VOLUME 27, ISSUE 2, PAGES 19–31 (2026)

Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law & Society

CRIMINOLOGY, CRIMINAL JUSTICE, LAW & SOCIETY

E-ISSN 2332-886X
Available online at
https://scholasticahq.com/criminology-criminal-justice-law-society/

Like a Demon: Racialized Threat, Deadly Force, and Police Discourse

Peter A. Hanink

California State University, Pomona

ABSTRACT AND ARTICLE INFORMATION

This article examines how law enforcement discourse makes racialized police violence intelligible through accounts of threat, authority, and institutional legitimacy. Using a purposively constructed corpus of grand jury testimony and retrospective accounts concerning Officer Darren Wilson's killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the study combines critical discourse analysis with the discourse-historical approach. The complete law-enforcement portions of the selected sources were coded for nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, mitigation and intensification, and recurring strategies identified in research on racial discourse. Four interlocking strategies organize the findings: denial of racism, positive self-presentation of officers and police institutions, negative other-presentation of Michael Brown and Ferguson's Black community, and appeals to deference that delegitimize post hoc criticism. Together, these strategies show how formally race-neutral vocabularies of size, threat, disrespect, professionalism, and officer safety can connect the legal language of objective reasonableness to historically racialized expectations about dangerousness. The article extends scholarship on police storytelling by demonstrating how legal testimony and institutional narratives can work together to transform a contested killing into an account of professional duty, survival, and legitimate authority.

Article History:

Received: May 21, 2026
Received in revised form: August 25, 2026
Accepted: August 27, 2026

Keywords:

use of force, discourse, Ferguson, Michael Brown, police legitimacy, race and policing

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Corresponding author: Peter A Hanink, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, 3801 W Temple Ave, Pomona, CA 91768.
Email: pahanink@cpp.edu

Allegations of excessive force by police are ordinarily evaluated through a legal vocabulary of reasonableness, threat, and officer perception. In the United States, *Graham v. Connor* (1989) directs courts to ask whether the force used was objectively reasonable from the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene rather than with the benefit of hindsight. That standard foregrounds what the officer perceived, how quickly the encounter unfolded, and what dangers appeared present. Those circumstances, however, do not enter legal or public judgment without interpretation. They are described in reports, testimony, interviews, investigations, and institutional accounts. Further, the objective reasonableness framework itself arguably cannot be separated from the racialized conditions under which police perception, danger, and state violence are made legally intelligible (Triola, 2023).

A growing literature has examined police narratives rather than treating them as transparent reports of events. Research shows that officers account for coercive force in ways that protect occupational identity (Dick, 2005), use color-blind rhetorical strategies when discussing racial profiling (Glover, 2007), and tell stories of critical incidents that reinforce police claims to interpret the legitimate use of force (Schaefer & Tewksbury, 2018). Pipkins (2019) uses critical discourse analysis to show how officers' public accounts of killings of unarmed civilians can invoke fear and empathy while avoiding blame. Other studies have examined racialized newspaper narratives of police violence (Roychoudhury, 2023) and the role of uncertainty in police storytelling about the killing of a Black man (Arthur, 2025). This article, therefore, does not claim that police discourse about force has gone unstudied. Its contribution is narrower. It places formal legal testimony and later law-enforcement retrospective accounts in the same analytic frame and asks how those genres jointly construct the reasonableness, legitimacy, and racial meaning of a single highly visible use of deadly force.

This article takes as its focus the 2014 killing of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old Black man, by Officer Darren Wilson, a 28-year-old White police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri. According to Wilson's grand jury testimony, he encountered Brown and Dorian Johnson walking in the roadway, associated Brown with a recently reported theft of cigarillos, and became involved in a struggle at his patrol vehicle. Wilson testified that Brown initially fled before later turning and moving toward him and that he fired additional shots because he believed Brown posed a lethal threat ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014). The shooting immediately generated protest in Ferguson and became a national focal point for conflicts over race, police violence, and institutional legitimacy (Civil Rights Division, 2015; Williams, 2021). On November 24, 2014, a St. Louis County grand jury declined to indict Wilson. The following year, a separate federal investigation of Ferguson's police and municipal court practices documented unconstitutional practices and racial discrimination against African American residents (Civil Rights Division, 2015).

The case generated intense national debate over race, policing, protest, and the legitimacy of local criminal justice institutions. The narratives surrounding the case provide a rich opportunity to examine how racialized threat is made plausible in language.

This article uses the term racialized police violence to describe violence whose perception, explanation, or legitimation is structured by racial categories, histories, or stereotypes (Dhanani et al., 2022; Dukes & Gaither, 2017; J. P. Smith & Merolla, 2019). The term does not require a finding that an officer consciously acted from racial animus. In much the same way, the argument here is not that every speaker consciously intended to reproduce racist meanings. Critical discourse analysis does not require that showing. Rather, the question is how discourse draws on shared racial meanings and institutional scripts to make some interpretations appear natural. In the texts analyzed here, police and law enforcement speakers repeatedly present Wilson and police institutions in positive terms, Brown and the surrounding community in negative terms, and subsequent criticism as uninformed, disloyal, political, or racially partial. These moves jointly help restore police authority after a legitimacy crisis and support the racialized normalization of lethal force against Black men.

