

Under the Radar: Strategies Used by Black Mothers to Prepare Their Sons for Potential Police Interactions

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Abstract

The current qualitative study explores the experiences of Black mothers who prepare their sons for potential police encounters. Police presence in the Black community has historically elicited feelings of mistrust and fear among Black Americans, and those sentiments resonate today. The discrete incidents of police violence in the United States have been exposed due to an increase in media documentation of the phenomenon. Increased awareness of police violence has also provided insight into the impact that police encounters can have on Black families. A focus group was conducted with six Black mothers with sons ranging in ages from 11 to 33 years. Results highlighted strategies that participants shared with their sons to prepare for a potential police encounter, which included knowing the harsh realities of being Black, regulating their behavior, reframing negative schemas about police, and utilizing family and community supports. Participants believed that sharing strategies and instructions with their sons could enhance safety during a potential police encounter.

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Black males are twice as likely to be killed by the police before the age of 21 years compared with their White counterparts (Staggers-Hakim, 2016). The prevalence of police violence among young Black males increases risk of injury or death during a police encounter. According to Carbado and Rock (2016), "Research demonstrates that Black children are far more likely than their White peers to be sentenced as adults, and police officers themselves see Black youth as older, and more culpable than White youth" (p. 172). For example, the officers who shot 12-year-old Tamir Rice perceived him to be older than he was (Fitzimmons, 2014; Staggers-Hakim, 2016). Recently it was reported that 1 in every 1,000 Black boys and men will be killed by police in their lifetime (Edwards, Lee & Esposito, 2019). Parents play a central role in preparing their children for the world where an encounter with the police is a common occurrence (Cabrera, Kuhns, Malin, & Aldoney, 2016). Black mothers, often designated as primary caregivers, must manage parental duties and everyday life stressors while ensuring that their children are equipped to operate in a racist society (Elliot, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Woods & Kurtz-Costes, 2007). The unique socialization process that occurs between Black mothers and their children incorporates learning about societal norms while accounting for implicit and explicit racism.

Parental Strategizing and Police

In a formative ethnography with Black male students at a school in California, Anne Ferguson (2000) noted two strategies that parents used to prepare their children for inevitable encounters with racism. One strategy aimed at creating distance between one's self and Blackness, something she referred to as a focus on "racelessness." The second strategy, primarily used by poor families, focused on educating children about racism, as poor families with limited cultural capital do not have the privilege of promoting racelessness (Dow, 2019; Ferguson, 2000). This approach focuses on prevention by encouraging proactive measures to combat racism, specifically acknowledging institutional and systemic racism (Ferguson, 2000).

The strategies identified by Ferguson (2000) illustrate the ethnic-racial socialization process whereby parents transmit knowledge about race and ethnicity to their children (Hughes et al., 2006). Specifically, the parents in the ethnography referenced three methods of transmission practiced during the ethnic-racial socialization process: (a) egalitarianism, (b) preparation

for bias, and (c) promotion of mistrust (Cabrera et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2006). Parents who use egalitarian messaging encourage their children to develop the skills needed to thrive in the dominant culture. While preparation for bias and promotion of mistrust messages both acknowledge racism, preparation for bias provides children with strategies to cope with racial discrimination. Promotion of mistrust remains distinctive because this method provides no advice to children on how to manage discrimination (Hughes et al., 2006). However, Black mothers frequently use preparation for bias messaging when engaging with their sons compared with their daughters (Woods & Kurtz-Costes, 2007). This difference in approach could be influenced by their beliefs that their sons will be more likely to face racial discrimination (Dow, 2019).

