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## Cultivating Police Use of Force Perceptions through Cinema: Maintaining the Racial Divide?

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### ABSTRACT AND ARTICLE INFORMATION

This study draws on Robert E. Park's writings regarding the impact of cinema on acculturation and James Baldwin's extensive reflections on the role of entertainment media in promoting the racial divide in the United States. Public opinion studies following the Trayvon Martin case and others reveal a racial divide regarding decisions to not charge or acquit officers. Research has shown that most members of the general public have no personal knowledge of both the criminal justice system and other races. Therefore, opinions are largely dependent on knowledge garnered through the media. Cultivation theory postulates that long-term exposure to specific media messages can result in subjects adopting specific opinions. Before a cultivation effect can be determined, the messages conveyed must be identified. This exploratory first step cultivation theory analysis examines municipal police officer use of force scenes in the first 40 years of the core cop film genre leading up to the killing of Trayvon Martin. A total population of 112 films was systematically identified, and all 468 police use of force scenes contained within the genre served as the units of analysis. Each scene was examined to determine depiction patterns and messages conveyed based on the race of officer. Findings revealed that White officers were overwhelmingly represented in use of force scenes, while minority officer scenes were isolated to specific years and films. Findings also demonstrated a dependence on a White officer's presence when minority officers used force on Whites. The historical origins and role of such depictions in cultivating current public perceptions of use of force are discussed.

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*These movies are designed not to trouble, but to reassure; they do not reflect reality, they merely rearrange its elements into something we can bear. They also weaken our ability to deal with the world as it is, ourselves as we are.*

James Baldwin (1960, p. 375)

*To watch the TV screen for any length of time is to learn some really frightening things about the American sense of reality.*

James Baldwin (1968, p. 56)

As early as 1937, Robert E. Park of the Chicago School of Sociology wrote extensively about the media's impact on society (e.g., Park, 1937, 1938, 1940, 1941a, 1941b). While he focused primarily on news media, in his article entitled "Reflections on Communication and Culture," he discusses how cinema is far more influential in acculturating people to a common set of beliefs than news and or the written word (Park, 1938). Having been a journalist in his early years, and later serving as Booker T. Washington's secretary at the Tuskegee Institute, it is not surprising that he was aware of the intersection of race and media and that he continued to write about race, media, and urban analysis throughout his career.

Social scientists have continued to grapple with the different forms of media, issues surrounding race, public opinion, and where these areas intersect. However, despite the extensive interest in these areas by social scientists, it can be argued that some of the greatest insight into the intersection of race and media did not come from a social scientist, but rather from an essayist, playwright, and novelist. James Baldwin spent most of his career breaking new literary ground by writing about the Black experience in the United States. He writes in a way that not only informs the reader about the personal Black experience, but also informs the reader about White society's perceived, or sense of, reality. Writing largely amidst the racial unrest of the 1950s and 60s, he not only exposed the underlying racial divide in society, he also exposed the role entertainment media plays in establishing and maintaining the racial divide. It was this same unrest that laid the fertile ground for the cop film genre to take root in the 1970s (Rafter, 2006).

This study expands on social science research that has addressed media and race by identifying the patterns and messages regarding police use of force conveyed through cinema. Specifically, it examines the forty years leading up to the Trayvon Martin shooting and its impact on public opinion. Baldwin's concept of an "American sense of reality" is what media researchers call a socially constructed reality.

Utilizing this as a guide post, the current study employs cultivation theory which was designed to both identify the messages conveyed and determine the impact of the messages in cultivating a group's shared set of beliefs.

This study focuses on theatrically released films because this medium not only appears in theaters, but also in all the platforms that television programming appears. Further, theatrically released films are not limited to appearing on just one or two television channels. More importantly, theatrically released film depictions of modern, urban law enforcement have served as the archetype for both film and television since the early 1970s (Murray, 2016; Rafter, 2006). Beyond the influence of establishing the archetype, there has also been a recent trend of directly converting cop films to television series such as *Lethal Weapon* (2016), *Rush Hour* (2016), and *Training Day* (2017). According to cultivation theory, this direct expansion to television would only serve to increase exposure to those messages found in theatrically released films and consequently influence viewers' socially constructed reality regarding law enforcement and use of force.

This study's contribution is fourfold. First, a major void in scholarly literature is addressed regarding the entertainment media's depiction of municipal police officer use of force and how such depictions may differ based on race of officer. Second, the possible effect of such depictions on public perceptions is discussed. Third, the use of cultivation theory in disciplines beyond communications is introduced and encouraged. In cultivation analysis, the first step seeks to identify the messages conveyed, and then, those findings are utilized in a second study or second step cultivation analysis to identify a cultivation effect. This study's purpose was to identify the patterns and messages surrounding the depiction of municipal police officer use of force scenes according to the officer's race in the first four decades of the core cop film genre. Fourth, the Unified Film Population Identification Methodology (UFPIM) is introduced to the broader social science realm. A comparatively new methodology, the UFPIM, allows future film and television researchers the ability to establish complete film and television populations. This allows researchers to overcome the traditional critiques of representativeness and replicability (Wilson, 2009). Before discussing the study itself, it is important to describe the history of what was historically considered the "proper" roles of minority police officers and minorities in the entertainment industry.

## Literature Review

### “Proper” Role of Minority Police Officers

Minority municipal police officers are relatively new to American culture, including their ability to utilize force of any kind. Of all racial minorities, the evolution of Black police officers is the most documented and thereby gives us the best insight into this issue. While there was a brief period following reconstruction where some large cities hired Black officers, during the first 338 years of Colonial and United States history, Black police officers were virtually nonexistent (Wilson & Henderson, 2015). Black police officers only started to propagate approximately 70 years ago (Dulaney, 1996). Despite their increased presence, the policing powers of Black police officers were often limited as to not offend the dominant White culture. Black officers were required to be supervised by White officers before arresting Whites, if they were allowed to arrest Whites at all (Rudwick, 1962). Often, they were only allowed to police other Blacks and, in many cases, were made to drive police cars marked “Colored Police” (Dulaney, 1996; Sullivan, 1989). This differential treatment would continue well into the 1960s, with a large number of agencies still limiting the powers given to Black police officers, even with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Ebony, 1966). There was not an intentional focus on increasing the number of minority officers in the United States until after the race riots of the late 1960s and the subsequent Kerner Commission (Reaves, 1996). Even then, the focus was arguably on the hiring of African American officers and not officers of other racial minority groups.

Virtually no research or historical documentation regarding Hispanic and Asian municipal police officers has been published. The research that has been conducted reveals that when one sees a large number of Hispanic police officers, it is in regions of the United States where Hispanics represent a large portion of the civilian population (Zhao, He, & Lovrich, 2005). Asian police officers are the most underrepresented, even in cities with large Asian populations such as San Francisco, New York, and Washington, D.C. (Hoffman, 1981; Stokes & Scott, 1996). No matter the location, Asian and Hispanic police officers are virtually always underrepresented in comparison to the populations that they serve (Hoffman, 1981; Stokes & Scott, 1996). Historically, these officers have also faced restrictions regarding where they work, usually in areas reflecting their race or ethnicity, and, at times, oversight by White officers.