The empirical questions are as follows: How did law enforcement speakers name and characterize Brown, Wilson, and Ferguson's Black community? What arguments made Wilson's conduct appear reasonable or necessary? How did these narratives deny or neutralize claims of racism? And how did they transform a contested police killing into an account of professional duty and survival?

The study analyzes law-enforcement speech in the grand jury record, Wilson's later interview-based profile in *The New Yorker* (Halpern, 2015), and former Ferguson Police Chief Thomas Jackson's retrospective account (T. Jackson, 2017). The sources were coded through an integrated critical discourse analysis (CDA) and discourse-historical approach (DHA), with deductive attention to strategies identified by Van Dijk and to DHA categories,

followed by inductive coding of recurrent argumentative patterns. The analysis identifies four linked strategies, presented in three findings sections: denial of racism, the paired operation of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, and deference to officers coupled with hostility toward second-guessing. The central implication is that objective reasonableness is not only a legal test applied to facts after they are known. It is also a discursive accomplishment. Accounts can organize racialized cues of danger into a narrative in which lethal force appears necessary and institutional criticism appears uninformed or unfair.

Theoretical Framework

Race, Threat, and Social Cognition

This study draws together theories of racialized policing and critical approaches to discourse. Theories of minority threat explain policing as a tangible manifestation of authority that dominant groups use to manage populations perceived as politically, economically, or symbolically threatening (P. I. Jackson, 1989). Blalock (1967) argued that dominant groups respond to the relative size and perceived political or economic power of minority groups by mobilizing mechanisms of control. P. I. Jackson (1989) developed this logic specifically for policing, treating police as a tangible manifestation of authority through which dominant groups respond to populations perceived as threatening. Applied to Ferguson, the point is not that every officer consciously acts to preserve a racial hierarchy. It is that the institutional environment in which officers work can inform an associational relationship between a majority-Black community, perceived disorder, and the legitimate deployment of coercive authority. The community, therefore, matters analytically alongside the individual victim. Descriptions of Brown are embedded in descriptions of the place and population in which the encounter occurred.

Racial formation theory further emphasizes that race is not a fixed biological fact but a historically produced social and political category, one that helps organize power and justify unequal distributions of resources (Lawrence, 2012; Omi & Winant, 2014). In policing, these processes are visible when racialized communities are treated as presumptively disorderly, dangerous, or in need of control and when White officers use force substantially more often in minority neighborhoods than minority officers (Hoekstra & Sloan, 2022).

Ecological and cultural theories of policing help explain how these broader racial meanings become operational in street-level encounters. Klinger (1997) argues that officers' views of territorial deviance influence how police work is done and how officers perceive normal crime, victim worthiness, and the seriousness of events. D. A. Smith (1986) similarly describes pragmatic induction, in which officers rely on past experiences with places and populations to guide present decisions. These are policing-specific mechanisms through which a broader minority-threat relationship can become consequential in street-level perception.

Social cognition explains how such contextual meanings may enter perception without conscious animus. People use learned scripts, models, and stereotypes to interpret ambiguous stimuli (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Moscovici, 1988). Eberhardt and colleagues (2004) empirically demonstrated that race and crime are "perceptually relevant," that is, cognitively linked. In their study, participants exposed to Black faces were better able to detect crime-relevant objects, such as guns, while those primed with crime-related objects directed their visual attention toward Black male faces. Their studies included both police officers and civilian participants, making the findings especially relevant to judgments made under uncertainty. More recent policing research likewise shows racial differences in the conditions under which force is used. Hoekstra and Sloan (2022), using quasi-random officer dispatch to 911 calls, found that White officers escalated force more sharply in minority neighborhoods than minority officers, and DeAngelis (2024) found national patterns consistent with a lower threshold for perceiving Black and Hispanic civilians as dangerous than for White civilians. These findings do not establish that officers harbor conscious animus; rather, they describe a set of interpretive habits through which some bodies, places, and gestures become signs of danger.

The literature on racial attribution and empathy further clarifies this process. The fundamental attribution error refers to the tendency to attribute others' behavior to character rather than to circumstance, while attributing one's own behavior to situational pressures (Ross, 1977). In criminal justice settings, such attribution can take racialized form. Bridges and Steen (1998) found that probation officers more often attributed Black youths' delinquency to negative traits and White youths' delinquency to external circumstances. Lynch and Haney (2011) similarly demonstrated that racial stereotypes can shape perceptions in subtle but pervasive ways, including judgments of blameworthiness, dangerousness, and deservedness of punishment. More recently, DeAngelis (2024) observed that the threshold for being perceived by officers as dangerous is higher for White civilians than for Black civilians. These dynamics are especially important in policing as

officers are asked to make rapid judgments under conditions of uncertainty while also carrying culturally available stereotypes about Black criminality and danger.