While existing empirical literature addresses ethnic-racial socialization practices within Black families, there is a need for further research dedicated to identifying the processes distinct to police interactions. Evidence in current research has demonstrated the effects of potential police encounters on Black youth identity and attitudes (Kerrison, Cobbina, & Bender, 2018). Through direct experiences and vicarious witnessing of police harassment, Black youth are consistently confronted with the devaluation of their personhood during police interactions (Dow, 2019; Kerrison et al., 2018). This realization can negatively influence their attitudes toward police, which increases their risk for violence during police encounters, as police are more likely to respond aggressively to poor attitudes (Brunson & Weitzer, 2011). The socialization process utilized by Black parents to prepare their children for police encounters is a part of Black youth development and signifies how Black children learn to navigate encounters with police officers (Brunson & Weitzer, 2011; Whitaker & Snell, 2016). The precarious nature of police interactions forces Black parents to disregard the age of their children and implore them to engage in self-monitoring behaviors (e.g., emotional regulation, image management) that are beyond their developmental purview (Dow, 2019; Whitaker & Snell, 2016).

Additional studies indicate that Black mothers make concerted efforts to educate their children on the racialized nature of their identities and how that will influence the behavior they may receive from police and other social control agents (Gonzalez, 2019; Threlfall, 2018). The learning curve for navigating police encounters is steep, and the consequences of ill preparation are dire. Thus, some Black mothers resort to keeping their children in the home or engage in harsh disciplinary action to dissuade their children from participating in activities that might lead to greater violence at the hands of police (Elliott & Reid, 2016; Kerrison, Cobbina, & Bender, 2018). Further investigation is needed to capture the methods and strategies that Black parents adopt when

socializing their children to police. This study adds to the growing body of literature that can provide elucidation regarding strategies developed by Black parents, specifically Black mothers, as they assist their children in managing the racial implications endemic to police interactions.

The process of socialization that Black mothers engage in when preparing their sons for police encounters does not occur in isolation but takes place within the broader context of social systems, structures, and institutions. The theoretical foundation of critical race theory (CRT; Bell, 1995) and social dominance theory (SDT; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) provides the contextual nuances needed to capture some of the intricate and systemic influences of policing on Black families. With origins in legal studies and radical feminism, CRT states that race is a social construction deeply embedded into American institutions that maintains racial hegemony (Ladson-Billings, 1998). SDT posits that society is organized into group-based hierarchies, in which the dominant group controls the allocation of resources (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

CRT serves as an orienting lens to analyze the world critically and center race in all discussions. CRT encourages society to recognize the normalcy of racism in America and identify its contributions in creating racial disparities (Bell, 1995). For the current study, we draw from three essential CRT tenets. First, racism is normal and deeply woven into the fabric of American society and its institutions and can only be eradicated when named explicitly. Second, it is imperative that marginalized voices are centered through storytelling. Finally, affirming the experiential knowledge of the racism Black people endure at various levels is a necessary component to eradicate racism within systems and institutions (Delgado, Stefancic, & Liendo, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Naming the harm created by constructing Whiteness as the epitome of normalcy while condemning Black people to the realm of inferiority is also integral to understanding the creation of group and race-based hierarchies in American society (McWhorter, 2005).

As an explanatory theory, SDT offers specific mechanisms to understand how dominant groups maintain their position in societal hierarchies (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006). SDT challenges society to consider some of the mechanisms employed by the dominant group to solidify their place within the social structure. One of the essential mechanisms used by the dominant group to justify their unequal distribution of resources and power is the creation of shared values, beliefs, ideologies, and stereotypes (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In SDT, this particular mechanism is referred to as legitimizing myths (LMs; Sidanius, Pratto, Van Larr, & Levin, 2004). These myths may or may not be true but are agreed on and attenuated in some fashion by both dominant and subordinate groups in society (Hindriks, Verkuyten, & Coenders,

2014; Sidanius et al., 2004). There are several conflicting LMs that create dilemmas for Black mothers to reconcile for optimal functioning within a group-based hierarchy. One conflicting myth pertains to the role of police in society; police are designated “helpers” but are also agents of social control. Additionally, conflicting ideologies about Black males affect their treatment in society; Black males are labeled “dangerous” in broader society but are viewed positively in the Black community.