Minority officers face institutional barriers even when attempting to join the police force. Such

barriers have included height requirements, “complicated applications, multi-staged selection processes, department’s image regarding minorities, and perceived and real negative attitudes on the part of officers toward minorities” (Gaines & Kappeler, 2005, p. 111). While some of these barriers have been eliminated, many of these barriers, especially those involving perceptions and attitudes, still exist. Although the history of Asian and Hispanic police officers is not well documented, it is reasonable to assume that they too have faced similar forms of discrimination as Black officers, especially in decisions about locations where they will be assigned to work. While having officers match the demographic of where they are assigned does have benefits, it has been argued that by doing this, a subtle standard is being established as to whom it is socially acceptable for them to utilize their police powers upon, utilization of force in particular. This is a pattern reflected in entertainment media portrayals of policing as well.

### “Proper” Role of Minorities in Hollywood

While diversity in Hollywood has long been a topic of discussion, in the past few years we have seen a resurgence in public discussion on the issue. We have seen well-known Hollywood celebrities make highly publicized references to these issues in front of large audiences ranging from the Critics’ Choice Awards, Screen Actors Guild Awards, Academy Awards, and Cannes Film Festival (Wilson & Henderson, 2015). Additionally, findings from studies such as the annual Hollywood Diversity Report published by the Ralph A. Bunch Center for African American Studies (2017) at the University of California Los Angeles consistently demonstrate the stark lack of diversity in Hollywood. While this report focused on all areas of employment in Hollywood, it is the absence of diversity among actors that has reaped the most attention.

According to MacDonald (1992), Black actors were promised color-blind programming in the advent of television. Instead, they were cast into the stereotypical roles indicative of minstrel shows, radio, and film. Only if the script called for a Black actor, were Black actors considered for the role. Most often these roles lacked responsibility and were comedic in nature. While this sort of discrimination could be openly contested, MacDonald (1992) points out that the more deceptive discrimination historically occurred before production. Minorities were often kept from respectable roles or prevented from appearing at all on screen. This was largely due to a fear of offending their prominently White audiences, not dissimilar to the reasoning behind limiting the

policing powers of African American officers (MacDonald, 1992). While not officially declared, similar racial attitudes remain still today (Drake, 2014; Morin & Stepler, 2016; MacDonald, 1992; Newport, 2012, 2016; Roper Center, 2017a, 2017b).

### **Modern Racial Divide and the Media**

The 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman and his subsequent acquittal arguably began the unveiling of the racial divide that still survives in the United States, a divide many believed no longer existed in this supposed post-racial society. While Zimmerman was Hispanic and a neighborhood watch member, the case began an international discussion about the utilization of force against minorities in the United States (Gabbidon & Greene, 2016; Kilgo, 2017; Kilgo, Mourao, & Sylvie, 2018). It forced many in the United States to question their sense of reality and recognize, often reluctantly, the world as they would like it to be, does not exist. Racial tensions and debates increased with incidents such as the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed young, Black man, by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, and the death of Eric Garner by a police officer in New York City utilizing an illegal choke hold.

This racial divide has best been captured in the plethora of public opinion polls of different races on topics ranging from general confidence in police and the legitimacy of grand jury decisions not to charge officers in cases such as Brown and Garner and acquittals in the Martin case (i.e., Drake, 2014; Morin & Stepler, 2016; Newport, 2012, 2016; Roper Center, 2017a, 2017b). These polls, taken directly after these decisions, arguably capture the raw, underling divide between large portions of Whites and Blacks in the United States. For instance, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, Pew Research Center (2013) found that 70% of Whites either directly or indirectly supported the verdict, while 86% of Blacks were dissatisfied with the verdict. Similarly, after the grand jury decision not to charge Darren Wilson, Pew Research Center (2014) found that 64% of Whites believed the jury made the right decision, while 80% of Blacks believed it was the wrong decision. However, an apparent narrowing of this gap was seen in the case of Eric Garner (Pew Research Center, 2014). In this case, 53% of Whites either supported or were neutral about the grand jury decision not to charge Daniel Pantaleo, while 90% of Blacks believed the decision was wrong. It could be argued that this increase among Whites was due to film footage being available in the Eric Garner case, which resulted in Whites being able to witness the actual incident

instead of being left to decide based on their sense of reality as they were in the Martin and Brown cases.

If one views these perceptions in the context of the existent literature from communication and media studies, the reactions to such cases make more sense. Some cultivation research has found that the more subjects consume certain types of media, the more likely they were to assume an officer's race was White when presented with a scenario in which the race of the officer was not revealed (Dixon, 2007). Further, heavy consumers were more likely to view Black officers in a negative light (Dixon, 2007). It has also been shown that White consumers of crime-related media had increased levels of confidence in the police, while there was no change among African American and Latino consumers (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011).

It could be argued that the way police use of force has been portrayed over the years has cultivated a sense of reality among a large portion of Whites in the United States regarding the legitimacy of police use of force; a sense of reality that runs counter to the experienced reality of minority groups of color. The image of Garner made Whites uncomfortable and did not reassure them. It broke with the norm of much of White society's sense of reality that James Baldwin alluded to in 1968. This sense of reality regarding police use of force largely exists due to the majority of United States citizens having no personal experience with the criminal justice system (Surette, 2011; Wilson, 2015). Additionally, research has shown that roughly two-thirds of White United States citizens have zero friends of color (Cox, Navarro-Rivera, & Jones, 2018). Therefore, what most people believe they "know" about the United States criminal justice system and other races comes from secondhand accounts and media portrayals (Robinson, 2011; Surette, 2011; Wilson, 2015). Given the vast lack of personal experience with the criminal justice system and other races, the secondhand accounts often find their origins in the media as well (Surette, 2011; Wilson, 2015). Baldwin recognized the media's power in cultivating and/or sustaining the general public's knowledge of issues, such as police use of force, as far back as 1960 and 1968, a power that has only expanded with the proliferation of media platforms and increased consumption levels.

Television program consumption alone had more than doubled in the decade leading up to the shooting of Trayvon Martin (Wilson & Henderson, 2014; Wilson, 2015). In 2011, the year before Trayvon Martin's death, Nielsen reported that the average American was watching over 34 hours of live television per week; this excludes recorded, rented, and programs watched via the Internet. This means the average American was spending two years of

every 10 years of their life watching television in 2010 (Nielsen, 2011; Wilson, 2015). Couple this with the fact that, depending on the source, ever since the 1970s, law enforcement-based programs have been estimated to make up between 20 and 30% of television programming (Gold, 2014; Hetsroni, 2012; Jones, 2003; Severin & Tankard, 2001), the media's potential impact on public perceptions is hard to ignore. Further, prior to the Trayvon Martin case, with the possible exception of Rodney King, national and international attention to such cases by the news media had been virtually nonexistent since the late 1960s. Therefore, much of White America had been left to their own sense of reality, a reality largely cultivated by entertainment media and not by personal experience. Nevertheless, before establishing the patterns of entertainment media depictions, it is important to establish the void of research regarding the intersection of officer race, public perceptions, and media.

