and cancel 220,000 of outstanding arrest warrants for nonviolent municipal offenses, largely from traffic violations. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* cited that the city unfairly profited from those who could not afford to pay traffic tickets and were disproportionately people of color. When these people could not pay their tickets, the city enforced additional fees, thereby amounting to even more money owed and leading to arrest warrants. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published an article describing this practice as "bigotry and profit-driven law enforcement - essentially using the black community as a piggy bank to support the city's budget through fines" (Johnson 2015:A4). Shortly after, an op-ed in the *Post and Courier* stated: "We need to stop seeing the criminal justice system as a source of revenue" (Moskos 2015).

Revenue Reform emerged in a much higher percentage of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles (23%). Fines and court fees comprising the second largest source of

revenue for Ferguson may explain this greater proportion. An editorial by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (2014b:A12) noted that fines and court fees totaled $2,635,400 in 2013: "In 2013, the Ferguson Municipal Court disposed of 24,532 warrants and 12,018 cases, or about 3 warrants and 1.5 cases per household." The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (2014a:A17) editorial board wrote again later, "Twenty-five percent of the city's revenue comes from traffic citations, prompting a local public defender to argue that most people see the city as targeting its citizens to raise revenue, not to 'serve and protect' them." This exposé implied that major reforms were needed in Ferguson's criminal justice system.

Zero Tolerance/Broken Windows

The Zero Tolerance/Broken Windows theme offers a different aspect regarding sanctions for minor offenses. This code refers to the policing strategy that preventing minor crimes, such as vandalism, helps create an atmosphere of order and lawfulness, therefore preventing more serious crimes from occurring (Wilson and Kelling 1982). The newspapers mentioned this type of policing in 5% of the total number of articles in this study. When mentioned, this theme tended to overlap with Racial Profiling. For example, the *Post and Courier* reported in an article: "The Police Department, which has 343 sworn officers, has fought accusations in the past that aggressive patrolling tactics had unfairly targeted poor, predominately black communities" (Knapp 2015d). Similarly, an editorial by the *Baltimore Sun* (2015a:12A) stated, "Mass arrest and incarceration strategies of the past have only exacerbated tensions between police and minority communities." This collective view of the editorial board may have led to a higher

proportion of the *Baltimore Sun* (8%) articles mentioning this code than the other two newspapers.

Does this proportion change over time?

One caveat is that policing incidents that occurred elsewhere in the country during the same timespan may have skewed the variation in coverage between these time periods. This research does not claim one incident's coverage necessarily influenced the nature of subsequent reporting by other newspapers. Instead, this study merely investigates whether any changes in the proportion of articles mentioning main themes occurred between the occurrences of the Brown, Scott, and Gray incidents. The findings of this part of the study reveal that the proportion of newspaper articles that depicted main themes changed somewhat over time.

This research question was answered by conducting a longitudinal analysis of changes in the newspapers' reporting of main themes following each subsequent incident. This was executed by sorting articles into time periods based on the date of each incident: *Brown* (August 9, 2014 to April 4, 2015), *Brown and Scott* (April 4, 2015 to April 12, 2015), and *Brown, Scott, and Gray* (April 12, 2015 to September 30, 2015). Each time period is unique in that it does not overlap with the other time periods. The *Brown* time period encompasses articles written after the Brown shooting, but before the Scott shooting. Thus, the *Brown* period consists solely of articles from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Following the same procedure, articles published during the *Brown and Scott* period were written after the Scott shooting, but before the Gray incident. Thus, the *Brown and Scott* period contains articles from both the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *Post*

and Courier articles. Finally, articles in the *Brown, Scott, and Gray* period were written after the Gray incident to the last day the articles were collected for this study. Therefore, articles in the *Brown, Scott, and Gray* period include all articles from the *Baltimore Sun* in addition to some articles from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *Post and Courier* articles. As noted in Table 2, out of the total sample of 578 articles, 224 articles emerged during the *Brown* period, 41 articles during *Brown and Scott*, and 313 articles during *Brown, Scott, and Gray*. The short timespan of the *Brown and Scott* period explains the lower number of articles written during this period.