The synthesis of these theoretical frameworks is designed to consider the roles of police and Black families within racist systems and institutions. Dow’s (2019) research on middle-class parenthood and the experience of Black mothering highlights the extensive strategizing necessary for preparing Black children to navigate a world where they are undervalued, even within middle- and high-class structures. Mothers of Black youth who experience involvement with law enforcement are often blamed for the undesirable outcomes following such interactions (Rousseau, 2013). Black mothers are held to impossible standards that require them to address the systemic racism that endangers the lives of their children (Elliot & Reid, 2016). SDT provides distinctive social mechanisms present in society (e.g., LMs) that Black mothers must counteract with strategies to increase safety measures during police encounters. In tandem, CRT positions race as an influential component in a police interaction with young Black men, while uplifting the value in a Black mother’s experiential knowledge and voice in her efforts to protect her son. This study aims to explore the information that Black mothers share with their sons about police. It is hoped that the experiences of the Black mothers who participated in this study can bring attention to the efforts made by parents to prepare their male children for encounters with the police.

Method

Participants

The sample was composed of six Black mothers, who met the following inclusion criteria: (a) self-identified as Black woman, (b) had at least one son who was Black, and (c) the son was between the ages of 10 and 35 years. The average age of each participant was 43 years ($SD = 8.87$), with ages ranging between 33 and 60 years. The average age of the participants’ sons was 20 years ($SD = 7.76$), with a range of 11 to 33 years. The socioeconomic status (SES) of the participants was determined by using their occupations as the stratifying principle to identify level of social class (Darin-Mattsson, Fors, & Kåreholt, 2017). Participants’ occupations were nutritionist, caterer, retiree, and early-childhood education manager, and two participants were graduate

Table 1. Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics.

Pseudonym	Approximate age (years)	Occupation	Number of sons	Age(s) of sons (years)
Kandy	42	Nutritionist	1	13
Janet	43	Graduate student	2	23, 24
Danielle	33	Graduate student	2	11, 13
Keisha	42	Early education Manager	2	18, 24
Michelle	60	Retired	2	30, 33
Tabatha	41	Caterer	1	13

Note: Participants created a pseudonym in order to increase anonymity and create comfort level with information shared during the focus group.

students. Four of the participants had two sons, and two mothers had only one son. To protect their identities, participants chose their own pseudonyms: Janet, Keisha, Michelle, Kandy, Danielle, and Tabatha (see Table 1).

Interview Protocol

Open-ended questions were created to facilitate the discussion that allowed participants to “explore issues of importance to them, in their own vocabulary” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299). Focus group questions were created in partnership with the author’s thesis advisor and evaluated for appropriate relevance to research questions. The first set of questions gathered demographic data about the mothers and their sons. The majority of group content focused on thoughts and feelings about potential interactions with the police, with attention also given to exploring the strategies that the mothers employed to prepare their sons for a potential police interaction. The questions specific to preparation for a police interaction were as follows: “What are your feelings about your children having interactions with police?” and “What are some strategies or tips that you have shared with your son(s) about interacting with the police?” Additional questions not pertaining to strategies concentrated on communication styles (e.g., “Describe your communication style with your son[s].”) and positive beliefs (e.g., “What are some positive attributes you admire about your son?”).

Procedures

Following approval from an institutional review board, a focus group discussion was held with six participants. Participants were recruited using snowball and convenience sampling methods that utilized the researcher’s and

participants' extended network. Advertisements with the inclusion criteria listed were also posted in community spaces to recruit eligible participants. Eleven women met the inclusion criteria, but due to scheduling conflicts, two participants were unable to enter the study. On the day of the focus group, three additional women could no longer participate due to lack of child care facilities, work schedule conflicts, and transportation issues. No incentives were provided, but the focus group concluded with a lunch and social period in which participants were given time to be in the community with one another without being audio recorded. Resources were offered to all participants who focused on wellness and parenting support groups. The focus group was approximately 2 hours long.