### **Officer Race and the Public's Perceptions**

The vast majority of research on race and public perceptions of the police focus on the citizen's race with little mention of officer demographics. Research consistently finds that people who identify themselves as non-White are more likely to embrace negative perceptions of the police across a range of outcomes, such as experiences with law enforcement or police performance (Johnson & Kuhns, 2009; Peck, 2015). Further, as Peck's (2015) analysis of 92 studies examining minority perceptions of the police revealed, these negative perceptions of the police by those identifying themselves as Black, non-White, or minority "held regardless of the measures used to operationalize attitude and various dependent variables surrounding the police" (p. 173). Yet, studies examining public perceptions of the police often overlook whether the officer's race influences those perceptions. Scholars argue that having non-White officers police minority communities will lead to more positive experiences for the public (Decker & Smith 1980; Skogan, 1979; Weitzer & Tuch, 2005). Research does support the notion that the interaction between Black officers and Black community members is different than that with White officers (Brown & Frank, 2006; Cochran & Warren, 2012; Mastrofski, Reisig, & McCluskey, 2002; Sun & Payne, 2004; Sun, Payne, & Wu, 2008).

Few researchers have examined whether or not officer race influences citizen perceptions (Brown & Frank, 2006; Engel, 2005; Lersch & Mieczkowski, 2000), and findings are mixed. Studies on officer race and public satisfaction conducted in the 1970s revealed that African Americans had positive

relationships and supported Black police officers (Skogan, 1979). Similarly, Wallach and Jackson (1973) explored Black citizens' views on police effectiveness. Their study revealed that 36 out of the 50 respondents believed race was immaterial, and the remaining 14 preferred Black officers. The study also revealed that 28 respondents did not perceive a difference in how White and Black officers treated African Americans. Additionally, eight out of the 50 respondents believed Black officers to be more brutal than White officers, and there were no respondents who stated the opposite (Wallach & Jackson, 1973). In a more recent study, Weitzer (2000) determined that Blacks residing in lower-class areas had a greater likelihood of believing that Black and White officers treated residents differently. Several respondents indicated Black officers were harsher than their White counterparts, while other respondents believed that the bias and abuse by officers of both racial categories was equal. Weitzer (2000) found few participants in either lower- or middle-class neighborhoods to hold a preference for Black officers, and most espoused a desire for racially integrated patrol teams. Brunson and Gau (2011) conducted interviews with 44 Black adults on their perceptions and experiences interacting with police officers. Findings indicated the respondents were very dissatisfied with Black officers, rejecting the notion that the presence of Black officers alone will improve public perceptions.

There exists little research on how the race of an officer might influence public perception, and the aforementioned studies are largely limited to the presence of Black officers only. Furthermore, the studies do not examine whether perceptions of police use of force varies due to the officer's race. This being said, given the plethora of public opinion polls that reveal a racial divide in opinions surrounding police use of force cases since 2011 (see Drake, 2014; Morin & Stepler, 2016; Newport, 2012, 2016; Roper Center, 2017a, 2017b), a racial divide in perceptions clearly exists. Coupled with most of society's heavy dependency on the entertainment industry's depictions of such cases in the 40 years leading up to the Trayvon Martin case to inform their sense of reality, an investigation into the entertainment industry's depictions is warranted.

### **Socially Constructed Reality**

What Baldwin referred to as a "sense of reality" is regularly referred to as a socially constructed reality in the literature. A socially constructed reality is a combination of an individual's experienced reality, things they have directly experienced, and their symbolic reality, knowledge they have acquired from other people, institutions, and



the media (Surette, 2007). Therefore, what individuals believe to be the “real” world, what the world is really like, is in fact their socially constructed reality. This process consists of four stages of social constructionism (Surette, 2007). Stage 1 involves the physical world, and it is within this stage, that individuals “may” actually encounter some form of criminality or interact with various groups such as the police or others employed by the criminal justice system. The remaining three stages must operate within the boundaries of the physical world (Surette, 2007, p. 34).

In Stage 2, competing descriptions of the physical world are introduced. These descriptions address the conditions and facts surrounding the physical world. The constructs frequently focus on issues that have been labeled as social problems (Surette, 2007), such as police use of force. Different theories and histories are implemented to support each construct’s vision of the physical world and often argue for the backing of specific laws or policies (Surette, 2007).

In Stage 3, the competing constructs are filtered by the media; this provides the media a very powerful role in the social construction process. It is difficult for non-mainstream groups to break through this filtering process. This is largely attributed to the media favoring viewpoints that are dramatic, rooted in established cultural themes, and promoted by influential groups (Surette, 2007). As Surette (2007) points out, “construction advocates who are not adept with the media are effectively shut out of the social construction competition. In effect, they never get on the playing field.... They are not seen as unimportant; they are not seen at all” (pp. 35-36). The final stage of the social construction process results in the dominant social construction of the physical world emerging.

As has been stated, according to recent polls, White opinions regarding the failure to charge or the acquittal of officers who had killed unarmed Black males only seemed to waiver in the Eric Garner case, for which there was extensive film footage of the incident. While there was still a racial divide in the appropriateness of the grand jury’s decision to not prosecute in the Garner case, it was not as pronounced as the divide after the decisions in the Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown cases. We would argue that this serves as an example of what happens when a dominant social construction is somewhat disrupted. In this case, it was White subjects being exposed to a factual reality that runs counter to their traditional perceptions of the real world of police use of force. On a similar note, the consistent high percentage of Blacks viewing the grand jury decisions as wrong is a reflection of hundreds of years of personal experience and not a symbolic reality as it is with most Whites.

Since Black communities have experienced such behavior from law enforcement or law enforcement-like agencies since the implementation of institutional slavery and/or the establishment of slave patrols in 1704 in the Carolina colony (Barlow & Barlow, 2000; Kappeler, 2014), theirs is an experienced reality. Their views of these grand jury decisions are largely based on generations of personal experiences, while for Whites it is largely a symbolic reality, highly dependent on secondhand knowledge, much of which comes from entertainment media. This disjuncture between those who experience an issue first hand and those whose perceptions of the issue are based on secondhand knowledge is at the heart of one of communication studies’ most widely cited theories, cultivation theory.

### Cultivation Theory

When examining the dominant constructions of the physical world through the exploration of media, and ultimately the determination of effect, the starting point is content analysis. Content analysis as a starting point for subsequent studies is comparatively new to disciplines outside of communication studies (Wilson, 2009). However, cultivation theory and cultivation analysis provide the unique requirement of two separate studies. First, researchers must conduct an analysis of a media format (i.e., television, movies, internet, video games) and genre or source to determine the dominant themes and messages conveyed. Then, the findings acquired in the first study are utilized in subsequent studies to develop a set of questions that are designed to detect if a cultivation effect exists. In these subsequent studies it is determined if the dominant themes and messages are fostering similar attitudes amongst heavy media users (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). The current study represents a first step cultivation analysis. It seeks to determine the dominant representations, themes, patterns, and messages conveyed in regards to the race of municipal police officers utilizing force in the first four decades of the core cop film genre leading up to the death of Trayvon Martin.