Social distance and othering can intensify these dynamics, as greater perceived dissimilarity between the police and the policed can make encounters more punitive and coercive (Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969), while othering can facilitate moral disengagement by diminishing similarity and emphasizing difference (Bandura, 1989). Empathy scholarship makes a related point: People are more likely to take seriously the claims of those with whom they can imaginatively identify (Linder, 1996; Sherman, 1998). Thus, when Black civilians are cast as threatening others, officers and audiences may more readily interpret violence against them as deserved or necessary.

Research on racialized perceptions of physicality is particularly relevant to the Brown case. Waytz and colleagues (2015) found that White participants were more likely to attribute superhuman qualities to Black people and that such superhumanization was associated with reduced recognition of Black pain. The relevance for police discourse is not that any reference to size is necessarily racial. It is that descriptions of extraordinary strength, invulnerability, or pain tolerance have a documented racial history and contemporary psychological resonance. The analytic task is therefore to examine when ordinary police vocabularies of size, threat, compliance, and officer safety converge with these historically available meanings.

Thus formulated, cross racial evaluations of blame, such as those required in policing, are especially fraught as White officers are more likely to view the actions of non-White offenders as more blameworthy than they would have been had they been committed by Whites, less likely to be able to empathize with the environmental factors that may have played a role in influencing the non-White offenders' behaviors, and more likely to allow stereotypes to influence their judgments.

Critical Discourse Analysis and the Discourse-Historical Approach

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) treats discourse as a social practice that can reproduce domination by naturalizing unequal relations of power (Fairclough, 1985; Van Dijk, 1993b). Power in this sense is not limited to direct coercion. Lukes (1974) reveals that power operates by shaping what people perceive as normal, legitimate, and thinkable, while Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony similarly explains how dominance can be secured through consent as well as force. For CDA, discourse matters because it helps manufacture that consent by linking individual events to broader ideologies. Police are analytically significant within this framework because their institutional authority gives their accounts unusual consequences. Police narratives enter reports, investigations, legal proceedings, and public records that help fix the meaning of contested encounters.

Van Dijk's work on elite discourse and racism is particularly important here. He identifies two mutually reinforcing strategies: positive representation of the dominant group and negative representation of the dominated group (Van Dijk, 1987, 1993a, 1993b). Positive self-presentation emphasizes the in-group's fairness, professionalism, benevolence, and civic virtue. Negative other-presentation emphasizes the out-group's deviance, danger, irrationality, ingratitude, or disorder. These strategies often appear alongside denials of racism, appeals to neutrality, and claims that remedial efforts unfairly victimize the dominant group. In policing discourse, such strategies can make police violence appear as reluctant protection while making protest and critique appear illegitimate. The value of these categories for the present study is empirical rather than presumptive. They serve as sensitizing concepts against which the texts can be coded; their presence must be demonstrated in the language of the sources.

The discourse-historical approach (DHA), a branch of CDA, adds attention to historical context and rhetorical strategy. DHA asks how people, places, and events are named (*nomination*); what traits are attributed to them (*predication*); what arguments justify those attributions (*argumentation*); whose perspective structures the account (*perspectivization*); and whether statements are intensified or mitigated (*mitigation and intensification*; Reisigl, 2017; Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). This is especially useful for analyzing police violence because present accounts often invoke long-standing racial scripts while denying that history matters. DHA helps reveal how contemporary descriptions of threat, disrespect, and community hostility echo historical narratives of Black dangerousness and disorder.

The theory-method link is therefore direct. The racialized-policing literature identifies the kinds of threat perceptions that warrant attention, CDA identifies recurrent strategies of institutional legitimation, and DHA supplies the coding questions used to examine how those strategies are linguistically constructed.

Together, these theories predict that law enforcement discourse about racialized police violence will tend to protect dominant institutions through familiar rhetorical moves. It will cast officers as reasonable and professional, cast Black victims or communities as threatening or blameworthy, deny the

relevance of race, and reframe criticism as unfair second-guessing. These moves are not merely descriptive. They help produce the very reality they claim to explain, one in which police violence against Black men can be understood as necessary, lawful, and morally defensible.

Data and Method

Case Selection and Data Sources

This study uses a theoretically selected single case. Ferguson is not treated as representative of all police departments or all uses of force. It was selected because the Brown shooting produced an unusually rich public record across legal, journalistic, and institutional genres and because the controversy explicitly joined questions of racial inequality, police legitimacy, and the reasonableness of lethal force. A single-case design permits close comparison of how the same encounter and its aftermath are reconstructed across settings, while the broader literature supplies the basis for assessing the theoretical significance of the strategies identified.