Qualitative Approach and Data Analysis

The goal of phenomenology is to discern features of consciousness in hopes of understanding the essence of an experience (Moustakas, 1994). The subjective meanings of a phenomenon are forged together to understand the objective meanings about the same phenomenal experience where there may be some commonality (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Traditionally, interviews are the preferred method of data collection in a phenomenological study, as the focus is on individual experiences. However, utilization of focus groups in phenomenology is growing as they are found to maintain the individual voice and story in a group setting and can enrich the data as group members are able to interact with one another (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2008). Focus group research has the potential to quiet the voices of dissent if influenced by group norms, but when managed appropriately group dynamics can empower group members to share opinions that may otherwise have gone unheard (Kitzinger, 1995).

The method of phenomenological reduction requires the researcher to orient herself in curiosity to allow for the essence of the phenomenon to surface, which is subsequently followed by thematizing the participants' experience of that phenomenon (Bevan, 2014). Using this method, the researcher allowed the initial reflections of the participants to drive the interpretation of data. Utilizing the qualitative data software Dedoose (Version 7.6.13), content within the transcript was analyzed using emergent coding. This study was conducted to fulfill a thesis requirement. Therefore, the researcher (a 30-year-old Black cis-gendered woman) was the only analyst, and interrater reliability was not attempted. However, the identified themes were independently reviewed and substantiated by the co-facilitator present during the focus group. The co-facilitator was a faculty member who was a White cis-gendered woman and served as an observer and additional support for the participants.

Results

These preliminary results were based on the mothers' experiential knowledge. The knowledge acquired was influenced by a collection of information gathered from family, friends, history, and current events. Several strategies emerged among participants in preparing their sons for potential police interactions. The strategies that became apparent during the focus group were reflected in the following categories: using harsh realities, using self-monitoring and regulation, reframing negative schemas, and accessing support networks.

Scared Straight: Using Harsh Realities

Five of the six participants used harsh realities and "tough love" to deter their sons from engaging in behaviors that could lead to police involvement. Utilizing honest and open communication, participants reported taking the opportunity to help their sons understand the repercussions of deviant behavior. Michelle, a 60-year-old woman who has two sons aged 30 and 33 years, shared that she used withholding support and affection as a way to stress emotional consequences of police involvement stating the following:

If you get in trouble with the police and they take you to jail. Don't expect me to come visit you. I ain't sending you nothing. Y'all ain't gonna get a card, nothing from me. And they remember that to this day. They said "well mom, you said if we ever went to jail, you would never come and send us anything [*sic*]."

Similarly, Janet, a 43-year-old mother with two sons aged 23 and 24 years, acknowledged how the media can serve as a sobering reminder that danger is real; she shared, "As a single mother, and African American mother . . . you know having those examples, look what happened to such and such, look what's going on in the TV." Janet and Michelle realized the potential for harm and made it a priority to ensure that their sons were aware of the impact that a police interaction could have on their lives. Tabatha a 41-year-old mother with one 13-year-old son acknowledged that she did not have direct conversations with her son about the police because of her son's age but did verbalize her son's recognition of police violence through media exposure.

Stay Under the Radar: Self-Monitoring and Regulation

Several times during the course of the focus group, all participants referred to preventative methods that could be categorized as "staying under the radar." Staying under the radar essentially means bringing as little attention to one's

self as possible. This strategy materialized into various forms for the participants and their sons. These forms included avoiding police, altering one's physical appearance, limiting abrupt movements, and remaining inconspicuous. Many of these strategies stemmed from how society, namely, police officers, stereotype and categorize their sons. In alignment with SDT, mothers understood the impact of cultural ideologies (LMs) on the perception of their sons. Keisha, a 42-year-old mother with two sons aged 18 and 24 years, expounded on her strategies:

I just tell my son to stay under the radar. Don't do nothing that's gonna bring attention to you. Don't do anything, cause I don't trust them (the police). They be done found something for you to go to jail [*sic*].

There was a keen awareness of how misconstrued behavior or abrupt movements could lead to an unsafe outcome for their sons. Kandy, a 42-year-old mother with a 13-year-old son, shared the following instructions with her son:

Don't put your hands in your pocket. You know they could be walking down the street, or anything. And I just say like, just do what you're told. Put your hands up. I did tell them to never put your hands in your pocket, or if you are in a car don't reach for anything. And I think it's bad that we have to have that conversation with our sons.