Table 2. Main Themes in Each Time Period

Variable	Total Sample	Brown *(August 9, 2014 - April 4, 2015)*	Brown and Scott *(April 4, 2015 - April 12, 2015)*	Brown, Scott, and Gray *(April 12, 2015 - September 30, 2015)*	Statistical Significance (Chi-Square)
	N = 578	N = 224	N = 41	N = 313	
Accountability Problem	15%	14%	29%	14%	*
Causes					
Victim Precipitation	15%	10%	29%	17%	**
Rotten Apple	6%	7%	22%	3%	***
Racism	6%	6%	15%	5%	*
Ferguson Effect	6%	4%	2%	8%	+
Misconduct					
Officer's Previous Misconduct	2%	0%	10%	2%	***
Incident					

Blaming Police	33%	27%	56%	33%	***
Blaming Victim	15%	22%	20%	8%	***
Police Violence	40%	31%	12%	21%	**
Investigation					
Questioning Investigation	26%	27%	0%	28%	***
Poverty or Economic Inequality	15%	21%	7%	13%	**
Racism					
Institutional Racism	18%	21%	32%	13%	**
Racial Profiling	18%	21%	29%	14%	*
Reform					
Body Cameras	21%	14%	46%	23%	***
Citizen's Review Board	9%	13%	10%	6%	*
Revenue Reform	11%	21%	10%	4%	***
Zero Tolerance/Broken Windows	5%	0%	10%	7%	***

Note: *** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$, + $p \leq 0.10$.
N refers to the total number of articles in the given sample.

All of the statistically significant associations between themes and newspapers that were discussed in the previous section were also significant between these time periods, with the addition of the Institutional Racism code. Institutional Racism refers to the idea that racism is structurally embedded in a police department. In the *Post and Courier*, this code appeared in phrases such as "stop racist police terror" and "to change a culture of fear-induced bigotry in and beyond law enforcement" (Knapp 2015f; Darby 2015).

For most codes, their prominence increased following the Brown and Scott incidents before declining during the final *Brown, Scott and Gray* period. However, five of the codes did not follow this trend. The proportion of articles that portrayed police violence and questioning investigations decreased during the *Brown and Scott* period and increased during the *Brown, Scott, and Gray* period. Meanwhile, the percentage that mentioned blaming the victim during the incident, along with the Reform codes of Citizen's Review Board and Revenue Reform, continuously decreased between time periods.

The proportions associated with each code in Table 2 are likely skewed due to the large number of *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles in the overall sample. Therefore, the following table illustrates these proportions across the three time periods for the sub-sample of articles from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* only. Due to the small number of *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles that appeared after the Scott shooting, but before the Gray incident, I focus primarily on the results for the first (*Brown*) and final time periods (*Brown, Scott, and Gray*). The findings reveal statistically significant associations between the Accountability Problem, Causes (Racism), Blaming Police, Reform (Body Cameras), and Zero Tolerance/Broken Windows themes and time periods, and thus will be the focus of the discussion below.

Table 3. Main Themes in Each Time Period for *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* Only

Variable	Brown (August 9, 2014 - April 4, 2015)	Brown and Scott (April 4, 2015 - April 12, 2015)	Brown, Scott, and Gray (April 12, 2015 - September 30, 2015)	Statistical Significance (Chi-Square)

	N = 224	N = 6	N = 37	
Accountability Problem	14%	17%	0%	*
Causes				
Victim Precipitation	10%	0%	5%	NS
Rotten Apple	7%	17%	0%	NS
Racism	6%	33%	14%	*
Ferguson Effect	4%	0%	3%	NS
Misconduct				
Officer's Previous Misconduct	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Incident				
Blaming Police	27%	33%	11%	+
Blaming Victim	22%	33%	8%	NS
Police Violence	34%	33%	27%	NS
Investigation				
Questioning Investigation	27%	0%	22%	NS
Poverty or Economic Inequality	21%	17%	24%	NS
Racism				
Institutional Racism	21%	33%	8%	NS
Racial Profiling	21%	33%	19%	NS
Reform				
Body Cameras	14%	50%	16%	+
Citizen's Review Board	13%	33%	16%	NS
Revenue Reform	21%	50%	30%	NS
Zero Tolerance/Broken Windows	0%	17%	5%	***

Note: *** p≤0.001, * p≤0.05, +p≤0.10.
N/A because this code was not mentioned at all in the Michael Brown articles.
NS = not significant.
N refers to the total number of articles in the given sample.