Cultivation analyses have evolved alongside the expansion of media formats from the late 1960s to the present. When George Gerbner first introduced cultivation theory, he hypothesized that long-term exposure to a repetitive system of messages conveyed through television could result in cumulative consequences. He and other cultivation theorists contended that the viewing of television would lead to the gradual adoption of conveyed selective beliefs about the reality of the physical world (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Since then, research on cultivation studies (see Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Morgan &

Shanahan, 1997, 2010; Shrum & O'Guinn, 1993) have established that, as a whole, cultivation studies have proven a consistent cultivation effect on a wide range of subjects' perceptions of the physical world, or social reality (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014).

When Gerbner first introduced his theory, television programming emanated from only three channels. But as Hendriks (2002) states, since the theory was first formulated, television has been invaded by cable and satellite options, which has most likely altered the assumption that all content found on television is equal. Today, the plethora of mediums examined by cultivation researchers include newspapers (Vergeer, Lubbers, & Scheepers, 2010), video games (Breuer, Kowert, Festl, & Quandt, 2015; Fox & Potocki, 2016; Williams, 2006), music (Wright & Craske, 2015), image searches (Kay, Matuszek, & Munson, 2015), social media (Cheng, Mitomo, Otsuka, & Jeon, 2016; Tsay-Vogel, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2018), and movies (Wilson, Longmire, & Swymeler, 2009; Wilson & Blackburn, 2014; Wilson & Henderson, 2014, Wilson, Schaefer, Blackburn, & Henderson, 2019), among others. With this expansion of media sources also comes the ability of viewers to consume messages from increasingly more narrow genres (Prior, 2005). As early as the 1980s, narrowing of genres viewed has been shown to increase the power of the cultivation effect (Hawkins & Pingree, 1981).

The current study is intended to expand cultivation research beyond the discipline of communication studies. This study also continues the expansion of mediums by examining theatrically released films, a medium arguably far more pervasive than television, given that it starts in the theater and then infiltrates all other mediums occupied by television programming. At the same time, this first step cultivation analysis narrows its focus to the core cop film genre.

### **Core Cop Film Genre**

The cop film era arose as the traditional portrayals of law enforcement figures found in Westerns and the noirs began to lose their appeal in the 1950s and 1960s (Rafter, 2006; Surette, 2007). This was largely due to public opinion moving toward a desire for law-and-order, which was coupled with the unrest of the 1960s (Rafter, 2006). This shift allowed filmmakers to transmute the lone gunslinger of the pre-1970s Westerns into a contemporary municipal police officer (Rafter, 2006). Following, in 1971, the film *Dirty Harry* became the archetype for the modern cop film genre (Rafter, 2006; Murray, 2016).

Rafter (2000) revealed that the cop film genre presented a new approach for studying the nature of

heroism and how the hero relates to society. By the 1980s and 1990s, subgenres would begin to emerge from the cop film genre. Some examples of these subgenres would include "buddy cop films," "rogue cop films," "corrupt cop films," and "cop comedy films" (Wilson & Blackburn, 2014; Wilson & Henderson, 2014). These shifted away from the original features, modern municipal police officer depicted as a hero, that helped define a cop film. However, we argue that, even with the splintering of the cop film genre, the core features still remain in many films. Not only have those features that originally helped to define the cop film genre endured, they serve to define the parameters of what we deem to be the core cop film genre. Furthermore, those same features have served as the archetype for similar portrayals on television (Murray, 2016). In this study, we isolate the core cop film genre population leading up to the Trayvon Martin killing to determine what imagery and messages have been portrayed in regards to use of force scenes involving municipal police officers. The genre was captured utilizing the Unified Film Population Identification Methodology (UFPIM).

### **Unified Film Population Identification Methodology (UFPIM)**

Before we address how the film population was isolated, it is important to explain the Unified Film Population Identification Methodology and how it changes the traditional nature of film analysis. In an effort to address the issue of population replicability in studies of social science issues in theatrically released films, Wilson (2009) developed a methodology for systematically identifying large replicable film populations and named it the UFPIM. This methodology is designed to assist media researchers in isolating entire media populations that can be systematically replicated (Wilson, 2009).

Employing the Internet Movie Database Power Search (IMDbPS), the UFPIM isolates specific film populations through a process consisting of three phases (see Wilson, 2009). While this study utilizes IMDbPS, any database of films or other media could be utilized. Wilson (2009) establishes that Phase I consists of developing an operational definition of the film population, or other media type, being examined. The researcher accomplishes this by utilizing the literature related to the form of media being examined, in this case film, and/or the depictions being examined, in this case police. Phase II consists of the IMDbPS being employed to help isolate a base list of films. The film list is established by using at least the IMDbPS search criterion of "key words in the movie plot summaries," "movie genre" (the primary genre to

which the IMDbPS associates a film), “year” (the year or series of years in which films were released), and “key words” (see Wilson, 2009). A two-stage process is employed in Phase III. In Stage I, the researcher develops an identification coding sheet. This sheet is designed to assist in the isolation of the films that match the parameters of the definition developed in Phase I. In Stage II, researchers utilize the coding sheet to examine plot summaries associated with the films that were isolated in Phase II. The plot summaries are drawn from two or more independent sources. In this study, plot summaries from the IMDb and Amazon.com were utilized. This redundancy in examination helps researchers to safeguard the accuracy of the final film population.

## Method

### Determining Film Population

#### Phase I of UFPIM.

In Phase I of the UFPIM, the core cop film genre was defined as (a) theatrically released films between January 1971 and January 2011, (b) that take place in the United States, (c) where one or more actors play the hero who is an active urban (municipal) police officer of traditional ranks, (d) either acting alone or with a partner in a street cop/detective role, (e) in the past or present, that appear to be reality based. Based on the parameters of this core cop film definition, any film that portrayed officers in specialized units such as forensic units, internal affairs, SWAT units, among others, were omitted. Additionally, storylines that did not appear to be based in reality such as comedies, those involving supernatural phenomenon, alien encounters, and/or futuristic depictions were also omitted. Films in which officers were depicted operating outside their jurisdictional boundaries were also omitted.

#### Phase II of UFPIM.

In an effort to narrow down those films meeting the definitional parameter for the core cop film genre of “occurring in the past or present and appearing to be reality based,” IMDb genre definitions were examined in order to establish those genres that should be included or excluded. At the time of this study, the IMDb categorized films into 19 genres; these include action, adventure, animation, comedy, crime, documentary, drama, family, fantasy, film-noir, horror, music, musical, mystery, romance, sci-fi, thriller, war, and Western genres. In the end, eight out of 19 film genres were chosen (i.e., action, adventure, crime, drama, family, mystery, romance, and thriller).

Common terminology utilized in film literature and research literature surrounding law

enforcement was utilized. Specifically, each genre’s plot summaries were searched for the key terms “cop,” “detective,” “police,” and “law enforcement” (Wilson, 2009). A total of four searches on each of the eight chosen genre categories were conducted. In each of the searches, the IMDb Power Search categories “plot summary words,” “country of origin,” “genre,” “language,” “year,” “must have,” “TV movies,” “direct to video,” and “TV series,” were also used to isolate the films that were theatrically released during the aforementioned time period. Specifically, the search criteria constituted (a) films that occurred in the United States (country of origin), (b) in which the dominant language was English (language), (c) that were released in theaters between January 1971 and January 2011 (year), (d) contained a plot summary (must have), and (e) excluded films that went direct to video or were TV movies and/or series. The only categories that were adjusted were the genres searched and the key terms searched for within the plot summaries. At the conclusion of Phase II of the UFPIM, a base list of 500 films had been isolated.