Four participants reported that it was necessary to be overly compliant to ensure that their sons would leave a police interaction safe. Keisha stated the following:

I tell my boys if you encounter the police . . . you use respectful language. You say yes sir or yes ma'am. That's what I tell them to do. They don't do that any other time, but that's for their safety, I tell them to do that.

There Are Good Cops: Reframing Negative Schemas

While all the participants have had negative experiences with the police or had known a family member who had experienced police negatively, several participants made efforts to portray the positive attributes of police officers. Among all participants, a negative conceptualization of police was determined to increase risk for their sons in a police interaction. Thus, a reframe of the "police are bad" ideology was used to change their child's perception of police. Both Janet and Kandy were cognizant of how their sons' negative perception of police could influence their sons' reactions during a police

interaction. Janet presented her perspective on the use of a reframe, “I don’t want my son to go around saying, ‘F ___ the Police.’ I don’t want him to have that attitude.”

Janet shared that she found it difficult to change the perspective of police with her sons, aged 22 and 24 years, as their personal experience began to overshadow her sentiments. However, she continued to use this strategy with her 5-year-old grandson, in the hope of fostering positive relationships with the police. In alignment with both SDT and CRT, the LMs portraying police as aggressors make a direct contrast to the dominant narrative. However, mothers felt obligated to present police as positive figures to prevent their sons from responding to police in negative ways. This strategy maintains police legitimacy and ultimately attenuates the dominant group’s control in a hierarchy-based society (Hindriks et al., 2014).

Instrumental in Their Upbringing: Accessing Support Networks

The participants utilized multiple support systems, such as family, friends, and mentors, to augment the social capital available to their children. Five of the six participants indicated that their mother or grandmother, typically the matriarchs of Black families, played a crucial role in helping them raise the children. Danielle, a 33-year-old mother with two sons aged 11 and 13 years, who moved to California from the South, expressed how helpful her grandmother was as a support:

And the transition out here was kind of different because we left all of our family back home and my grandmother, their great grandmother, was the person who raised me. So, she raised them also because at the time I was still in school and my husband was in the military. Yeah, and so she was very instrumental in their upbringing, and still is even via Skype.

In fact, Danielle indicated that her grandmother has continued to be instrumental in helping to raise the children.

Kandy and Janet also indicated that their mothers played an important role in supporting them as single mothers. Kandy says, “The extra support is primarily my mother. His grandmother. She is like a second mom to him.” Janet reported that her sons’ grandmother contributed shelter and finances for her sons to aid in their upbringing. Extended family (i.e., aunts, uncles, and cousins) played an integral role in helping the mothers raise and surround their sons with support. Three out of the six participants were married and indicated that having a spouse was imperative in helping them raise their sons. For the participants who were unmarried, they utilized community supports

(e.g., coaches, mentors) in efforts to supplement the support that could be provided by a partner. Use of multiple support networks proved to be helpful for the participants and the most effective. Of the five participants who identified varying support networks for their sons, four reported lower incidents of interactions with law enforcement.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black mothers prepared their sons for potential police interactions. We found that participants developed strategies to share with their sons in response to their knowledge of power dynamics present in societal structures, especially as it relates to race and ethnicity. Consistent with both SDT (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and CRT (Bell, 1995), there was a keen awareness of the beliefs or ideologies (LMs) about young Black men that heavily influenced how mothers developed and shared their strategies specific to police encounters. The ability to create and maintain oppressive narratives about subordinate groups in society allows the dominant group to establish justification for their place within the social hierarchy (Hindriks et al., 2014). Participants could not control the stereotypes and beliefs associated with Black masculinity; thus, the mothers in this study were forced to ensure that their sons self-policed their own identities and behaviors to limit contact with police and ensure their sons' safety during police interactions (Dow, 2019). While these mothers did not internalize society's characterization of their sons, many of the strategies were created based on their understanding of how young Black men are racialized among police officers.