The corpus contains three sources. First are formal statements from the grand jury proceedings in *State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson* ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014). These include Wilson's own testimony and testimony from law enforcement witnesses who repeated, interpreted, or evaluated Wilson's account. Second is a *New Yorker* profile, which was based on interviews with Wilson and contains retrospective statements about race, policing, Ferguson, and the shooting (Halpern, 2015). Third is former Ferguson Police Chief Thomas Jackson's memoiristic account *Policing Ferguson, Policing America*, which offers a retrospective account of the shooting's aftermath, the police response, community relations, and federal review (T. Jackson, 2017). These sources are termed quasi-formal because the speakers were former or current law enforcement officials addressing a public controversy, even when not speaking in an official proceeding. Prosecutors' questions in the grand jury record are considered only when necessary to interpret a law-enforcement witness's answer; they are not coded as law-enforcement self-presentation.

Passage Sampling and Analytic Procedure

The analysis did not begin by selecting isolated quotations. The complete law-enforcement portions of the chosen sources and coded passages were reviewed before excerpts were selected for presentation. The unit of analysis was a meaningful passage, ranging from a sentence to several connected paragraphs or turns of testimony, in which a person, place, event, action, or institution was named, characterized, evaluated, or used in an argument about the shooting or its aftermath. The grand jury material and the Halpern profile were organized and coded in ATLAS.ti; Jackson's book was coded manually using the same codebook. The difference in coding medium reflects source format rather than a difference in analytic criteria.

Coding proceeded in two iterative stages. The first was deductive. Passages were coded for DHA categories of nominations, predications, arguments, perspectivization, mitigation, and intensification (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016) along with strategies identified in Van Dijk's work on racial discourse: denial of racism, positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation, appeals to credible witnesses, and claims that critics of racial inequality are unfairly victimizing the dominant group (Van Dijk, 1993a, 1993b). The racialized-policing literature supplied additional sensitizing codes for dangerousness, physicality, disrespect, neighborhood threat, and officer safety. The second stage was inductive: Previously coded passages were re-read for recurrent argumentative patterns that did not fit the initial scheme. The strongest emergent code was deference / hostility toward second-guessing, which captured claims that outsiders were epistemically or morally unqualified to evaluate an officer's split-second decisions.

Analysis then compared how codes clustered within and across genres. For example, references to Wilson's professionalism were examined alongside depictions of Brown's size and dangerousness rather than as independent descriptions, claims that race was irrelevant were compared with descriptions of Ferguson's Black community, and arguments about hindsight were compared with the legal language of objective reasonableness. Excerpts reported below were selected after coding because they were recurrent, unusually explicit, or especially useful for showing how multiple codes operated together. The goal was analytic generalization, identifying a theoretically meaningful repertoire, not statistical frequency estimation. Because this was single-author interpretive analysis, no intercoder reliability statistic was reported; coding consistency was pursued through a stable codebook, iterative re-reading, and comparison of passages across sources.

Analysis and Findings

As an analysis of discourse, this study focused upon "the major argumentative and semantic moves and rhetorical ploys within an overall persuasive framework" (Van Dijk, 1993a, p. 71). The coding produced four recurring strategies: denial of racism,

positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation, and appeals to deference that delegitimize second-guessing. They are presented in three sections because positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation operate most clearly as a relational pair. Across the corpus, the strategies formed a recurring justificatory sequence. Denial of racism narrowed the interpretive frame; positive self-presentation established the officer and police institution as credible and well intentioned; negative other-presentation organized Brown and the surrounding community as dangerous, disrespectful, or hostile; and anti-second-guessing limited who may legitimately challenge the resulting account. The sections below show how that sequence was constructed in the texts.

Denial of Racism

The first strategy was the denial or displacement of race or racism. Van Dijk (1993a) identified denial of racism as a common feature of dominant racial discourse. Speakers disavow racial animus, deny that race is relevant, or reframe racial grievances as something else. In the present data, denial of racism appeared both in Wilson's account of the controversy and in Jackson's explanation of Ferguson's police-community conflict.

In the *New Yorker* profile, Wilson explicitly rejected the claim that Brown's death and the protests that followed were about race: "Everyone is so quick to jump on race. It's not a race issue" (Halpern, 2015, para. 34). He reframed the controversy as a disagreement over whether police have too much or too little power. The rhetorical effect is to move the event away from a historically situated conflict over anti-Black police violence and into a race-neutral debate about state authority. In that reframing, Black protest becomes not a response to racialized harm but an expression of anti-police sentiment or policy disagreement.

Jackson's account used a related strategy. He described Ferguson officers as attending "ball games, church picnics, block parties, and fairs" to reach out to the community, and then attributed persistent mistrust to "poverty, government mismanagement, and cultural predisposition" (T. Jackson, 2017, p. 4). The listing of community activities performs positive self-presentation, while the phrase "cultural predisposition" relocates responsibility for distrust away from present police conduct to residents' attitudes. Mistrust was not framed as a rational response to racially disparate enforcement or humiliating encounters but as a cultural problem located in the community. The significance of the phrase becomes clearer considering the Department of Justice's finding that Ferguson's law-enforcement and municipal-court practices reflected and exacerbated racial bias and discriminated against African American residents (Civil Rights Division, 2015). The analytic point is not that poverty and government mismanagement are irrelevant. It is that invoking them as alternative causes can displace the specific claim that police practices themselves contributed to racialized mistrust.