#### Phase III of UFPIM.

**Stage I.** A core cop film identification coding sheet was constructed in Stage I of Phase III of the UFPIM process. The coding sheet was comprised of five questions designed to help ensure that films fit the parameters of the core cop film definition established in Phase I. Questions consisted of only two answers, yes or no. If any question received an answer of “yes,” the film was deemed not to be a core cop film and was subsequently excluded from the study. When a film was excluded, a brief reason was annotated on the coding sheet. The coding sheet questions were as follows:

1. Does anything indicate that the film does not take place in an urban setting in the United States?
2. Does anything indicate that the primary character(s) is(are) not an active urban police officer(s)?
3. Does anything indicate that the primary character(s) is(are) not portrayed as the hero?
4. Does anything indicate that the officer(s) is(are) acting outside the traditional street cop/detective roles?
5. Does anything indicate that the film takes place in the future or is not intended to be portrayed as reality based?

**Stage II.** Utilizing the coding sheet developed in Stage I, more than 1000 plot summaries from both the IMDb and Amazon.com were evaluated in Stage II of Phase III. This resulted in a final population of 130 films. During the examination process, additional



films were excluded for multiple reasons. A total of eight films were out of production, and copies could not be located. Three additional films, *Electra Glide in Blue* (1973), *The Indian Runner* (1991), and *Partners in Crime* (2000), were excluded because the officers portrayed were not municipal police officers. Additionally, the film *God Told Me To* (1976) was excluded due to falling into the horror film genre, as was the film *The Black Marble* (1980) due to being more appropriately classified as comedy. The film *The Onion Field* (1979) was omitted because it largely focused on the justice system as a whole and not on municipal police officers. The film *Cement* (1998) and the film *Wild Things* (1998) had police officers as lead characters; however, these characters were not depicted as heroes. Lastly, the films *Unstoppable* (2004) and *Gone Baby Gone* (2007) were omitted because the lead characters were not municipal police officers. Given that eight films could not be located, and an additional 10 films were excluded, the final population of films totaled 112 films.

### Defining and Isolating Police Use of Force Scenes

The units of analysis for this study are all scenes in which police utilization of force takes place in the core cop film genre. It should be noted that the simple presence of a law enforcement officer can, under some use of force definitions, be considered a level of force, as can the pulling of a weapon (Gaines & Kappeler, 2005). However, given the fact that police officers are the central characters in the films studied, sheer presence, or the simple wielding of a weapon, was not used to identify a use of force scene. Police use of force, in this study, was operationalized as scenes containing an act or sequence of acts of physical and/or life-threatening behavior directed toward one or more human beings, animals, and/or inanimate objects by municipal police officers acting under the collar of law (i.e., in an official capacity).

When more than three minutes passed between police use of force incidents, the previous scenes were deemed to have ended, and the next incident of force was considered a new scene and subsequently coded. However, if a total change in location or context of use of force occurred, but three minutes had not passed, a new scene was established and coded. Whether using a computer, DVD player, or VHS player, the start and end times for each scene were recorded for replication purposes in the future. Scenes within films were assigned a number reflecting the sequence in which they occurred in the film. Further, scenes were assigned a number reflecting the order in which they were evaluated overall.

### Analysis of Police Use of Force Scenes

Out of the 112 films analyzed, a total of 468 scenes containing police use of force were identified. Each scene was examined to determine the race of the officers using force, the aggregate quantity of such depictions, the temporal dynamics by both year and decade surrounding the placement of such scenes, and the within film ratios, all in an effort to determine if any distinct differences exist in how officers are portrayed in use of force scenes based on their race. Race of officer was coded as White, Black Hispanic, Asian, White and Black, Black and Hispanic, Black and Asian, White and Hispanic, White and Asian, Three or more races, and Undeterminable.

### Results

It is important to emphasize that this study is not about whether film depictions of use of force are comparable to actual occurrences. Nor is this study about whether film depictions of use of force by specific races of officers are comparable to actual occurrences. This study represents the first step in understanding the images Americans were exposed to in the 40 years leading up to the shooting death of Trayvon Martin and their potential impact on the racial divide regarding perceptions of police use of force incidences. The findings that follow are first presented in the aggregate total by racial categorization. Then, due to the proliferation of White officer use of force scenes, those films that contain minority use of force scenes are focused on in regards to temporal placement and within film ratios to lone White officer scenes.

### Race of Officer Using Force Aggregate Count

Of the 112 films comprising the first four decades of the core cop film genre, only two did not produce any municipal police officer use of force scenes. Of those remaining 110 films, 57% ( $n=63$ ) portrayed municipal police officer use of force scenes containing only White officers; no minority officer use of force scenes were portrayed. Further, White officer only scenes appeared in every year that produced police use of force scenes.

As presented in Table 1, of the 468 police use of force scenes, 74.35% ( $n=348$ ) solely involved White police officers, and 11.75% ( $n=55$ ) involved White and Black officers. The percentage of White and Asian officer use of force scenes accounted for .86% ( $n=4$ ) of the scenes, and White and Hispanic officer use of force scenes accounted for .86% ( $n=4$ ) of the scenes. Those scenes involving three or more

racess including White police officers accounted for .64% ( $n=3$ ). Therefore, White police officers were either sole or joint participants in 88.46% ( $n=414$ ) of

the 468 police use of force scenes in the first four decades of the core cop film genre.

**Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Police Use of Force Scenes by Race(s) of Police Officer**

Race of Police Officer	Scene Frequency	Scene Percentage
White	348	74.35
White and Black	55	11.75
Black	39	8.33
Black and Hispanic	7	1.50
Asian	4	.86
White and Asian	4	.86
White and Hispanic	4	.86
Hispanic	3	.64
Three or More Races	3	.64
Undeterminable	1	.21
Total	468	100

Black police officers represented the second highest percentage of scenes involving officers of one race, accounting for 8.33% ( $n=39$ ) of the 468 police use of force scenes. Joint White and Black officer use of force scenes accounted for an additional 11.75% ( $n=55$ ) of scenes. Additionally, Black officers utilized force alongside Hispanic officers in 1.50% ( $n=7$ ) of the scenes. Scenes containing three or more races that included Black officers accounted for .64% ( $n=3$ ) of the police use of force scenes. Therefore, Black officers were involved in 22.22% ( $n=104$ ) of the 468 police use of force scenes.

Hispanic police officers represented .64% ( $n=3$ ) of the scenes involving an officer of a single race utilizing force. They were teamed with a Black officer in 1.5% ( $n=7$ ) of scenes, White officers in .86% ( $n=4$ ) of scenes, and officers involving three or more races in .64% ( $n=3$ ) of scenes. Altogether, Hispanic police officers were depicted utilizing force in 3.64% ( $n=17$ ) of the 468 police use of force scenes. Similarly, Asian police officers were the sole race in .86% ( $n=4$ ) of the police use of force scenes and teamed with White officers in an additional .86% ( $n=4$ ). Asian police officers did not appear in any of the scenes involving officers of three or more races. This makes Asian police officers the least represented race, accounting for only 1.70% ( $n=8$ ) of officer presence in use of force scenes.

