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# Officer-Involved Homicides of Unarmed Black Males: Perceptions of the African American Community

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Officer-Involved Homicides of Unarmed Black Males:  
Perceptions of the African American Community

by

Sarah Fox

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
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St. Paul, Minnesota  
In Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

**Abstract**

Officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males have gained increasing publicity in recent years. However, there has been no research regarding how officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males have impacted members of the African American community's perceptions of police. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine how members of the African American community's perceptions of police have been impacted as a result of the officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males. Three members of the African American community were interviewed for this study. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions in a semi-structured format. After transcribing and coding the interviews, the themes that emerged from the data included lack of accountability, the role of media, unequal treatment between races, black lives do not matter, perceptions of police, and improvements for police-minority relations. The researcher provided a discussion of the findings and the correlation of findings with existing research. Strengths and limitations and implications for future research are also discussed.

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### **Introduction**

Nationally, police use deadly force against African American males at a rate 21 times higher than they do against white males (Zwach, 2015). The media has publicized multiple instances of police killings of black males in recent years but the problem has continued. While it may seem that the frequency of these stories are increasing in recent years, the data suggests that the prevalence of police misconduct is not increasing (McLaughlin, 2015). In contrast, it is the amount of news coverage that is allowing Americans to see how significant a problem police misconduct is and how often it occurs.

The Department of Justice defines the types of police misconduct, which include “excessive force, sexual assault, intentional false arrests, the intentional fabrication of evidence resulting in a loss of liberty to another,” “unlawful stops, searches or arrests” (The Department of Justice, 2015). These are serious offenses and the prevalence is even more alarming. According to the Cato Institute (2011), there were 4,861 reports of police misconduct. Of those reports, excessive force (23.8%), sexual misconduct (9.3%), fraud/theft (7.2%), and false arrest (6.8%) are the most frequently reported types of police misconduct.

Given the serious nature of the types of police misconduct, it is important to consider the ramifications of instances of police misconduct. Unfortunately, police officers are not held to the same standards of accountability when compared to citizens (Cato, 2011). This lack of accountability can cause lasting effects on peoples’ perceptions of the police and help to create negative attitudes towards them.

It seems as though attitudes towards the police, especially by youth and young adults in Minneapolis, are the most unfavorable than they have ever been (Johnson, 2016). The Northside Research Team conducted surveys and interviews with the residents in regards to their

perceptions of the police. The findings suggest that there is a significant amount of mistrust of the police among young people from North Minneapolis. Alarming, 77% of respondents reported working to avoid the police due to being anxious or fearful in the presence of police (Johnson, 2016). Equally significant, only 23% of the people interviewed reported that they felt safe around the police (Johnson, 2016).

While considering these statistics, it is important to consider the demographic characteristics of the location where the study was conducted. The majority of people living in North Minneapolis are people of color (Minnesota Compass, 2016). Taken together with the findings that the majority of young people of North Minneapolis mistrust the police, people of color in this community disproportionately have negative views of the police.

All things considered, police misconduct, including the deadly use of force by police, has an impact of peoples' perceptions of the police (Barthelemy et al., 2016; Miller & Davis, 2008; Walker & Waterman, 2008; Weitzer, 2002; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). However, the research fails to address how perceptions are impacted among members of the African American community by police use of deadly force against unarmed black males and how individuals create meaning from these incidents. Due to the lack of research on this topic, the purpose of this study is to examine how recent police deadly use of force against unarmed black males has impacted members of the African Americans community's perceptions of police.

## **Literature Review**

### **Factors that Impact Perceptions of the Police**

**Demographics.** Research repeatedly addressed the significance of demographic factors and their relationship to perceptions of police. Across the research reviewed, demographic

factors, including race, age, gender, neighborhood, socioeconomic status (SES), and marital status, were predictors of how people perceive the police and police work.

**Race.** One of the most consistently recognized demographic factors that impacts perceptions of police is race. Research suggests that whites hold the least negative view of the police (Weitzer, 2002; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Whites are more inclined to agree with aggressive policing and are less likely to be critical of police work. In addition, whites are less likely to believe that police misconduct occurs frequently and are less inclined to be critical of instances of police misconduct, including unjustified stops, insulting language, excessive force, and corruption.

In contrast, multiple researchers have found that the minority population have the most negative attitudes towards the police (Albrecht & Green, 1977; Benson, 1981; Rosenblum et al., 2005; Weitzer, 2002). Furthermore, African Americans of all ages and across all income levels are more critical of police work than whites (Benson, 1981). African Americans are more likely to expect unjust policing than whites and they are more likely to be dissatisfied with the quality of policing in their neighborhoods. Interestingly, the findings from Brindenball and Jesilow (2008) suggest on the other hand, that race and ethnicity are not significant factors that affect perceptions of police.

Furthermore, peoples' perceptions of police misconduct differ by race. African Americans are much more likely to believe that police misconduct happens very often, when compared to whites (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). In a study by Weitzer and Tuch (2004), nearly half of African American respondents believe the police use excessive force. The literature goes on to suggest that African Americans and Hispanics believe that police misconduct occurs very often and can be associated with their disproportionate experience with police and experiences of

abuse from police. Therefore, the minority populations' experience with police seems to have increased the probability that they will have a more negative attitude towards police.

Weitzer and Tuch (2004) propose that the racial-hierarchy thesis can be used to explain some of the differences between races. This model suggests that there is a white-Hispanic-African American racial hierarchy that can be used to explain differences in perceptions of police between races. This hierarchy suggests that whites hold the most favorable views of police and are most likely to minimize police misconduct and African Americans hold the least favorable attitudes towards police and believe that police misconduct is more prevalent than whites.

*Age.* Research has shown that age is significantly associated with perceptions of police (Brindenball & Jesliow, 2008; Weitzer 1999). Research has suggested that older individuals were less likely to be dissatisfied with police (Brindenball & Jesliow, 2008). Similarly, young people are more likely to have unfavorable views of police (Benson, 1981). Additionally, when specifically looking at how age impacts peoples' perceptions of police misconduct, younger people perceive police misconduct to be more prevalent than older generations (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004).

On the contrary, findings from a study by Jefferis et al. (2011) suggest that non-traditional students (23 years and older) were much more likely to believe officers use excessive force when compared to traditional students (18 to 22 years of age). This finding may contradict the previously presented research from Weitzer and Tuch (2004) because the limited difference between the age ranges of the between the non-traditional and traditional students, along with the differences in age not being reflective of the differences between the younger and older generations referenced earlier.

**Gender.** Research suggests that gender can affect peoples' perceptions of the police. To begin, women are more likely to hold a favorable opinion of police than men (Brindenball & Jesilow, 2008). Correspondingly, in a study by Jefferis et al. (2011) where respondents were shown a videotaped arrest and asked to give their opinions about the justification and legality of the arrest, men were more likely to see the arrest as being unjustified and illegal.

**Neighborhood.** Another highly recognized demographic factor that affects peoples' perceptions of police is their neighborhood and the social disorder in their community. First, the geographic location of a peoples' neighborhood affects their attitudes towards the police (Albrecht & Green, 1977). The majority of people from urban middle class, semi-rural, and rural communities hold the most favorable attitudes towards the police. In contrast, people from urban poor communities have the most negative opinions of the police.