Jackson also argued that focusing on bad policing creates a convenient "scapegoat" that distracts from poverty and inequality (T. Jackson, 2017, p. 178). This move is rhetorically powerful because it appears to broaden the analysis while narrowing responsibility. In CDA terms, the argumentative burden shifts. Critics must now show not only that policing was discriminatory but that policing, rather than poverty or culture, is the proper explanatory target. Poverty and inequality are real social problems, but invoking them to displace police racism neutralizes the specific claim at issue. Namely, that Ferguson's police practices were racially discriminatory and that Brown's death resonated because it fit a broader pattern of racialized coercion documented by The Department of Justice's investigation (Civil Rights Division, 2015).

The denial also works historically. Jackson acknowledges Jim Crow and other past "indignities," but he describes them as experiences of parents and grandparents rather than as legacies that structure the present (T. Jackson, 2017, p. 85). This is a familiar rhetorical move in color-blind racial discourse: Past racism is conceded, but present racism is denied or minimized (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Glover, 2007). The discourse-historical significance is that history is invoked only to be contained. The past explains why some Black residents may distrust police, but it does not require present institutional accountability.

Denial of racism, therefore, does more than reject a charge. It restructures the field of interpretation. If Brown's death was not about race, then protests appear mistaken. If mistrust is cultural, then police reform appears secondary. If racism belongs to a past era, then present claims of racialized policing appear excessive. In this way, denial of racism becomes a mechanism of institutional repair. It protects police legitimacy by making race unsayable at the very moment when race organizes public meaning.

Relational Self- and Other-Presentation

Positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation are analytically distinct but empirically intertwined. Van Dijk (1993b) argued that dominant groups often defend against criticism by emphasizing their own fairness, professionalism, benevolence, and good intentions. In the present data, Wilson, his supervisors, and allied law enforcement officials were

repeatedly presented as good officers and credible witnesses.

During the grand jury proceedings, a Ferguson sergeant described Wilson as an "easy going," smiling, "good officer," and not the kind of officer who would "start trouble" ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, p. 74). The sergeant's testimony did not directly establish what happened at the shooting scene; he was not a witness to the fatal encounter. Instead, his testimony established character and institutional credibility. Wilson was made legible as a reasonable officer before the reasonableness of his conduct was assessed.

This characterological framing matters because it sets up a logic of moral inference. If Wilson is intelligible as a good officer, and good officers do not shoot unarmed teenagers without cause, then Brown must have created the conditions that made the shooting necessary. This inference is rarely stated as bluntly as that, but it structures the narrative. Wilson's character becomes evidence not only of who he is but of what Brown must have done. Positive self-presentation thus works in tandem with negative other-presentation.

Jackson's account expanded this strategy from Wilson to the broader law enforcement network. He emphasized his own and another officer's "Medal of Valor" (T. Jackson, 2017, p. 10), described St. Louis County Chief Jon Belmar as experienced and professional, and repeatedly expressed confidence that Belmar and his investigators would produce a "fair report" (T. Jackson, 2017, p. 5). The language of professionalism was central. Jackson described officers as people who enter police work because "they want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem" (T. Jackson, 2017, p. 178). This generalization shifts attention from a specific killing and specific institutional practices to a broad claim about occupational motivation. It invites readers to judge the contested event through an idealized image of policing. The rhetorical question becomes not "What did police do here?" but "Would people who entered public service to help others do what critics allege?" These statements form a chain of credibility: Good officers know other good officers, trust their professionalism, and rely on their fairness. The chain deflects suspicion that police investigating police might protect one another.

Negative other-presentation supplied a contrasting chain of inference. Brown was repeatedly described through physicality, dangerousness, inhumanity, disrespect, and noncompliance. Likewise, Ferguson's Black community was characterized as anti-police, violent, and culturally predisposed to hostility. These descriptions do not simply report perceptions; they activate long-standing racialized associations between Blackness, threat, and criminality.

At the time of Michael Brown's death, Darren Wilson was 28 years old, 6'4" and weighed 210 pounds. Michael Brown was 18 years old, 6'5" and 289 pounds. Despite their relative similarity in heights, throughout the grand jury proceedings, Michael Brown's relative size and strength are repeatedly referenced regarding Darren Wilson's fear and evaluation of Michael Brown's dangerousness. Wilson and other law enforcement witnesses described him as bigger, stronger, and capable of overpowering Wilson ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, p. 155). Wilson himself used the image of feeling like a child holding onto Hulk Hogan to convey Brown's size and strength ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, p. 212). This comparison is rhetorically vivid. It minimizes Wilson and magnifies Brown, transforming a 28-year-old armed officer into a vulnerable child and an unarmed 18-year-old into a superhuman threat.

The predication of Brown as dangerous moved beyond just his size. Wilson testified that another punch could be fatal or render him unconscious, leaving him vulnerable to whatever might happen next ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, pp. 216–217). He also described Brown as having "the most intense aggressive face" and looking "like a demon" ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, p. 225). The demon language is especially revealing because it moves from threat to dehumanization. Brown was not merely a person who frightened Wilson; he was described through a figure of evil and irrational violence.