While these aggregate findings reveal the general disparity regarding the race of officers depicted utilizing force, a closer examination of films containing minority officer use of force scenes reveals a deeper message of segregation; this segregation is accomplished through temporal isolation of appearances and within-film White to minority officer

scene ratios dominated by White officers. This is accomplished first by examining those films that contain lone minority officer use of force scenes and then by examining those films that contain joint White and minority officer scenes. The racial segregation dynamic is further exacerbated by examining the race of the officer using force and the race of the subject on which the force is being applied.

### Lone White and Minority Officer Use of Force Scene Comparison

Given the sheer dominance of White officer portrayals, it should not be surprising that a large portion of the minority officer depictions were not spread evenly across the four-decade time period. In fact, the percentage of minority officer only police use of force scenes is highly concentrated into specific films and years. Additionally, the within-film ratio of White officer only scenes to lone minority officer scenes was largely skewed toward White officer representations. Given that Black officer use of force scenes were the most prevalent of all the minority groups, we will first present the comparison of the films in which they utilize force and will conclude with films containing Asian and Hispanic officer use of force scenes.

During the 1970s, scenes depicting Black officer only use of force scenes amounted to only five scenes and were temporally isolated to 1971 (see Table 2). Sidney Poitier's depiction of Virgil Tibbs in the movie *The Organization* (1971) accounted for 60% ( $n=3$ ) of those scenes. *The Organization* (1971) contained no White officer only scenes. The ratio of White officer only scenes to Black officer only scenes

in the remaining two films was one to one and three to one. The film *The Seven Ups* (1973) represents one of only two films in the four decades where the lone

White officer to lone Black officer use of force ratios were equal in a film, the other being *Training Day* (2001).

**Table 2: 1970s Lone White Officer to Black Officer Use of Force Scene Comparison by Temporal Appearance and Within Film Ratio**

Film	Date	White Only Scenes	Black Only Scenes
The Organization	1971	0	3
The Seven Ups	1973	1	1
Hustle	1975	3	1

As Table 3 reflects, 76.9% (n=10) of the 13 police use of force scenes involving only a Black officer in the 1980s was found in the films *Fatal Beauty* (1987) and *The Kill Reflex* (1989). Only *The Kill Reflex* (1989) contained a White officer only scene. In the remaining three films, the lone White officer scenes to Black officer scenes ranged from three to one to five to one. Only the one Black officer only scene in *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989) represented a significant role by a leading character in a storyline beyond those depicted in *Fatal Beauty* (1987) and *The Kill Reflex* (1989); the remaining scenes were secondary characters. However, despite its appearance, the White officer only to Black officer only scene ratio in *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989) was five to one, arguably dwarfing the one scene’s impact. The majority of Black officer only scenes, 92% (n=11), were temporally isolated to the years 1987 and 1989.

In the 1990s, 88% (n=14) of the 16 police use of force scenes involving a lone Black officer were temporally isolated in the films *Murder at 1600* (1997), *Rush Hour* (1998), and *In Too Deep* (1999). As Table 4 reflects, neither the film *Murder at 1600* (1997) or *Rush Hour* (1998) contained White officer only scenes, and *In Too Deep* (1999) contained only one such scene. The remaining two scenes occurred in *Lethal Weapon 3* (1992) and *Glimmer Man* (1996). In *Lethal Weapon 3* (1992), White officer only scenes

to Black officer only scenes were at a ratio of three to one and in *Glimmer Man* (1996), the ratio was six to one.

In the 2000s, Black only police use of force scenes were only found in three films, *Shaft* (2000), *Training Day* (2001) and *Dirty* (2005). Only the film *Training Day* (2001) contained a White officer only police use of force scene. The ratio of White officer only to Black officer only use of force scenes in *Training Day* (2001) was two to two. While the counts in *Shaft* (2000) would be larger, the character Shaft is forced to leave the police force in order to properly pursue the White murderer of a Black male and thereby no longer operates in an official capacity. Additionally, it should be noted that both *Training Day* (2001) and *Dirty* (2005) met the operational parameters of the core cop film genre only because the Black leading character was teamed with a White or Hispanic joint leading character who played the hero municipal police officer role requirement. Both of these Black officer depictions were of corrupt officers working alongside a White or Hispanic officer portrayed as a hero. Therefore, 80% (n=4) of the Black officer only use of force scenes in the 2000s were by Black officers portrayed as being corrupt. Further, such scenes were temporally isolated to 2000, 2001, and 2005.

**Table 3: 1980s Lone White Officer to Black Officer Use of Force Scene Comparison by Temporal Appearance and Within Film Ratio**

Film	Date	White Only Scenes	Black Only Scenes
Sharkey’s Machine	1981	4	1
Fatal Beauty	1987	0	6
The Kill Reflex	1989	1	4
Lethal Weapon 2	1989	5	1
Dead Bang	1989	3	1

**Table 4: 1990s Lone White Officer to Black Officer Use of Force Scene Comparison by Temporal Appearance and Within Film Ratio**

Film	Date	White Only Scenes	Black Only Scenes
Lethal Weapon 3	1992	3	1
Glimmer Man	1996	6	1
Murder at 1600	1997	0	3
Rush Hour	1998	0	6
In Too Deep	1999	1	5

**Table 5: 2000s Lone White Officer to Black Officer Use of Force Scene Comparison by Temporal Appearance and Within Film Ratio**

Film	Date	White Only Scenes	Black Only Scenes
Shaft	2000	4	1
Training Day	2001	2	2
Dirty	2005	0	2

#### Joint White and Minority Officer Use of Force Scene Comparison

Even in films where Black and White officers use force together, one still sees temporal isolation and White officer only scenes outnumbering White and Black officer scenes within the films. As Table 6 indicates, in the 1970s, only three films depicted municipal police officer use of force scenes containing both races. One sees temporal isolation in the 1970s,

with the film *The Seven Ups* (1973) containing 60% ( $n=3$ ) of the five scenes. The two remaining scenes are divided between *Magnum Force* (1973) and *Hustle* (1975). Therefore, all joint White and Black officer use of force scenes were temporally isolated to 1973 and 1975. In two of the three films, we see a lone White officer to joint White and Black officer ratio of three to one.

**Table 6: 1970s Lone White Officer to Joint White and Black Officer Use of Force Scene Comparison by Temporal Appearance and Within Film Ratio**

Film	Date	White Only Scenes	White & Black Scenes
Magnum Force	1973	3	1
The Seven Ups	1973	1	3
Hustle	1975	3	1

In the 1980s, only nine films depicted use of force scenes containing both races. Although the 1980s produced 15 joint White and Black police use of force scenes, 67% ( $n=10$ ) of the scenes are isolated to four films: *Fort Apache the Bronx* (1981), *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Colors* (1988), and *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989) (see Table 7). Again, in this decade, we see more scenes with lone White officer as compared to White and Black officer use of force scenes. Lone White officer only scenes outnumbered joint White

and Black officer scenes in 89% ( $n=8$ ) of the nine films. Lone White officer to joint White and Black officer use of force scene ratios ranged between two to one and six to three. In the one film where White officer use of force scenes did not outnumber joint White and Black use of force scenes, there were no White officer only scenes and only one joint White and Black scene.