Equally important, high levels of crime in citizens' neighborhoods increase the likelihood that they will have unfavorable views of the police (Benson, 1981; Brindelball & Jesilow, 2008; Parker et al., 1985; Van Craen, 2013). The high crime levels subsequently increase peoples' fear about their safety, which further increases dissatisfaction towards the police (Brindenball & Jesilow, 2008; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Also, people from high crime neighborhoods are more likely to perceive the police as corrupt, dumb, unfriendly, and cruel (Parker et al., 1995) and these negative perceptions about police only further contribute to the poor attitudes towards police from people living in high crime areas.

Furthermore, the more contact that the majority and minority groups have with their minority neighbors, the less they trust the police and the more negative their attitudes are towards police (Weitzer, 1999). Correspondingly, attitudes towards police are impacted by the racial composition of the neighborhood, where a higher minority population holds more negative views

(Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Taken together, the more racially diverse a neighborhood is, the more likely that they will hold unfavorable views of the police.

Taken together, the outcome-based performance model presented by Van Craen (2013) suggests that neighborhood disorder is directly linked to distrust in the police. This concept suggests that when there is high levels of social disorder in a neighborhood the residents feel as though the police are not doing their job successfully and subsequently leads members of the community to have less trust in police.

***Socioeconomic Status.*** Numerous research studies have suggested that socioeconomic status significantly affects peoples' perceptions of the police, with the poor and lower class holding the most unfavorable views towards the police (Albrecht & Green, 1997; Benson, 1981; Brindenball & Jesilow, 2008; Parker et al., 1995). Research by Benson (1981) suggests some potential reasons for this, stating that the poor receive different treatment from the police than the upper- and middle-class. Additionally, the poor are more likely to have hostile encounters with police and more likely to be stopped, questioned and detained than people of higher socioeconomic statuses. The police's unequal treatment towards the poor further contributes to the negative perceptions the poor have towards the police.

Parker et al. (2005) suggests that people of lower socioeconomic status to hold more negative views towards the police because they are more likely to live in impoverished, inner city neighborhoods that are more routinely patrolled than more affluent areas. The researchers suggest that this more frequent patrolling leads to the residents and the community to resent the police which subsequently leads to less favorable attitudes towards the police.

***Marital Status.*** In addition, peoples' marital status can influence their perceptions of police. In a study by Parker et al. (1995), researchers suggested that people who are single and

separated-divorced have a more negative attitude towards police and the behavior of police when compared to people who are married. This holds true for the both men and women respondents of the study.

The reasoning for this finding is again suggested by Parker et al. (2005) who says that people who are single are more likely to live in more impoverished areas where police are more continually monitoring the community and this higher police presence leads to more negative attitudes towards the police.

**Media exposure.** It has been suggested that media may be one of the most powerful influences in America (Pratt-Harris et al., 2016). Additionally, the publicized exposure to police and police work in the media has been shown to affect citizens' perceptions of the police (Donovan & Khlam, 2015; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). This effect holds true for both entertainment media and the news (Donovam & Khlam, 2015). Research by Weitzer & Tuch (2004) suggests that entertainment media, including police reality shows like *COPS*, has been shown to increase satisfaction with police by white viewers. In contrast, these police reality shows do not increase the satisfaction of African American viewers with police.

Additionally, it has been shown that viewers of entertainment media shows, such as crime dramas, hold different beliefs about the police when compared to non-viewers (Donovan & Khlam, 2015). Specifically, viewers of crime dramas are more likely to believe the police are successful at fighting crime and that excessive force is typically necessary. This effect is stronger for whites than African Americans.

Also, instances of police misconduct displayed in the news have an effect on peoples' perceptions of the police. News coverage of police misconduct, including police brutality and corruption, have been shown to increase unfavorable attitudes towards the police (Dowler &

Kawilski, 2007; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Furthermore, findings from Dowler and Kawilski (2007) suggest that network news more strongly impacts perceptions about police misconduct than entertainment media. Interestingly, there is a difference in perceptions of police misconduct based on which news network people watch or read their news from (Miller & Davis, 2008). Given this information, it is important to consider how police work portrayed in entertainment media and real life police situations displayed on the news can impact peoples' perceptions of the police.

A potential explanation as to why news broadcasts lead to more unfavorable views of the police is because the news of police misconduct is much more prevalent than news that portrays an officer doing something good (Miller & Davis, 2008). By people being exposed to more negative incidents than positive stories, it is understandable why media would have such a strong effect on affecting peoples' perceptions of police.

**Contacts with the police.** Interactions with police have been shown to significantly influence peoples' perceptions of the police (Brindelball & Jesilow, 2008; Jefferis et al., 2011; Parker et al., 1995; Van Craen, 2013). Citizens' perceptions differ if the contact with police is involuntary versus voluntary, where involuntary contact is associated with more negative views of police (Brindelball & Jesilow, 2008). In addition, it has been proposed that the police using fair and respectful treatment during encounters have a significant effect on the perceptions of the suspect and others (Rosenblum et al., 2005; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Equally important, the behavior and demeanor of the citizen during a police encounter can also impact perceptions of the police (Rome et al., 1995).

**Vicarious experience.** Similar to the concept that direct contact with the police can shape one's perceptions; positive and negative vicarious experiences with police contribute to the

formation of attitudes as well (Rosenblum et al., 2005). This finding was also confirmed by Weitzer and Tuch (2004), who suggest that peoples' perceptions can be affected by vicariously experiencing contacts with police through others' portrayals of the experience. A person does not have to have personally experienced contact with police for them to hold a negative view. Likewise, witnessing police wrongdoing can influence peoples' perceptions as well.

Additionally, positive vicarious experiences have the ability to impact attitudes as well (Rosenblum et al., 2005). Rosenblum et al. (2005) suggest that positive vicarious experiences with police were more influential in changing peoples' perceptions than negative vicarious perceptions. This finding is important because it is less common to hear about or see instances of positive police interactions and situations. It is more common for the news to broadcast instances of police misconduct, police brutality, and officer-involved shootings. This research suggests the impact that more broadcasts of positive police experiences could have on influencing peoples' attitudes towards police and increasing more positive perceptions of law enforcement.

Furthermore, there are differences between races in how people learn about by vicarious experiences with the police (Rosenblum et al., 2005). African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to hear about experiences with police by portrayals told by others, where as white people are more likely to vicariously experience contact with police through media sources. Therefore, it is important to recognize how personal contacts with police and vicarious experiences with police can impact peoples' attitudes towards law enforcement.

Taken together, Rosenblum et al. (2005) suggests that there is a prejudice nature in the way people form attitudes towards the police. The researchers discuss that the public's attitude towards police are sometimes based on an overgeneralized belief after having direct contact with police or vicariously experiencing an interaction through another. When attitudes towards police

are based on limited information and overgeneralizing of attitudes, more negative perceptions are likely to occur.

This hypothesis is substantiated by Miller and Davis (2008) who suggest that there is a ripple effect that results from encounters with police when people tell their stories to friends and family. Then the friends or family retell the story again. By the retelling of the story and people having these vicarious experiences with police, it is understandable that limited information would be available and unintentional misrepresentation and overgeneralization may occur.

**Police misconduct.** Multiple research studies have addressed the impact that police misconduct can have on perceptions of the police (Barthelemy et al., 2016; Miller & Davis, 2008; Walker & Waterman, 2008; Weitzer, 2002; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). There is a general consensus that police misconduct negatively impacts peoples' perceptions of the police. Interestingly, perceptions of police misconduct are separate and unconnected to peoples' perceptions of police effectiveness and responsiveness (Miller & Davis, 2008). People can believe the police to be performing their work successively, while still viewing instances of police misconduct negatively. However, highly publicized instances of police misconduct negatively affect peoples' perceptions of the police (Walker & Waterman, 2008; Weitzer, 2002).