This discourse resonates with empirical research on superhumanization (Waytz et al., 2015), which found that White participants were more likely to attribute superhuman qualities to Black people, including extraordinary strength and reduced vulnerability to pain. Such beliefs may appear positive in some contexts, but in policing they can increase perceived threat and reduce empathy. Wilson's description of Brown continuing to move through gunfire, becoming angrier as he was shot, and needing to be stopped fit this pattern ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, pp. 227–229). Brown was narrated as a body that verbal commands and bullets failed to discipline until lethal force was finally used in response to the threat he posed. The claim here is not that these studies prove what caused Wilson's

perception. They identify the cultural and cognitive repertoire that makes such descriptions racialized rather than semantically neutral.

The police term "threat" performs crucial work. Law enforcement witnesses repeatedly described Brown as a threat and Wilson's shots as actions taken to "neutralize the threat" ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, p. 73). This vocabulary is technically familiar within police training, but it also narrows the moral field. Once Brown becomes "the threat," his personhood, youth, wounds, fear, or possible confusion recede from view. The encounter becomes a problem of officer survival rather than a conflict between state power and civilian life. This is a clear instance of perspectivization; the event is structured through the officer's threat assessment, while the civilian's interiority is largely absent.

Brown's alleged disrespect is another component of negative other-presentation. Wilson and other witnesses repeatedly recounted Brown's profanity and challenges to Wilson's authority. The Sergeant ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, p. 31), Detective ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, pp. 101–102), FBI Agent ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, p. 155), and Darren Wilson himself ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, p. 214) explicitly referenced that Brown cursed at Wilson – either "Fuck off" or "the fuck with what you have to say" – and used the phrase "you're too much of a pussy to shoot me." A sergeant testified that no officer likes being told to "fuck off" and characterized the statement as disrespectful ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, p. 53). The repeated attention to profanity matters because it links Brown's death to demeanor and deference. Brown is portrayed not only as physically threatening but as verbally insubordinate.

This move has deep implications for racialized policing. Police authority depends heavily on compliance, and disrespect can be treated as a challenge to that authority even when it is not itself a serious crime. The Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice (2015) found that Ferguson officers sometimes used their authority in ways that punished perceived disrespect. In the discourse analyzed here, Brown's profanity becomes part of the causal chain that makes escalation appear intelligible. His speech is implicitly treated as evidence of his character and as a precursor to violence.

The negative presentation extends from Brown to the Black community around Canfield Green. Wilson described the area as anti-police and associated it with gangs, violence, guns, and drugs ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, p. 238). Whether or not Wilson sincerely believed this description, its discursive function is clear. It situates the encounter in a place already marked as dangerous and hostile, making Brown's actions more readily interpretable as criminal and threatening. The neighborhood becomes part of the evidence against him. Ecological theories of policing help explain why this matters. Officers' understandings of territorial deviance shape how ambiguous conduct is classified and how seriously it is treated (Klinger, 1997; D. A. Smith, 1986). At the same time, Jackson's (2017) description of community mistrust as a "cultural predisposition" (p. 4) makes the community itself a source of pathology. Police are narrated as trying to build trust; residents are narrated as disposed to withhold it.

Viewed together, positive self- and negative other-presentation produce a moral asymmetry. Wilson is calm, professional, trained, and endangered; Brown is profane, inhuman, defiant, and threatening. Ferguson's police are patient and civic-minded, while its Black residents are mistrustful because of culture, poverty, or history. This asymmetry helps justify coercive policing as a response to community pathology rather than as a cause of community grievance and helps explain why the legal category of reasonableness can feel self-evident within the account.

Wilson can appear reasonable because Brown appears monstrous, disrespectful, and dangerous. Police can appear benevolent because the community appears hostile and predisposed to be against them. The strategy works even when speakers do not explicitly mention race. Indeed, its power lies partly in its race-neutral vocabulary: size, threat, disrespect, neighborhood crime, officer safety. These terms allow racial meanings to circulate without being named.

Deference, Second-Guessing, and Loyalty

A final strategy emerged inductively: hostility toward second-guessing and strong deference to the officer in the moment. This theme overlaps with positive self-presentation but is analytically distinct. Positive self-presentation says that the officer is good and credible. Deference says that outsiders lack the standing, knowledge, or loyalty to judge the officer's split-second decisions after the fact. The distinction matters because it shifts the argument from "Wilson was right" to "people who were not there cannot fairly say he was wrong."

The strategy is explicit in grand jury testimony when a sergeant characterized an injury-report question asking "how could this incident have been prevented" as a "stupid question" ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case," 2014, Grand Jury Transcripts section, Vol. V, p. 166). The sergeant's reasoning was that when an officer is physically attacked without provocation, there is nothing meaningful to ask about what else could have been done. The statement does more than defend Wilson. It delegitimizes the very practice of after-action scrutiny. To ask how the event could have been prevented is to misunderstand the reality of police work. This aversion to "second guessing" has been noted as a defining characteristic of police culture in which police officers look askance at non-police authorities who are perceived as too lenient on criminals and overly critical of officers (Punch, 1979; Reiner, 2010).