**Table 7: 1980s Lone White Officer to Joint White and Black Officer Use of Force Scene Comparison by Temporal Appearance and Within Film Ratio**

Film and Date	Date	White Only Scenes	White & Black Scenes
Cruising	1980	2	1
Fort Apache The Bronx	1981	3	2
Fatal Beauty	1987	0	1
Lethal Weapon	1987	4	2
Red Heat	1988	3	1
Colors	1988	6	3
Above The Law	1988	2	1
Lethal Weapon 2	1989	5	3
Dead Bang	1989	3	1

In the 1990s, 10 films depicted use of force scenes containing both races. Although the 1990s produced 23 joint White and Black police use of force scenes, 65% ( $n=15$ ) of the scenes are isolated to four films: *Downtown* (1990), *Lethal Weapon 3* (1992), *The Glimmer Man* (1996), and *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998; see Table 8). Unlike the 1970s and 1980s, in the 1990s, we see lone White officers being portrayed in a different manner. Lone White officer only scenes outnumbered joint White and Black officer scenes in only 30% ( $n=3$ ) of the 10 films, with ratios of two to one, six to one, and seven to one. So, in the three films where a lone White officer use of force scene was present, lone White officer scenes occurred anywhere from two to seven times as often as the joint White and Black scenes. Lone White officer and joint White and

Black officer use of force scenes were the same in 30% ( $n=3$ ) of the 10 films, with in film occurrence rates between one and three scenes. Even though the counts were the same, the number of occurrences were low in these films when compared to films where lone White officer use of force scenes were the majority. In the remaining 40% ( $n=4$ ) of films, there was only one lone White officer scene; three of the films contained no lone White officer scenes. Findings therefore revealed that in the 1990s, if a lone White officer use of force scene is present in the film, it either dominates joint White and Black officer scenes, or it is equal but in smaller occurrence. If joint White and Black officer use of force scenes represent a majority of the scenes, lone White officer scenes are all but non-existent.

**Table 8: 1990s Lone White Officer to Joint White and Black Officer Use of Force Scene Comparison by Temporal Appearance and Within Film Ratio**

Film and Date	Date	White Only Scenes	White & Black Scenes
Downtown	1990	1	4
Lethal Weapon 3	1992	3	3
Rising Sun	1993	2	2
Excessive Force	1993	7	1
Seven	1995	0	1
The Glimmer Man	1996	6	3
Murder at 1600	1997	0	2
Lethal Weapon 4	1998	0	5
Oxygen	1999	2	1
Resurrection	1999	1	1

In the 2000s, only eight films depicted use of force scenes containing both races. The 2000s produced 12 joint White and Black police use of force scenes and 58% ( $n=7$ ) of those scenes are isolated to

three films: *Training Day* (2001), *15 Minutes* (2001), and *Miami Vice* (2006; see Table 9). Lone White officer only use of force scenes outnumbered joint White and Black officer use of force scenes in 38%

( $n=3$ ) of the eight films, with lone White officer to joint White and Black officer ratios of two to one, three to one, and nine to one. In the three films where lone White officer use of force scenes represented the majority, lone White officer scenes occurred anywhere from two to nine times as often as the joint White and Black officer scenes. Lone White officer and joint White and Black officer use of force scenes were equal in 13% ( $n=1$ ) of the eight films. In this film, lone White officer and joint White and Black officer scenes

occurred only one time. In the remaining 50% ( $n=4$ ) of films, there was only one lone White officer use of force scene; three of the films contained no lone White officer scenes. Therefore, in the 2000s, like the 1990s, we see that if lone White officer use of force scenes are present in the film, they either dominate joint White and Black scenes, or they are equal but in fewer occurrences. If joint White and Black officers represent a majority of the scenes, lone White officer scenes are all but non-existent.

**Table 9: 2000s Lone White Officer to Joint White and Black Officer Use of Force Scene Comparison by Temporal Appearance and Within Film Ratio**

Film	Date	White Only Scenes	White & Black Scenes
Training Day	2001	2	3
True Blue	2001	1	1
15 Minutes	2001	0	2
Exit Wound	2001	9	1
Malevolent	2002	2	1
Dark Blue	2002	3	1
Inside Man	2006	0	1
Miami Vice	2006	0	2

Joint White and Asian officer scenes are temporally isolated to 1999 in the film *The Corruptor*. In this film, there were a total of four White and Asian officer use of force scenes, and the lone White to joint White and Asian use of force scene ratio is one to four. It should also be noted that in each of the joint scenes, the Asian officer is a corrupt officer. Again, this film was included because the corrupt Asian officer shared the lead role with a White officer who served the criteria of the hero to be included into the core cop film genre. Further, Asian officers were not teamed with any other racial categories and were the only major racial category excluded from the police use of force scenes over the 40-year time period that incorporated three or more races.

Joint White and Hispanic officer use of force scenes occurred only four times in 40 years, all as single occurrences in the films *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Cobra* (1986), *The Rookie* (1990), and *Cold Fire* (1990). Lone White to joint White and Hispanic use of force ratios were three to one, five to one, and six to one in three of the films. In the film *Cold Fire*, a ratio could not be calculated because there was no lone White officer use of force scenes. Therefore, the four scenes were temporally isolated to the years 1971, 1986, and 1990. All three of the White and Hispanic officer use of force scenes were intricate to the film's storyline, but only in the film *Cold Fire* (1990) would the Hispanic officer be considered a leading character.

This is the one film where no lone White officer scenes are present. This pattern of subliminal segregation of minority officer use of force scenes and White officer legitimacy is further revealed when one compares the race of the officer using force to the race of the subject to whom force is being applied.

### Who Receives Force From Whom?

Even more subtle than the aggregate numbers, temporal isolation, and within film ratios of minority municipal police officer use of force portrayals is the dynamic of the race of the officer and the race of the subject to whom force is being applied. White officers only utilized force alongside a minority officer in 16% ( $n=67$ ) of the 414 police use of force scenes involving a White officer. Minorities, on the other hand, utilized force alongside a White officer in 56% ( $n=67$ ) of the 120 police use of force scenes involving a minority officer.

In 3% ( $n=12$ ) of the 414 police use of force scenes by White officers, the force was toward something other than a human, such as an animal or an inanimate object (e.g., shooting a lock). White officers accounted for 86% ( $n=12$ ) of such scenes across the 40-year time period. Of the 402 police use of force scenes by White municipal police officers toward humans, 75% ( $n=300$ ) of the scenes were against White subjects: either a White subject alone or

a White subject accompanied by a minority subject. Only 15% ( $n=46$ ) of those use of force scenes were conducted with a minority officer. Use of force by White officers against minorities, either alone or with a White subject, constituted 42% ( $n=168$ ) of the 402 scenes. Only 38% ( $n=64$ ) of scenes in which force was applied to a minority portrayed the involvement of a minority officer. Based on these findings, there appears to be no dependency by White officers on a different race of officer when utilizing force against all racial categories and combinations. While White officers utilized force regularly against all racial categories under study, when one examines scenes involving minority officers, a dependency on White officers becomes apparent.