Interestingly, when people have the belief that police generally use too much force, they are 24 times more likely to perceive instances that confirm their held belief (Jefferis et al., 2011). Also, citizens who have had encounters with police where excessive force was used are much more likely to believe that this type of police misconduct is a common occurrence and to perceive excessive force being used in other instances with police. Similarly, people who have had contact with police where they have been arrested or charged are more likely to believe that

police misconduct is a common occurrence (Dowler & Kawilski, 2007). The evidence presented suggests that police misconduct can negatively impact peoples' perceptions of police.

Additionally, research by Weitzer (2002) suggests that the negative perceptions and reduction in the citizens' confidence following instances of police misconduct can last for a significant amount of time. The researcher goes on to speak about how the most alarming instances of police misconduct can become engrained in the belief system of minorities and can cause further divide between minorities and police. Taken together, these findings suggest that instances of police misconduct further hinder minority-police relations in communities where perceptions of the police are already negative.

Furthermore, when instances of police misconduct occur, African American victims and the African American community believe the police report of the incident does not accurately depict what happened and only partial accounts of the situation are documented (Pratt-Harris et al., 2016). Equally important, the majority of Americans do not believe that there is a lack of accountability for police misconduct (Zwach, 2015). Again, this is important because this lack of transparency and lack of accountability creates an even deeper divide between the African American community and police, especially when community-police relations have much room for improvement.

### **Factors that Impact Police**

While it is important to examine the factors that impact peoples' perceptions of the police, it is equally important to examine characteristics of police who are involved in police misconduct and the polices' perceptions of the minority communities they serve. Because minorities are no more likely to be using drugs, carrying guns, or committing crimes than white people, it is important to examine why police are killing African American males at 21 times

more often than white males (Zwach, 2015). By doing so, it can provide a more thorough view of why officer-involved homicides of unarmed black men have become more prevalent, along with providing information for reducing the frequency of officer-involved homicides.

**Policies' perceptions.** There have been multiple factors identified that cause police to suspect that criminal activity is occurring (Zwach, 2015). Some of these factors include sociological factors, such as race, sex, socioeconomic status, and age. For example, men are more likely to be perceived as aggressive and more likely to act out by a police officer. Also, men who are larger and muscular are more likely to be perceived as a threat and therefore, more likely to have deadly force used against them.

Additionally, research discusses how police perceptions are impacted by implicit racial biases (Zwach, 2015). Zwach (2015) explains that stereotypes of African Americans being aggressive, violent, and criminals are so embedded in our history and culture that they can inform and impact thinking, even when people are not consciously aware of the stereotypes. Examples of implicit racial biases provided include that people interpret the faces of African Americans as more malicious and violent than those of white people. Likewise, studies suggest that “thoughts of crime or criminals prompts individuals to unconsciously look for black faces and to ignore white faces” (Zwach, 2015, p. 208). These examples show the powerful impact that implicit racial biases can have. Because these biases are unconsciously engrained in our belief systems through history and culture, they become difficult to identify and change.

Furthermore, research has suggested that polices' perceptions of the communities they serve directly effects the way they interact with people in the community (Barthelemy et al., 2016). Therefore, when police have negative perceptions about the communities they serve, they will have less interaction with the people in that community. Research by Zwach (2015)

suggested that the Ferguson Police Department, who shot and killed an unarmed African American male, Michael Brown Jr. on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, lacked knowledge and understanding on how to effectively communicate with the community that they serve. This is important because police have reported that the steps to improving community relations is through more in-person encounters and dialogue with community members and to be more visible (Barthelemy et al., 2016).

Taken together, if police do not understand how to effectively communicate with the communities they serve, it will be much more difficult to improve community-police relations. Suggestions to improve community-police relations include increasing the diversity of the police force and race and gender sensitivity trainings that would promote respectful treatment from police (Zwach, 2015). By police being more sensitive and respectful to the members of the communities they serve, the response could be more cooperative behavior from the community, which in turn, could improve community-police relations.

**Police involved in misconduct.** Research has also addressed the characteristics that are most commonly associated with police officers that are involved in misconduct (Barthelemy et al., 2016). Some of the findings presented by Barthelemy et al. (2016) include that officers who had previously been arrested and had traffic violations were more likely to be accused of police misconduct. Conversely, officers who have an associate's degree or higher were less likely to be involved in police misconduct. Also, officers who did well in their police academy training were less likely to be accused of police misconduct compared to fellow officers who scored marginally in police academy. By identifying the characteristics of police that are most commonly involved in police misconduct, it sheds light on how changes to hiring and screening procedures could reduce the amount of police misconduct seen today.

**Officer-involved homicides of African American males.**

One study showed police use deadly force against African American males nearly twice a week (Barthelemy et al., 2016). This statistic is undoubtedly too high and it is important to examine the impacts of the prevalence of police-involved killings of African American males. Because African American males are more likely to be stopped and searched by police (Barthelemy et al., 2016), it leads to them having more risk of being shot and killed by police.

Additionally, officer-involved homicides cause the African American community to doubt if the police are truly there to serve and protect them (Barthelemy et al., 2016). In a study by Bathelémy et al. (2016), researchers found that the majority of participants from a diverse community felt as though the police did not care about them. This led to a huge lack of trust in police-community relations and further increases the divide between police and the communities they serve.

While the research presented suggests findings that demonstrate that officer-involved homicides create a lack of trust between police and African American communities, the research fails to address what other potential impacts police-involved killings have on the African American community's perception of police. Therefore, the research question for this study is "How does officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males affect members of the African Americans community's perceptions of police?"

**Conceptual Framework****Minority Threat Hypothesis**

In order to gain a better understanding of how African American's perceptions of police are impacted by officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males, the minority threat hypothesis will be one of the theories used to conceptualize this study. While research has

addressed that factors impact citizens' perceptions of police, the research has failed to address how members of the African American community are impacted and has created meaning from police deadly use of force against unarmed African American males. The researcher will use the minority threat hypothesis as a lens to analyze the data. Additionally, the minority threat hypothesis will shape the way that the researcher creates meaning from the data and presents findings.

Simply stated, the minority threat hypothesis suggests that minorities are considered a threat and experience more control and receive greater punishment as a result of being perceived as a threat (Smith & Holmes, 2014). As addressed earlier, police's perceptions of the communities they serve is directly connected to the way they interact with citizens (Barthelemy et al., 2016). The literature reviewed earlier also has provided evidence that African American males are perceived to be aggressive, violent, and criminal (Zwach, 2015). These findings speak to the racial biases and racial disparities that exist when African Americans interact with law enforcement.

Based on the minority threat perspective, police are more likely to use excessive or deadly force against minority populations than the dominant group (Smith & Holmes, 2014). This hypothesis is even further substantiated by the startling statistic that police use deadly force against African Americans at 21 times the rate that they are against Whites (Zwach, 2015). Furthermore, higher population of minorities in a city will increase the amount of coercive control used against the minority population by police (Smith & Holmes, 2014). Again, the minority threat hypothesis assists one in understanding the reasoning behind the disparate amount of excessive force and deadly use of force against minorities.

This theory will help identify themes from the data that represent how African American men feel as though they are subjected to greater use of force and crime control methods based on the color of their skin. Additionally, the researcher will use the hypothesis to search for the respondents' perceptions about difference in treatment between more racially diverse areas and less racially diverse areas. According to this concept, respondents from less racially diverse areas will perceive the police to use less coercive methods with citizens and respondents from more racially diverse areas will perceive the police as using more aggressive forms of control.