Several parental dilemmas were identified that the participants experienced in relation to safety. There was a constant push and pull between raising autonomous and free children while maintaining safety in an often hostile social environment. Similar to findings in Dow's (2019) study with middle-class Black mothers, participants thought that it was important to educate their sons about racism that they will experience but did not want their children to internalize racist ideologies about being a Black man. Several times, participants acknowledged that they believed that their Black sons were targets and would be pursued by police despite their sons behaving in a socially acceptable manner. According to Durán (2016), in incidents where police shoot and kill an individual, it is often justified by the police, as a necessary use of force despite the appropriate behavior exhibited by the victim. As with both SDT and CRT, racially subordinate groups are described in ways that diminish their social value (McWhorter, 2005; Sidanius & Pratto, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) allowing for increased victimization. Research has

found that police officers have described Black people they encounter as being animalistic or having superhuman traits (Carbado & Rock, 2016). Such descriptions contribute to the dehumanization of Black people. Participants were well aware of how their sons are viewed in society, which decreased their confidence in police, but motivated the mothers to take a proactive approach to ensure that their sons knew what to expect during a police interaction. Similar to Ferguson's (2000) work and other literature (Brunson & Weitzer, 2011; Dow, 2019; Gonzalez, 2019; Whitaker & Snell, 2016) that discusses policing and parental strategizing, mothers did not have a considerable amount of confidence in police being able to see their children as nonthreatening.

While this study adds to the breadth of information about how these Black mothers implement strategies in preparing their sons for police interactions, it is important to acknowledge the limitations. Data collection only involved one focus group, with a small sample of women. One focus group limited the number of subjective experiences that could be included in the understanding of how Black mothers prepare their Black sons for police interactions. Additionally, information pertaining to SES of participants was not collected. There is no definitive information about SES of each participant to provide contextual knowledge. Threats to reliability in this study must also be noted as a limitation. One person analyzed the data and identified themes within that data. Several other researchers provided feedback on identified themes, but interrater reliability was not achieved. However, the themes identified in this study are similar to other studies that have discussed socialization of Black youth in racialized contexts (Brunson & Weitzer, 2011; Dow, 2019; Elliot et al., 2015).

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The findings from the current study demonstrate several implications for research dedicated to understanding the impact that policing has on the Black community. Research focusing on parental socialization to legal agencies and systems does not always acknowledge the burden of response that lies with Black families to create safety during encounters with law enforcement (Embrick, 2015). There is an opportunity for research to further explore and identify the strategies that Black mothers utilize and incorporate into their parenting practices to help their sons navigate traditionally discriminatory systems. Future research should also explore how strategies in preparation for police interactions may be affected by the intersectional identities of members within families of various ethnic backgrounds. Black maternal socialization pertaining to police is an essential part of development for Black boys and men. However, interventions must move beyond maternal socialization to

structural changes that alleviate the pressure on Black mothers and their sons to be fully equipped to navigate the capriciousness of police interactions.

Practice professionals can utilize the findings from this study to inform their work with Black mothers and their sons. Black mothers are often required to engage in hours of invisible labor to create safe and nurturing environments for their children (Dow, 2019). It would be important in clinical work to affirm and acknowledge the layers of responsibility that Black mothers have in securing their sons' safety. In addition, the strategies identified by the mothers in this study can be used to assist clinicians in supporting Black mothers who wish to have these discussions with their sons but find it difficult.

The transparent and candid experiences offered by the participants in this study speak to the intimate impact that systems of control have on Black families. While violence perpetuated by the police is a common occurrence in the Black community, the violence does not stop during a police encounter. Mothers who lose children to police violence or are forced to actively think about how to prepare their sons for potential police interactions bear the excruciating weight of structural violence (Rickford, 2016). The experiences offered by the mothers in this study demonstrate the power of counterstorytelling in extending authenticity to voices and experiences silenced by majoritarian stories of privilege (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).


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