This deference echoes the legal language of *Graham v. Connor* (1989), which warns courts not to evaluate police force with the 20/20 vision of hindsight. In legal doctrine, that principle aims to account for uncertainty and danger. In discourse, however, it can become a broader shield against accountability. The officer's perspective becomes privileged not only legally but morally and epistemically. Those who were not there are positioned as naive, politically motivated, or unfair.

Jackson's criticism of the Department of Justice investigation extends this anti-second-guessing logic to institutional review. He portrays the investigation as beginning from the "premise that Ferguson was a swamp of injustice" and then searching for evidence to support that view (T. Jackson, 2017, p. xiv). He describes the DOJ's presence as an "invasion" and accuses Attorney General Eric Holder of rushing to judgment (T. Jackson, 2017, p. 104). The rhetorical effect is to recast federal civil rights oversight as biased interference rather than as legitimate accountability.

Holder receives particular attention in Jackson's account. Jackson criticizes Holder for identifying himself as both Attorney General and a Black man, suggesting that Holder made the visit more about cultural identity than about his law enforcement role (T. Jackson, 2017, p. 134). This characterization is revealing because it treats Holder's acknowledgment of race as evidence of partiality. By contrast, police accounts that deny race are treated as neutral. Race becomes disqualifying when named by a Black official but invisible when embedded in police descriptions of threat and community hostility.

This is a reversal characteristic of dominant racial discourse. Efforts to identify racial inequality are reframed as unfair attacks on the dominant institution, making police the real victims of politicized criticism (Van Dijk, 1993b). Jackson's language transforms the DOJ from a civil rights enforcement agency into an invading, biased outsider. At the same time, Ferguson police are portrayed as besieged public servants whose good-faith work has been misrepresented.

The discourse of deference also enforces loyalty. Police culture has often been described as suspicious of outsiders who judge officers without understanding the dangers of the job (Punch, 1979; Reiner, 2010). In the data, that occupational solidarity becomes a rhetorical resource. To question Wilson's choices is not simply to evaluate evidence; it is to betray or misunderstand police work. This move narrows the range of legitimate critique and privileges those already aligned with law enforcement.

Deference, then, completes the justificatory structure. Denial of racism removes race from the frame. Positive self-presentation establishes officer credibility. Negative other-presentation constructs both Brown and the community as dangerous or blameworthy. Anti-second-guessing then blocks external review by insisting that only officers can truly understand the encounter. Together, these strategies transform a contested killing into a story of necessary violence and unfair criticism.

Discussion

These findings demonstrate how racialized police violence can be redeemed through discourse. Redemption here does not mean forgiveness in a religious or personal sense. It refers to the narrative process by which an act that appears morally and politically troubling is converted into an account of duty, professionalism, and survival. In the texts analyzed, Wilson's lethal force is redeemed by placing him in a narrative where he is small, reasonable, reluctant, and endangered, while Brown is large, defiant, demonic, and unstoppable. The police institution is redeemed by presenting itself as civic-minded, professional, and unfairly maligned, while the Black community is presented as mistrustful, disorderly, or culturally predisposed to hostility.

This process illuminates a key tension in the objective reasonableness standard. *Graham* asks whether a reasonable officer in the same circumstances would have perceived and responded to danger as the defendant officer did. But circumstances are not self-interpreting. They are narrated through language, and that language is shaped by racial meanings. When Blackness is associated with danger, size, pain tolerance, disrespect, and criminality, the officer's perception of threat may appear reasonable because it is culturally familiar. Discourse therefore helps produce the reasonableness it claims merely to report (Triola, 2023).

The analysis also complicates intent-based understandings of racism. The relationship between discourse and implicit racial cognition is especially important. Eberhardt and colleagues (2004) show that race-crime associations can shape visual attention and the detection of crime-relevant objects even without an explicit racial belief. None of the findings requires proof that Wilson, Jackson, or other law enforcement speakers consciously intended to deploy racist tropes. CDA instead asks how discourse reproduces relations of domination through shared meanings and institutional scripts (Fairclough, 1985; Van Dijk, 1993b). A speaker may sincerely deny racism while relying on racialized descriptions of danger. A police institution may sincerely describe itself as professional while discounting the racialized experiences of the communities it polices. Sincerity does not prevent discourse from reproducing hierarchy. Indeed, the findings reveal how a post hoc account can reproduce racialized threat meanings even if the speaker sincerely rejects racism and even if each individual term, for example, size, hand movement, high-crime area, can be race-neutral in isolation.