This framework suggests that in order for there to be better relations between the police and the African American community, there needs to be more work done to reduce the biases that police hold that cause them to believe the minority population is a threat. It would be smart to first address the media portrayal of African American men, this representation provided by media sources helps to sustain and reaffirm the biases that are held by others, including the police. Additionally, acknowledgement of the racial biases embedded in our culture would provide a foundational area to address and work to create change and behave in a way that does not see any minority group as a threat.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism will be used to conceptualize how members of the African American community create meaning following an officer-involved homicide of an unarmed black male. Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism approach has three premises, with the first one stating, "human beings act toward things based on the meaning they attribute to those things" (Williams & Dingwall, 2014, p. 723). Therefore, this concept suggests that officers behave toward minorities in a way that is consistent with the way they give meaning to them.

Conversely, members of the minority population have assigned meaning to police officers and behave according to the meaning that has been assigned.

The second premise of symbolic interactionism is that “the meanings people attribute to things arise out of social interaction” (Williams & Dingwall, 2014, p. 724). This concept provides an important lens to this study because it will help the researcher better understand the how and why members of the African American community attribute meaning through their interactions with law enforcement. Additionally, it can help explain how African Americans can ascribe meaning to publicized encounters of police deadly use of force against unarmed black males.

Finally, “the meanings people attribute to things are handled through an interpretive process used by a person in specific situations” (Williams & Dingwall, 2014, p. 724) is the third premise of symbolic interactionism. This assumption suggests that members of the African American community have ascribed meaning based on their experience of encounters with police specifically. Furthermore, African Americans may use the knowledge of others’ experience and encounters with police as an interpretive tool to attribute meaning.

Overall, symbolic interactionism will help the researcher to better understand how people from the African American community have ascribed meaning from their personal encounters with police and seeing or hearing about others encounters with police. In addition, symbolic interactionism further explains how these experiences provide an interpretive tool to create meaning about police and that African Americans respond in a way consistent from the meaning they have ascribed to police.

## Methods

### Research Design

This study used qualitative methods of data collection to answer the research question: “How does officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males affect African Americans’ perceptions of police?” Qualitative methods were appropriate for this study because the researcher was exploring a topic that little is known about (Padgett, 2008) and the researcher desired to obtain a deeper understanding of the effect that officer-involved homicides have on African American’s perceptions of police. Use of these methods was *etic*, or provided a point of view from an insider (Padgett, 2008), where the researcher interviewed African Americans about how they have experienced and created meaning from officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males.

### Sample

The sample consisted of three members of the African American community who were knowledgeable about the recent officer-involved homicides and were asked for their participation in this study. The respondents ranged in age from 26 years old to 52 years old. There was one woman and two men that participated in the study. All three of the respondents were college-educated with at least an associate’s degree. One respondent was a sergeant in the military. Two of the respondents were living in Minneapolis, MN at the time of the interview and one respondent was from Chicago, IL. All respondents endorsed having previous direct contact with police. The respondents were interviewed to obtain data regarding their beliefs about how officer-involved homicides affect the African Americans community’s perceptions about police. The respondents were chosen because they identified as African American and endorsed following the publicity following officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males.

The researcher used flyers posted at local agencies and snowball sampling where others distributed the flyer. Respondents contacted the researcher using the contact information provided on the flyer to express their desire to participate in the study. The researcher informed the respondent that their participation in the study is completely voluntary. The interested respondents contacted the researcher through phone or email to set up a time and place for the interview. It was not feasible for one of the respondents to complete the interview in-person so the researcher provided an option for the respondent to complete the interview via a phone interview. For the one phone interview, the researcher set up a time for the interview and called the respondent, asking all of the interview questions while recording the phone call.

At least 24 hours prior to the interview, the researcher supplied the participants with an informed consent form for them to review. Directly before the in-person interview, the respondents reviewed the informed consent form (see Appendix B) and asked if they have any questions or concerns. The respondents will be asked if they completely understand the consent form by the researcher asking the question “What am I asking you to do if you choose to participate in this study?”. The respondents reported having no questions or concerns and they were asked to sign the consent form. By signing the consent form, the respondents gave consent for the voluntary interview

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Before contact with potential participants, the St Catherine University Institutional Review Board (IRB) provided approval for conducting research with human subjects. IRB approval ensured that the participants of this study were protected and treated with dignity, have their privacy respected, and can be autonomous in their choice to participate in this research. Additionally, the informed consent form was approved by the St Catherine University IRB to

ensure that there were no ethical concerns with the interview and interview questions. The informed consent form was emailed to the participant prior to the interview and the researcher thoroughly reviewed the informed consent form with the respondent prior to the interview. Before the participant signed the document, the researcher checked for understanding by asking the participant to provide their description of what consent they are providing.

As stated earlier, the potential participants were made aware that their participation in this study was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time to protect their autonomy. To ensure the participants' privacy and confidentiality, the researcher assigned pseudonyms for each participant of this study. The researcher sent the audio recordings of the interview for transcription and researcher had the transcriptionist sign a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix A). Additionally, the researcher stored the data and transcripts in password protected files on the researcher's personal computer that is also protected by a password.

The researcher completed the Human Subject Research course through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training program to ensure the researcher was fully aware of potential issues that could put the protection of human subjects at risk. After completing the training, the researcher identified no foreseen potential risks for the participants of the study. Also, there were no direct benefits identified for the participants. However, the researcher did identify an indirect benefit for the study, in that the findings of the research can contribute to understanding the impact that officer-involved homicides of black males can have on the African American community and potential suggestions of how to improve community-police relations following these incidents.

**Data Collection**

For two of the interviews, the data was collected in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. The face-to-face interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and were recorded using an application on the researcher's password protected cell phone. One of the interviews was completed via phone. That interview lasted approximately 35 minutes and was recorded using an application on the researcher's password protected audio recording device. Within 24 hours of completing the interview, the researcher uploaded the interviews to a personal computer and saved the recorded interview in a password-protected file. The file will remain on the researcher's computer through May 2017, when all data will be destroyed.

The interview was guided by a list of questions developed by the interviewer (see Appendix C). The questions were developed after a review of the literature was completed on the factors impact perceptions of police. There was nine open-ended questions and the interview questions were reviewed by the research chair and committee to ensure their applicability to the research question. The questions investigated how police misconduct affects perceptions of police and if these perceptions differ between races, whether the victim's race affects citizens' reactions to police misconduct, how perceptions of police have changed over time, how publicized incidents of officer-involved homicides impact perceptions of police and if these perceptions differ between races, how officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males affect African Americans' perceptions of police, and what can be done to improve community-police relations following an officer-involved homicide of an unarmed black man.

The entire interviews were transcribed by a transcriptionist for data analysis. The interview transcriptions were saved in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer. After all transcription was complete, the researcher reviewed each transcript multiple times and

coded the transcript. Following coding of the transcript, the researcher identified themes from the codes that presented in the transcribed interviews. Specifically, this study will use the Grounded Theory approach because it will allow the researcher to derive themes from the coded data that will later be intertwined with previously analyzed theories and concepts.

### **Setting**

The respondents and researcher mutually agreed upon the location for the interview. The desired location was a study room at a public library. When the researcher and the respondents agreed on a time, the researcher reserved private rooms for the interviews. The researcher chose to use study rooms at a private library to have the most quiet, least distracting environment in a neutral location. For the phone interview, the researcher and respondent agreed on a time to complete the phone interview. Both the researcher and the respondent completed the phone interview while at their homes in a quiet and non-distracting environment.