Accountability Problem

While the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* mentioned this code in 14% of articles during

the *Brown* period, this issue was raised in 17% of articles during the *Brown and Scott*

period and 0% during the *Brown, Scott, and Gray* period. Due to the *St. Louis Post-*

Dispatch articles ceasing entirely to report on this theme after the onset of the Scott and

Gray incidents, the 14% of the total cohort of articles that revealed this code during the *Brown, Scott, and Gray* period is solely due to the *Post and Courier* and *Baltimore Sun* articles. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* may have stopped presenting the Accountability Problem because it began to focus on other themes, such as reform measures, by the time the Scott and Gray incidents occurred.

Causes (Racism)

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* referred to racism as a cause of the Brown shooting in a higher percentage of its articles during the *Brown, Scott, and Gray* period (14%) by more than twice as much as articles during the *Brown* period (6%). While a higher proportion of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles initially emphasized Victim Precipitation compared to the other causes of the incident, the greater percentage of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles depicting racism as a cause during the *Brown, Scott, and Gray* period indicates that the newspaper shifted its focus after the Scott and Gray incidents occurred. This could indicate that reporting of the incident over time leads to more discussions of the underlying issue of unwarranted police use-of-force and racial bias.

Blaming Police for the Incident

The percentage of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles blaming police decreased substantially from the *Brown* (27%) to the *Brown, Scott, and Gray* (11%) period. This decline could have been a result of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* having reported on the Brown incident for several months prior to the onset of the Scott and Gray incidents. Like

the Accountability Problem theme, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* may have transitioned to discussing other issues by the time the Scott and Gray incidents occurred, such as racism being a cause of the shooting.

Reform (Body Cameras)

The percentage of *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles describing police officers wearing body cameras while on duty as a measure of reform was higher in both of the later time periods as opposed to the initial time period. This indicates that *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* continued to focus a greater proportion of articles on body cameras following the occurrences of the Scott and Gray incidents compared to before these incidents.

Zero Tolerance/Broken Windows

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* began to cite this theme only after the Scott shooting occurred and continued to raise this issue following the Gray incident. This may reveal that later coverage of the Brown incident in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles were impacted by the reporting of subsequent incidents, rather than having the reverse effect despite the overall large sample of *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

By conducting a content analysis of newspaper reporting on the Brown, Scott, and Gray incidents, this study addressed questions on what themes appeared in newspaper coverage of these police violence incidents in the three cities, whether each newspaper reported these themes in a similar proportion of its articles, and whether this proportion

changed over time. For the question of what themes emerged in newspaper coverage of these incidents in the three cities, I found that common themes emerged throughout articles in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on Brown, *Post and Courier* on Scott, and *Baltimore Sun* on Gray. The themes mentioned in a greater proportion of these articles were Police Violence, Blaming Police for the Incident, and Questioning Investigation. In other words, it was not unusual for the news media to raise questions or draw damaging conclusions about individual officer behavior or larger policing problems that might be responsible for police killings of civilians. This critical approach contradicts the finding in older studies that coverage of these types of incidents was typically distorted in favor of the police and even indirectly promotes tolerance for police violence (Hirschfield and Simon 2010:158; Barak 1994; Ericson 1995; Lawrence 2000; Chermak and Weiss 2005).