Black officers were only involved in 21% ( $n=3$ ) of the 14 use of force scenes against inanimate objects. Of the 101 police use of force scenes against humans by Black municipal police officers, 61% ( $n=62$ ) were against White subjects. Of those scenes, 63% ( $n=39$ ) were conducted with a White officer. Black officers only committed force with another officer of minority status in 6% ( $n=4$ ) of the 62 scenes against White subjects, and one of those scenes contained three or more officer races, one being White. Therefore, only 32% ( $n=20$ ) of police use of force scenes in which a Black officer uses force against a White subject is the Black officer(s) the lone race of officer. Further, 65% ( $n=13$ ) of these 20 scenes were isolated into four films prior to 1997. The film *Fatal Beauty* (1987) accounted for 25% ( $n=5$ ) of the 20 scenes, while the films *Kill Reflex* (1989) and *Murder at 1600* (1996) each accounted for 15% ( $n=3$ ), and *The Organization* (1971) accounted for 10% ( $n=2$ ). Even when utilizing force against Black and other minority subjects, Black officers were highly dependent on being teamed with a White officer. A total of 52 scenes depicted a Black officer using force against another minority, of which Black officers were teamed with a White officer in 58% ( $n=30$ ) of these scenes.

The same dynamic is present in the few portrayals of Asian and Hispanic municipal police officer use of force scenes. Asian officers utilized force against Whites in 63% ( $n=5$ ) of the eight use of force scenes involving an Asian officer. Of those five scenes involving a White subject, 80% ( $n=4$ ) were with a White officer. Therefore, Asian officers were only depicted as the lone race of officer using force against White subjects in 20% ( $n=1$ ) of the five scenes. The three-remaining use of force scenes were solely against Asians by a lone Asian police officer. Hispanic officers utilized force against Whites, either a lone White subject or a White and minority subject, in 59% ( $n=10$ ) of the 17 use of force scenes involving a Hispanic officer. Of those 10 scenes, 60% ( $n=6$ ) of

the Hispanic officers were with a White officer. In the remaining four scenes, force was used against Hispanics; 50% ( $n=2$ ) of the scenes depicted a lone Hispanic officer, and 50% ( $n=2$ ) depicted a combination of a Black officer and a Hispanic officer.

As was addressed earlier and as these findings seem to indicate, the apparent need for minority officers to be accompanied by a White officer when utilizing force against White subjects, has strong historical roots in the United States that continue to permeate media portrayals of police use of force. It has strong roots in what has historically been acceptable to White society in the United States, audiences included. An acceptance that, we argue, is at the root of what James Baldwin referred to as the "American sense of reality."

### Discussion

The key findings of this study were that White officers were consistently portrayed utilizing force across the 40-year time span leading up to the death of Trayvon Martin. White officers were depicted as having no limitations as to when, with whom, or to whom they utilized force. Minority officer use of force scenes were limited to specific years and films. They were also limited to when, with whom, and or to whom force was applied. Given the current state of the research, it is not clear whether such depictions create, sustain, and or perpetuate what society perceives to be acceptable behavior for police officers based on their race. We would argue that it is more than likely that all three are going on simultaneously, depending on the age of the subject viewing the portrayal. We propose that this is most likely a generational process creating, sustaining, and perpetuating "the American sense of reality," as it pertains to perceptions of police use of force in the United States.

The findings from this study not only inform the discussion regarding public perceptions of police use of force, but also have potential relevance to those scholars exploring the impact of the lack of diversity in the entertainment industry, two areas that are not mutually exclusive. Understanding the key findings of this first step cultivation analysis is complicated. These findings are steeped in a history of race-based limitations. In order to fully understand the findings of this study, they cannot be viewed in an ahistorical fashion. Instead, they must be considered in a historical context, both in regards to the evolution of minority police officer policing powers and the evolution of minorities in the entertainment industry.

## Police Use of Force Depictions

Given the history of race both in regards to police officers and the entertainment industry, the key findings of this study were not unexpected. The 40 years of theatrically released film depictions of White police officers utilizing force without limitations is not surprising. Further, the fact that minority municipal police use of force scenes are temporally isolated and that when utilizing force, against Whites in particular, they are seemingly dependent on a White officer's presence is not surprising either. It is also not surprising, and can be argued, that such depictions have served to create, sustain, and/or perpetuate the public's underlying perceptions of White police officer use of force legitimacy. The images are not designed to trouble, but rather it seems to reassure a large portion of White society's sense of reality. We contend that this may be reflected in the public perceptions of decisions not to prosecute or to acquit in cases such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner.

We also contend that the findings of this study may reveal why television shows that are either reboots of old television shows such as *Kojac* (1995) and *Ironsides* (2013) as well as television shows based on popular films such as *Training Day* (2017) and *Rush Hour* (2017), all with Black hero leading characters as opposed to the traditional White hero characters, are canceled in a year or less. Perhaps such depictions simply do not match what James Baldwin referred to as "the American sense of reality" and may be rejected by viewers and subsequently canceled. Viewers, particularly White viewers, may prefer images that are designed to reassure their sense of reality, where the hero is both White and right, and does not challenge their sense of reality. Further, as Baldwin eluded, such depictions "weaken our ability to deal with the world as it is, ourselves as we are," a weakness that is arguably also reflected in the divide between White and Black attitudes toward the failure to charge or acquittals of officers in the killing of unarmed Black males.

This study is not without limitations. While the UFPIM isolated what is believed to be the vast majority of films that constitute the first 40 years of the core cop film leading up to the death of Trayvon Martin, one film was missed. The film *Murder by Numbers* (2002) was later determined to fit the definitional parameters of the core cop film genre. This film was missed due to an apparent change in the IMDb plot summary. The initial plot summary focused on a description of the killers and appeared to describe a more rural rather than urban setting. A more recent IMDb plot summary of the film reflects the urban, albeit small town, setting. Therefore, future

UFPIM utilizations should remain cognizant of such changes in databases such as the IMDb.

An additional limitation is the narrow focus both in regards to type of law enforcement officer and media format examined. While this study focused strictly on the depiction of municipal police officers in theatrically released films due to the fact that they have served as the archetype for depictions in other media formats, the scope of the study is limited both in regards to type of law enforcement officer depicted and type of media. This said, such limitations are needed in order to fully parcel out differences in how various types of law enforcement are depicted and between different types of media, which will be needed for future second step cultivation theory studies.

Given the findings of this exploratory first step cultivation analysis, future researchers should also document the dynamics surrounding police use of force scenes in television programming. Further, future first step cultivation studies need to document the same dynamics surrounding depictions in both film and television of county, state, and federal law enforcement agencies to determine if there are differences in how use of force is depicted based on the race of the officer. These studies should also seek to determine if the depiction of police use of force in entertainment media has changed in the post-Trayvon Martin era. Future second step cultivation studies should not just seek to isolate the impact of such depictions in an ahistorical context but rather to attempt to control for age or generational differences to determine if the cultivation is serving the role of creation, sustaining, or perpetuating the American sense of reality surrounding police use of force and its legitimacy. Additionally, future second step analyses should take care to control for social desirability bias and sponsor bias among respondents as well as confirmation bias, culture bias, and question order bias on the part of the researcher.

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