### **Data Analysis**

Findings from the interview were analyzed and coded using grounded theory data analysis method. Grounded theory data analysis is an approach used in qualitative research where one uses inductive methods to look for theories and themes that emerge from the data (Padgett, 2008). The researcher used an open-coding technique, where each sentence was summarized by a few words that conceptualized the content. The researcher then reviewed the codes multiple times to ensure the code conceptualized the content correctly. Next, the researcher examined the codes and found themes, or where multiple codes were conceptualizing the same concept or idea.

Furthermore, using the grounded theory approach allowed the researcher to derive themes from the coded data that was later intertwined with previously analyzed theories and concepts.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There are strengths and limitations to conducting a qualitative research study. Some strengths include the interview being performed in a fluid, and non constricting fashion. With qualitative methods, the researcher asked an open-ended question and the respondent could elaborate as much as they so choose. By choosing this format, the respondent was somewhat guided by the questions, but will have freedom and flexibility with the answers. This allowed the researcher to identify and interpret the meaning from the data and the data did not have to fit into preconceived categories.

Additionally, by using qualitative methods, the researcher sought to discover the “lived experience” of the participants and their perspective as being members of the African American community. This study provided a deeper understanding of the participants’ reality and how they come to create meaning from that reality.

Conversely, there are also some limitations by using qualitative methods. To begin, studies using qualitative methods do not produce solid outcomes (Padgett, 2008). While the findings may support a previously identified theory or concept, this study will not produce a brand new theory because it is qualitative in nature.

Furthermore, another limitation of this study is that limited sample size. Using qualitative methods and grounded theory data analysis, the researcher desired to have 20 to 30 participants included in the study. Given that the time to complete this study is limited, eight to ten participants is a reasonable number to seek for the study. However, the recruitment methods for the study yielded three participants. The small sample size of this study makes the outcomes and findings non-generalizable across populations.

## Findings

This research aimed to answer the research question: How does officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males affect African Americans' perceptions of police? Qualitative methods were used to extract data for participant interviews. A number of themes were identified from the data, including lack of accountability, the role of media, unequal treatment of races, black lives don't matter, affect on perceptions, and police needing to be a part of the community.

### Lack of Accountability

The first of the themes identified from the data was the lack of accountability that officers have following an officer-involved homicide. All respondents discussed this theme in their interview. One quotation from an interview that supports this theme is:

*If I shoot a police officer, justifiably so, I'm going to jail. And it's not even so much... The details of it don't matter you know like, "Ah, I was scared." There's no self-defense if I kill a cop. Good luck with that in court. That's not gonna happen. So you could have a video that an officer unjustly murdered someone, an officer clearly murdered someone. And a lot of these officers will not have to face trial or they face trial and they get off, or they resign.*

This statement from a respondent suggests that citizens are held highly accountable to taking another person's life. However, this respondent believes that officers are not held to the same standard as citizens are in terms of being accountable for unjustified officer-involved homicides.

In another interview, the respondent spoke to the lack of accountability not only be the criminal justice system but also between police in terms of police behavior with the following statement:

*And this lack of accountability just makes the whole profession look really poorly, because I never have seen a police officer, the good cops, ever say like, "Hey, that was wrong." Like, "We apologize for what happened." And not only that, there's a gross failure in the criminal justice system to prosecute cops that do a terrible job, or do something that's inhumane to a certain segment of the population.*

This respondent was speaking to the lack of accountability and lack of publically conveyed sympathy that fails to occur following an officer-involved homicide of an unarmed black male.

In the final interview, the respondent discussed the lack of accountability for officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males in the following statement:

*There is always outrage surrounding the videos and all we can do as black people is sit back and hope and pray that this time the officer will be held accountable. Police have very infrequently held accountable and I think it makes police more trigger-happy. There isn't much thought to pulling the trigger and taking a life when they know that their life isn't going to be forever changed because of it. Police know they can just be another officer that shoot and kill a black man and that they won't go to jail for it because they feared for their life. It just doesn't seem right. And sometimes there is a video of the interaction and we can clearly see that he wasn't an imminent threat to the officer's life but the police have the ability to shoot and kill when they experience a certain amount of fear, and this is so subjective. Nobody can corroborate the fear, the fear felt internally by the officer when he makes a choice to end someone's life. It is so subjective. So an officer can really just say I feared for my life and that can be as an excuse for murder. That just doesn't seem right to me. It doesn't seem right. They can do whatever they want and there won't be any consequences for them.*

The final respondent spoke about how they feel the lack of accountability for officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males increases the frequency of these incidents. This respondent believed that if officers were held accountable to unjustified officer-involved homicides that they would not be so prevalent in America today. Additionally, this respondent spoke to officers having a legally valid justification to take another's life when they have a reasonable amount of fear that a person could be an imminent threat to their life. The respondent speaks about the subjectivity of an officer's fear and the lack of consequences that officer's face following an officer-involved homicide.

This theme of the lack of accountability that officers are held to following an officer-involved homicide was prominent throughout the data and easily classified as a theme.

### **The Role of Media**

The second theme, the role of media, was discussed in all of the interviews. The respondents discussed the role media plays in increasing awareness into officer-involved homicides, the justification following videos of officer-involved homicides, and the emotional consequences that the respondents experience after viewing the videos of officer-involved homicides. For example, one respondent stated:

*What's sad is that now we have video. Before it was like, "No, we're telling you this is going on. This is how we feel." And it was like, "No, we don't believe you guys. Our officers are good guys." And then now you have video and it's like, "Well, there was probably a good reason this happened." And for most Americans, the first instinct is to justify why somebody just got murdered, which is disheartening on a lot of levels.*

This respondent discussed that even with video evidence of officer-involved homicides that instead of the outrage that should follow, the majority of Americans look for an excuse of justification for the officer's behavior.

In the second interview, the respondent addressed how social media increases visibility of officer-minority interactions.

*You have more social media, you have more things for things to go viral, for people to see and hear about it. Because before you had Twitter, Facebook, things like that, you had to hear it through the newspaper. So everything is more viral now. So if something does happen, say it happens today, everybody in the world can see it tomorrow. Like years ago, yes, there were black men pulled over, getting shot or being framed, and now you can have your phone in the car, and you can be able to tape that or see that.*

This statement suggests that technology and social media provides taped accounts of police interactions that were not available in previous years and the ability for these taped incidents to go viral and be seen by many people.

Finally, the last respondent discussed the impact that these viral videos on social media has had on them, as evidence by this statement:

*It's definitely gotten worse too, because of social media. When you see it every day and it's in your face every day, and you can't escape it. And if you try to escape it, you feel dirty, because it's like, "No, this is real life. You have to speak on it. It can't be taboo." But on the other hand it's like if you don't share these videos, people deny that it even exists. So it's a gift and a curse. And I guess 'cause it's so new, we don't know where it is right now. Psychologically though, it's wearing, it's exhausting, it's absolutely draining. Every day you see one of those videos and it's like punched you in the face, every day.*

*Every day you get punched in the face, every day you get punched in the face. And it's kinda like you stay in a daze almost.*

This statement speaks to how people of color have been profoundly impacted by the increasing the visibility of officer-involved homicides. From the last statement, there is an emotional toll that members of the African American community experience when they cannot seem to escape the publicity surrounding officer-involved homicides. Taken together with the previously mentioned statements, it appears that media plays a role in increasing visibility when these incidents occur while simultaneously causing emotional hardship.