The findings also complicate the assumption that more visual evidence will automatically resolve contested uses of force. Roche and colleagues (2022) found that contextual framing can shape how even "objective" evidence is interpreted. Participants were presented with the same ambiguous, low-quality body-worn-camera video of a deadly-force encounter involving a Black civilian while contextual information about the outcome was experimentally varied. Participants' judgments of the officers changed substantially with that contextual framing, and they rated the force as more appropriate when told that the civilian possessed a weapon. This complements the present findings; video may constrain some factual disputes, but the significance of what viewers see can still be organized by accounts of threat, weapons, and officer decision-making.

The Ferguson case also demonstrates the importance of genre. Grand jury testimony, journalistic interviews, and memoiristic accounts each structure discourse differently. Grand jury testimony emphasizes evidence, legal categories, and official procedure. The New Yorker profile emphasizes personal reflection and public reputation. Jackson's book emphasizes retrospective institutional defense. Yet across these genres, similar strategies recur. This suggests that the discourse is not reducible to one speaker or one setting. It reflects a broader law enforcement repertoire for explaining contested violence.

For criminology and criminal justice scholarship, the findings suggest that research on police violence should examine not only encounters and outcomes but also narrative afterlives. Police killings do not end when force is used; they continue through reports, testimony, press conferences, media interviews, federal investigations, memoirs, and community memory. These narratives shape whether violence is condemned, excused, ignored, or treated as inevitable and can recirculate official police accounts, criminalize victims through "no angel" frames, and shape collective memory of police violence (Roychoudhury, 2023).

The analysis further suggests that reform efforts focused solely on explicit bias may be insufficient. The most consequential discourse in these texts rarely uses overtly racist language. Instead, it uses formally race-neutral terms that carry racialized meaning in context: threat, size, disrespect, anti-police, high-crime area, officer safety, and second-guessing. Training and oversight that address only explicit slurs or intentional discrimination will miss how racial hierarchy is reproduced through ordinary institutional language.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of historical analysis. Descriptions of Black dangerousness, irrationality, and inhuman strength do not arise anew in each police encounter. They draw on long histories of racial representation. DHA helps reveal how contemporary police discourse can invoke that history while presenting itself as immediate, neutral, and technical. The appeal to split-second perception is therefore incomplete. Perception is made in the moment, but the categories through which perception occurs are historically sedimented.

Several limitations qualify the argument. First, the corpus is textual and does not include every television interview, radio appearance, social-media statement, press conference, or informal conversation concerning the case. Second, the three source groups differ substantially in genre. Grand jury testimony was elicited by prosecutors in a legal proceeding, Halpern's article contains selected quotations embedded in a journalist's narrative, and Jackson's book is a retrospective account written for a public audience. The recurrence of similar strategies across genres is analytically useful, but differences in selection and audience limit claims about frequency. Third, the study analyzes law-enforcement discourse, not the full discursive field. Community members, protesters, journalists, political officials, and Brown's family offered competing narratives that are essential to the public history of Ferguson but fall outside the sampling frame. Fourth, a single case cannot establish how common these strategies are across agencies or incidents. The case is theoretically informative, not statistically representative.

Conclusion

This article examined how law enforcement discourse surrounding Michael Brown's killing justified and normalized racialized police violence. The analysis identified four interlocking strategies: denial of racism, positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation, and appeals to deference that discredit second-guessing. Together, these strategies cast Wilson as a reasonable and endangered professional, Brown as a dangerous and disrespectful threat, Ferguson's Black community as hostile or culturally predisposed to mistrust, and critics as politically or racially biased outsiders. The central contribution is to show how racialized police violence is not only enacted through force but also reproduced through explanation. Language matters because it organizes responsibility, empathy, and legitimacy. It can make death appear as the unfortunate but necessary result of a victim's threat. It can make institutional critique appear unfair. It can make race disappear from precisely those events where racial meaning is most active.

Future research should extend this analysis across additional cases, agencies, and media forms. Comparative work could examine whether similar discursive strategies appear in body-camera reports, use-of-force reviews, civil litigation, press conferences, union statements, and news coverage. Such work would deepen our understanding of how police violence is narrated across institutional settings and how those narratives shape law, policy, and public opinion. Likewise, future research should examine not only how police officers and law enforcement officials narrate use-of-force incidents but also how those narratives are received by different publics. Recent experimental work suggests that perceptions of blameworthiness, redeemability, punishment, and justification vary with contextual information about officers and their conduct histories, even when officer race alone has limited independent effect (Dunbar et al., 2025).

The task is not only to identify problematic words or individual bad actors. It is to understand how the ordinary language of policing can reproduce racial domination while appearing neutral, professional, and reasonable. Only by examining that language can scholars and practitioners better understand how racialized violence is made legitimate and how alternative accounts of accountability might become possible.

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About the Author

Peter A. Hanink is an associate professor of Criminology and Sociology at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. He received his JD from Brooklyn Law School, MPA from New York University, and PhD from the University of California, Irvine. His research focuses on race and policing, specifically racialized police violence.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge Charis Kubrin, Richard McCleary, L. Song Richardson, and Geoff Ward for their helpful comments on early drafts of this study and the CCJLS editors and reviewers for their helpful suggestions.