For the second research question on whether each newspaper reported these main themes in a similar proportion of its articles, I found that this proportion differed for each newspaper. Out of the notable codes that emerged from answering my first research question, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles largely presented racism as a cause for the incident, blamed the police more than the victim, and advocated the reform measures of a citizen's review board and limiting the amount of revenue cities can raise based on minor offenses. The *Post and Courier* articles focused on accountability for police being rare; all three causes for the incident (victim precipitation, the officer being a "rotten apple," and racism); the officer's previous misconduct; blaming the officer; racial profiling; and body cameras as a means of reform. Finally, the *Baltimore Sun* articles highlighted the Ferguson effect, police violence, questioning the investigation, and zero tolerance/broken windows policing.

For the third research question on whether the proportion of articles reporting themes changed over time, I examined the presence of themes between the onset of incidents for the total sample of articles. This study found that the newspapers' focus on themes evolved between the reporting of subsequent incidents in other cities. All of the statistically significant themes between newspapers were also significant between time periods. Since the proportions associated with each code may have been biased due to the large number of *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles in the overall sample, I conducted a similar analysis in order to examine how coverage of the Brown incident developed. My findings revealed that the proportion of *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles discussing certain themes also changed significantly following the reporting of other incidents in other cities, such as police rarely being held accountable for misconduct and racism as a cause of the incident.

While these results are generalizable within this study, they may not be generalizable for other newspaper coverage for other incidents of police violence. More research of other incidents of police use-of-force is required to confirm whether similar themes emerged in articles in other newspapers. Additional research is also needed to confirm my others findings that newspapers cover police violence incidents differently and that they focus on different themes following reporting of later incidents in other cities. Finally, it would be interesting to see research conducted on the reasons for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Post and Courier*, and *Baltimore Sun* highlighting different themes after subsequent incidents were reported in other cities.

The content of the articles suggest certain policy implications. First, police officers need to maintain better relations with the communities in which they work. These

articles cited plenty of evidence of unlawful practices, such as police violence historically being an issue and racial profiling tactics, which fostered a distrust of the police that turned communities against them. Since previous research demonstrates that the media has an impact on public perceptions, the negative coverage of police in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Post and Courier*, and *Baltimore Sun* articles could have tarnished the reputation of police nationwide (Lawrence 2000; Weitzer 2015; Cerulo 1998; Ross 2000). Additionally, with the newer ways that people consume media, such as through bystander's videos and social media, police actions are more visible to the public than ever before, and police are therefore held to a higher standard of accountability for misconduct. The bystander's video of the Scott shooting demonstrated this, as the video's release immediately caused the officer's arrest and indictment.

The most important finding in this study concerns the issue of whether media reporting on policing continues to favor the police perspective, documented in previous studies, or whether there has been a recent shift toward a more critical or victim-sympathetic perspective. While in the past, the media framed authority figures as protagonists in its articles, the recent coverage of the Brown, Scott, and Gray incidents suggest that the newspaper's representation of authority figures in incidents that gain national attention has become increasingly skeptical of police behavior and also highlights underlying issues of unwarranted police violence and racial bias as systemic issues. Over a decade ago, Lawrence (2000:84-85) found that while the media digressed from taking cues from authorities in some policing incidents, "officials act as primary definers of issues and events…. And when non-officials, especially activists, try to set the news and the institutional agendas, they often falter against the structural and cultural

determinants of routine news. The news about police use of force is usually structured

around official claims." Thus, despite some news coverage that questioned the

authorities' perspectives, Lawrence (2000) contends that authorities continued to remain

the primary definers of events and problem construction for the media. However, my

analysis suggests that the news media seems to have departed from its prior pattern of

generally accepting the police version of events and instead increasingly scrutinizes

police behavior. Compared to when Lawrence conducted her research (mid-1980s to mid-

1990s), the news media today takes more cues from non-authority figures. Television

reporting, particularly cable news, and talk shows regarding specific policing incidents,

larger social problems, and public protests also played a role in furthering this trend in

their coverage following similar instances of police violence not examined in this study.

The news media seems to have changed the way it covers incidents of police violence by

turning towards non-authority figures and by raising larger issues about problematic

policing beyond the specific incident, and these changes may be reshaping public

perceptions of policing in the United States.

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