### **Unequal Treatment of Races**

The third theme identified from the data was the how officers treat members of different races unequally. This theme was present in all of the interviews. The statement below concisely provides evidence for this theme.

*In my personal experience it doesn't take as much to get a cop riled up if you're black or brown, as it does if you're a white person.*

This statement provided by one of the respondents provides evidence for the theme that there is unequal treatment of races by police. Another statement that speaks to the respondent's perception of unequal treatment between races is

*When I see a minority and they are not being treated fairly or justly by the police, it kind of fits what I already think police do. I think I would be actually more shocked to see police treating a black person as fairly or respectfully as a white person. I have this sort of, kind of a deeply rooted belief where I know that police are going to treat us like crap, essentially. I've never had and I never expect to have a respectful interaction with a*

*police officer. And at the same time, I would be fairly surprised to see police treating a white person the same way they do with black people.*

This statement provides evidence for the theme of unequal treatment of races because the African American respondent has witnessed police treating minorities with less respect than white people.

Another statement extracted from the data that provides evidence for the theme is the following quotation:

*Let's say, replace the victim in any of those cases as a white woman. I can't imagine that her... In Michael Brown's case, if it was an unarmed white woman, there's outrage in the streets! You can't just murder a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, Tammy in the street and leave her body out there for four hours, no first aid administered, or Philando Castille. Like, just sitting in your car, and blonde-haired, blue-eyed Tammy gets shot? That's not happening.*

This statement speaks to the unequal treatment of races by police immediately following an officer-involved homicide.

One final statement to support the theme of unequal of between races is provided by the following statement:

*I think I have created the meaning that black people don't matter. That black people aren't considered as important as white people, that we aren't treated as respectfully as white people and that we still, even after the civil rights movement aren't as important as white people. These incidents show me that police still see us as disposable, we can be shot and killed for no reason, and they can go on and continue their lives.*

The previous statement speaks to the meaning that the respondent created following an officer-involved homicide of an unarmed black male. From the quote, it appears that the respondent internalizes the incidents and they allow the incidents to create meaning about what it means about them and their world.

### **Black Lives do not Matter**

Another theme consistently presented in the data and heard in each interview was the theme that black lives do not matter. Evidence for this theme is provided by the following concise quotation:

*That black people are inconsequential in the eyes of a lot of people.*

In the previous statement, the respondent clearly feels that black people are not important or insignificant. Another statement that speaks to the perceptions that black lives do not matter is:

*That's why I feel like Black Lives Matter, When you say it, it sounds stupid. I don't know, it sounds dumb to me, like, "Black Lives Matter." But I just feel like you need to remind people like, Hey, black lives matter... It's almost like the perfect rebuttal, because what you feel is that people don't think black lives matter. Because there's no way for us to feel that we're actually valuable members of society and that our lives have worth. And the first thing you do is look to justify, why XYZ was murdered, or why it's okay to treat people like that. Even if you believe in every one of those instances that the cops were in the right, not understanding where we are coming from is why we feel like black lives don't matter.*

The last respondent spoke about how the incidents are handled following an officer-involved homicide and how the respondent created meaning about the value of his life following the

incidents. Additionally, the respondent spoke about how the justification only further contributes to the belief that black lives do not matter.

Finally, another statement from a different respondent speaks to how the lack of accountability for police involved in an officer-involved homicide helps the respondent create the meaning that black lives do not matter, as evidence by:

*It becomes more and more clear with every mistrial or every one that's left off or XYZ, that people just don't see black lives in the same light they see their own. 'Cause if it was your daughter, you'd damn sure want justice. If it was your cousin, you would damn sure want justice. But because it's Joe from the north side, you're like, "Oh, well, he probably deserved it. He probably needed to do it, anyway."*

The previous quotation discusses how this member of the African American community feels when there is a lack of accountability for police following an officer-involved homicide incident.

With all three statements taken together, it is clear that all respondents have created some meaning following officer-involved homicides. The meaning created from these incidents include that black lives do not matter, black lives are not important, black lives do not have worth and black people are not valuable members of society.

### **Perceptions of Police**

A theme around how perceptions of police have been impacted as a result of officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males emerged from the data. Data for this theme was present in all interviews completed. The following statement provides evidence for this theme:

*There's just an unspoken tension between being a black male, or a black human being period, and police, it be... Not so much that it's always directly impacted me, but just from seeing how they interact with people in my community, that stuff just starts building*

*up, building up, building up, building up, building up, and eventually you just have nothing but negative perceptions towards them.*

This quote speaks to the impact that even vicariously experienced interactions with police can impact people's perceptions towards the police.

In another interview, the respondent discusses how their perceptions of police have changed as a result of officer-involved homicides, as evidence by:

*Over my life, I have always had a negative opinion of police but it is worse lately. Every time I hear about another one of these incidents where an innocent black man is killed at the hands of police that I, I become enraged. It is like, not again. This didn't happen again. Why did this happen again. I think all of these instances where police kill a black man who has no gun or no weapon that I just gain a bit more disdain or extreme dislike for police in general.*

This statement speaks to the fact that this respondent has a more negative perception of police now than previously in life and that the culmination of all of the recently publicized officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males is creating extremely negative perceptions of police.

Another respondent spoke about how incidents of police misconduct and officer-involved homicides have impacted them, as stated by:

*I have seen police treat black people unfairly all of my life and the incidents have made me have a more negative view or opinion of police. But I can't even say that my perceptions of police have been good and that they do good. Chicago has a known history of police corruption so when I see these incidents of police misconduct or when I see these incidents of police killing black people then it just makes me think that, that this*

*is what they do but it makes me trust them less and fear them more. And it definitely worsens my perceptions about police.*

This final statement provides even more evidence that officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males creates more negative perceptions of police from multiple members of the African American community. The impact of officer-involved homicides seems to have a lasting impact and creates deeply rooted opinions about police.

### **Improvements for Police-Minority Relations**

When respondents were asked about what could be done to improve police-minority relations, especially following an officer-involved homicide, the theme of improvements for police-minority relations emerged from the data. Evidence for this theme is provided by the following statement:

*I think there needs to be more foot patrol and I think there needs to be more officers just being a part of the community instead of occupying the community.*

This statement speaks to the fact that officers are not doing enough to build relationships with members of the communities they serve. Additionally, this respondent spoke to the fact that integrating with the community instead of taking control of the community would improve police-community relations.

Further evidence for this theme is provided by the following statement:

*So I believe that a lot higher percentage of cops, officers that want to police in Minneapolis, absolutely need to live in Minneapolis. And I couldn't give you the exact stats on what that is now, but I know that living over there, they're not my neighbor. I'm not finding out, nobody's ever been over there, they're not anyone's neighbors. No one feels like they are a part of the community so it's easier to act a certain kinda way.*

In the previous statement, the respondent was discussing the need for officers to be serving the communities that they live in. The respondent was speaking to the fact that the police are a part of their community and if police were that the police may act differently.

To build off the previous statement, another respondent similarly spoke about police not residing in the communities they serve, as evidence by the following statement:

*Yeah, and also a lot of officers, they don't live in the city, so you don't have officers that live in Minneapolis. Many stay in the suburbs. So they're coming here, so they're thinking they're just gonna clean up this whole entire area. So, it's just like, you feel like you're leaving out the suburbs coming into this ghetto trash to just clean it up.*

Similarly to the first respondent presented, this respondent agrees that the police are not living in the communities they serve and by having officers that live in the communities that they serve could improve police-community relations.

Finally, another respondent spoke to the division between police and the community and the need to make improvements to police-community relations. Evidence that further supported this theme is presented in the following statement:

*Police need to be present in the community. They need to build relationships with the people they serve. They need to show the people in our Chicago neighborhoods that they see them as human and that we matter too. We, as citizens of Chicago, feel as though we can't trust the police and they are not here to help us.... They are not here to help us and I don't feel like I really know why they are here. It is not a good feeling to have.*

Taken together, this theme for improvements to police-community relations emerged from all interviews with an emphasis on the need to focus energy on improving relations following an officer-involved homicide incident. All respondents were able to provide ways to improve

police-community relations including more police residing in the communities they serve and more police on foot patrol in the neighborhoods.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate how members of the African American community's perceptions have been affected by officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males. Six main themes were identified in the data, including *lack of accountability, the role of media, unequal treatment of races, black lives do not matter, perceptions of police, and improvements for police-minority relations.*

The theme of lack of accountability was referenced in the literature review where research presented by Zwach (2015) suggested that the majority of Americans do not believe there is lack of accountability for police misconduct. This research contradicts the finding of this research study. A potential explanation for this contradiction is that members of the African American community more commonly believe that the documentation of following a police misconduct incident does not accurately depict what occurred or only partial accounts of the situation are documented (Pratt-Harris et al., 2026). Given that the respondents of this study were members of the African American community, it is logical that unrealistic accounts of police misconduct incidents could potentially impact the accountability of the officer, especially if the police report of the incident is written in a way that justifies the officer's behavior.

Similarly, the theme around the role that media plays following an officer-involved homicide was presented in early referenced research. While the research presented in the literature review was predominantly regarding entertainment media and news sources, accounts of police misconduct or officer-involved homicides presented on social media could be considered a news source as well. Research by Pratt-Harris et al. (2016) suggested that media

might be one of the most powerful influences in America today. With the increasing publicity of officer-involved homicides presented through media sources, it is apparent that this exposure can have a significant impact on the formation of attitudes. This finding is even further substantiated with the research findings that suggest that publicity of unfavorable police interactions, including officer-involved homicides has been shown to negatively impact perceptions of police (Dowler & Kawilski, 2007; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004).

Additionally, the third theme identified from the study around unequal treatment of races by police was discussed in the previously mentioned research. A review of the literature presents findings that suggest that African Americans are more likely to expect unjust policing than whites (Benson, 1981). A potential reason provided for this negative view of policing held by African Americans is because of their disproportionate experiences with police and abuse they have suffered at the hands of police (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). In addition, research by Rosenblum et al. (2005) suggests that seeing others experiences with police can significantly impact opinions about police. Since all respondents of the study made mention to the fact that police treat African Americans differently and more poorly than whites, it can be assumed that part of the reason for this is the increase in publicized incidents of officer-minority interactions. With media more commonly displaying incidents of alleged police misconduct and officer-involved homicides of African Americans, members of the African American community have formed an opinion that police treats members of their race more poorly.

Black lives do not matter was another theme identified from the findings of this study. This theme was supported by research presented in the literature review presented by Bathelemy et al. (2016), where researchers found that the majority of members of a racially diverse community believe that the police do not care about them. Also, African Americans are more

likely to feel like the police are not there to protect and serve them when compared to whites.

This research supported the data provided in the findings because all three respondents identified that the police do not value their life like a white persons and that they did not feel like the police were there to protect and serve them. From the data, the respondents identified that the police were more of a threat and led them to believe that their lives do not matter as much as a white life does, especially in the hands of police.

Furthermore, research supported the theme around perceptions of police. The findings of the study suggested that the respondents' perceptions of police were negatively impacted by police misconduct and officer-involved homicides. To preface, research has consistently identified minority populations as holding the most negative opinions of police. (Albrecht & Green, 1977; Benson, 1981; Rosenblum et al., 2005; Weitzer, 2002). Given the fact that members of the African American community generally have more negative opinions of police, it is understandable that their perceptions become even worse immediately following an officer-involved homicide. Furthermore, Weitzer (2002) found that these more negative perceptions of police following incidents of officer-involved homicides can last for a significant amount of time. Additionally, instances of police encounters that are deeply disturbing can become engrained in the belief system of minorities and further affect the perceptions that they hold about police.

Interestingly, while two of the respondents were considered younger and one respondent was considered to be older, all of the respondents still held very negative views of police. This finding contradicts research that suggests that people from younger generations are more likely to view police unfavorably while people from older generations are more likely to view police favorably (Benson, 1981). While this finding contradicts the research previously referenced, an argument could be made that race is more influential on perceptions of police than age, and

therefore it would make sense why all respondents held negative views of police since they were all members of the African American community.

In addition, the more negative views presented by the respondents can be even further explained by the fact that media exposure has the ability to significantly impact perceptions and it is much more common for the media to present controversial police encounters than positive ones (Miller & Davis, 2008). Because of the increasing publicity of officer-involved homicides and police misconduct, it is understandable that the respondents' perceptions are continuing to become more negative because they are seeing much more news stories of negative encounters with police than positive ones.

The final theme identified from the research was improvements to police-minority relations. This theme is important and came from a question regarding what can be done following an officer-involved homicide. Respondents identified the need for police to reside in the communities they serve and for police to have more foot patrol in the communities to increase communication and build relationships with members of the communities they serve. This finding was substantiated by previously addressed research that stated that to improve community relations following an officer-involved homicide that police need to be more visible in the community and to have more in-person encounters and dialogue with the citizens (Bartelemy et al., 2016).

When reviewing the contextual framework used as a lens for this study, then minority threat hypothesis and symbolic interactionism were used to analyze some of the data. Starting with the minority-threat hypothesis, that says that minorities are considered a threat and experience more control and receive greater punishment as a result of being perceived as a threat (Smith & Holmes, 2014). This hypothesis fits well with the literature reviewed and the data

because the respondents did comment on the fact that police treat minorities differently and use more force with minorities than they do with white people. This data was presented under the theme unequal treatment of races, black lives do not matter, and perceptions of police.

Additionally, the minority threat hypothesis says that with greater control methods used against minorities because they are viewed as a greater threat. This hypothesis helps to explain why minorities are victims of officer-involved homicides when compared to white people. The data presented in the findings section corroborates this view because respondents did mention of the repeated media exposure of African Americans being killed by police and how police would not be treating a white person in the same way.

When looking at the Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory, the three premises of symbolic interactionism fit well with the findings of this study. The first premise says "the meanings people attribute to things arise out of social interaction" (Williams & Dingwall, 2014, p. 724). This premise helps explain the respondents' statements regarding how police treat them more poorly when compared to white people. Therefore, the reasoning for this described poor treatment of minority populations by police is that officers have created meaning about who minorities are and therefore respond based off the meaning that the officer has created. Conversely, members of the minority population have created meaning about officers and respond in a way consistent from the meaning that the person has ascribed. Therefore, when minorities are fearful of police and have a lack of trust for police then they will respond in a way that is consistent with their beliefs about police.

In addition, the second premise of symbolic interactionism states "the meanings people attribute to things arise out of social interaction" (Williams & Dingwall, 2014, p. 724). This premise speaks to what meaning they attribute to their interactions with law enforcement. All of

the respondents of this study made statements around how they do not matter to police or how they cannot trust police based on their previous interactions with them. Furthermore, the respondents discussed that even when it is not a personal experience, even publicized exposure of an officer-involved homicide can allow themselves to create the meaning that their lives do not matter.

Finally, the third premise of symbolic interactionism presents the concept that “the meanings people attribute to things are handled through an interpretive process used by a person in specific situations” (Williams & Dingwall, 2014, p. 724). Essentially, it is the interpretation of the person that affects and guides how meanings are ascribed. Therefore, if an African American repeatedly sees news coverage or videos of other minorities being unjustly treated or killed at the hands of police, then they will use these incidents to influence how they create meaning about themselves now and in the future. Multiple themes above provide statements that are explained through the lens of symbolic interactionism.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

It is important to discuss the strengths and limitations of this study. One limitation to this study is the small sample size of respondents. While the researcher did seek to recruit eight to ten participants, because non-coercive recruitment methods needed to be utilized, the researcher only had three respondents contact them to participate in the study. Another limitation to this study is that the researcher has bias surrounding the topic of the study. While the researcher did make efforts to be mindful of personal bias and try to not have it lead to bias in the interpretation of the findings.

Some strengths of this study include the research topic and the utilization of qualitative methods. In terms of the research topic, the researcher conducted extensive searches of peer-

reviewed articles to find articles that addressed topics about the increasing amount of officer-involved homicides present in the United States today. However, little to no research was found specifically about officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males, therefore this research is a valuable contribution to the research field. Additionally, since qualitative methods were used, the data and findings are extracted from the dialogue of the respondents where they are able to tell their story. Although the results are not generalizable because the study was not quantitative research, the findings provide valuable insight into how members of the African American community's perceptions have been impacted as a result of officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study provides valuable information to guide future research. Firstly, this study referenced the lack of current research on the topic of officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males and how people are affected from these incidents. While the movements that have arose, such as Black Lives Matter, speaks about the impacts of these incidents, there is little to no research about the impacts of these incidents. Future research should investigate the immediate and lasting impact of these incidents, how people, including minority populations, create meaning from these incidents, and what can be done immediately following these incidents.

Additionally, one major finding of this study discusses how all of the respondents interviewed felt like their lives do not matter as much as white lives. This spoke to the lack of progress that has happened following the Civil Rights movement and how much more work is needed to become a nation that is united and promotes and ensure justice and equality for all citizens, regardless of skin color.

Finally, these findings suggest a need for a quantitative study with a large sample size would provide results that would be generalizable to the population studied. This researcher recommends that this study that further explores some of the themes included in this study would contribute to the gap in the current field of research.

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**Appendix A****Confidentiality Agreement**  
Transcriptionist

I, \_\_\_\_\_ transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentations received from Sarah Fox related to his/her research study on the researcher study titled **Officer-Involved Homicides of Unarmed Black Males: Perceptions of the African American Community**

Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents.
2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized titles of the transcribed interviews texts, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher, (name of researcher).
3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession.
4. To return all audiotapes and study-related materials to (researcher's name) in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any back-up devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally responsible for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber's name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Transcriber's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### ST CATHERINE UNIVERSITY Informed Consent for a Research Study

**Study Title:** Officer-Involved Homicides of Unarmed Black Males: Perceptions of the African American Community

**Researcher(s):** Sarah Fox

You are invited to participate in a research study. This study is called Officer-Involved Homicides of Unarmed Black Males: Perceptions of the African American Community. The study is being done by Sarah Fox, a Masters' student at St. Catherine University/University of St Thomas in St. Paul, MN. The faculty advisor for this study is Pa Der Vang, PhD, MSW, LICSW, in the School of Social Work at St Catherine University/University of St Thomas.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males impacts African Americans' perceptions of the police. This study is important because of the prevalence of officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males that have been publicized in the media recently. Approximately eight to ten people are expected to participate in this research. Below, you will find answers to the most commonly asked questions about participating in a research study. Please read this entire document and ask questions you have before you agree to be in the study.

#### **Why have I been asked to be in this study?**

You have been asked to participate in this study because you are an adult member of the African American community and you endorsed following news stories of officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males.

#### **If I decide to participate, what will I be asked to do?**

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do these things:

- Complete an interview that will take 60 minutes to 90 minutes.

In total, this study will take approximately 60 minutes to 90 minutes over one session.

#### **What if I decide I don't want to be in this study?**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide you do not want to participate in this study, please feel free to say so, and do not sign this form. If you decide to participate in this study, but later change your mind and want to withdraw, simply notify me, Sarah Fox, and you will be removed immediately. Your decision of whether or not to participate will have no negative or positive impact on your relationship with St. Catherine University, nor with any of the students or faculty involved in the research.

#### **What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?**

The potential risk to completing this study you experiencing emotional reactions from the interview questions and reflecting on officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males.

**What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?**

There are no direct benefits for you participating in this research.

There is an indirect benefit and a benefit to society in that this research will contribute to a better understanding of how officer-involved homicides of unarmed black males impacts the African American community's perceptions of the police, along with providing possible ways to improve community-police relations following an officer-involved homicide.

**Will I receive any compensation for participating in this study?**

You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**What will you do with the information you get from me and how will you protect my privacy?**

The information that you provide in this study will be recorded onto an application on the researcher's password protected cell phone. The researcher will download the recorded interview onto her password-protected personal computer within 24 hours and save as a password-protected file. The researcher will assign a pseudonym for each participant to ensure privacy and confidentiality. After transcription, the researcher will save the transcribed interview in a password-protected file. I will keep the research results on my personal password-protected computer and only the research advisor and I will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by May, 2017. I will then destroy all interview recordings, interview transcriptions and identifying information that can be linked back to you.

Any information that you provide will be kept confidential, which means that you will not be identified or identifiable in the any written reports or publications. If it becomes useful to disclose any of your information, I will seek your permission and tell you the persons or agencies to whom the information will be furnished, the nature of the information to be furnished, and the purpose of the disclosure; you will have the right to grant or deny permission for this to happen. If you do not grant permission, the information will remain confidential and will not be released.

**Are there possible changes to the study once it gets started?**

If during course of this research study I learn about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, I will inform you of these findings

**How can I get more information?**

If you have any questions, you can ask them before you sign this form. You can also feel free to contact me, Sarah Fox, at [fox00079@stthomas.edu](mailto:fox00079@stthomas.edu). If you have any additional questions later and would like to talk to the faculty advisor, please contact Pa Der Vang, PhD, LICSW at [pdvang@stkate.edu](mailto:pdvang@stkate.edu). If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or [jsschmitt@stkate.edu](mailto:jsschmitt@stkate.edu).

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I consent to participate in the study and agree to be audiotaped.

My signature indicates that I have read this information and my questions have been answered. I also know that even after signing this form, I may withdraw from the study by informing the researcher(s).

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Signature of Participant

Date

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Signature of Researcher

Date

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Demographic Information**

What is your age?

What race or races do you identify as?

What gender do you identify with?

What is your highest level of education?

#### **Interview Questions**

1. Tell me your thoughts about how alleged police misconduct affects your perceptions of the police?
2. How do you think a victim of alleged police misconduct's race affects your reactions to the incident?
3. Is your perception affected if the alleged police misconduct is by an African American officer?
4. What has influenced your perceptions of police throughout your life?
5. How has your opinion of police changed over time?
6. How have recently publicized instances of officer-involved homicides have impacted your perceptions of police?
7. How has officer-involved homicides of unarmed black men affected your perceptions of police?
8. How have you created meaning of the officer-involved homicides of unarmed black men?
9. In your opinion, what can be done to improve community-police relations following an officer-involved homicide of an unarmed black man?