

The Criminological Cultivation of African American Municipal Police Officers: Sambo or Sellout

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Abstract

African American municipal police officers have been historically underrepresented and often face a double marginalization, arguably due to fellow officer and public perceptions. This study represents a first-step criminological cultivation analysis of the quantity and quality of African American municipal police officer depictions in the core cop film genre (1971–2011). Utilizing the unified film population identification methodology, 112 films were identified and examined to determine the overarching messages conveyed through the genre. Findings revealed that White officers were depicted in the lead or joint leading role in 89% ($n = 100$) and African Americans in 19% ($n = 21$) of films. However, White officers were predominantly depicted in a serious light unless sharing the lead with a minority, while African American officers were predominantly depicted in a comedic light. Further, the issue of double marginalization was rarely depicted. The potential implications of these portrayals on officer recruitment, retention, and perceived law enforcement legitimacy are discussed and second-step criminological cultivation studies to determine if a cultivation effect exists are proposed.

Keywords

police, African American, perception, recruitment, retention, media, race and policing, race and public opinion, race/ethnicity, bias in the criminal justice system, criminology and cultivation

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Since the days of their systematic exclusion, African American police officers have made huge strides in increasing their representation at all levels of law enforcement (Gabbidon & Greene, 2013). In fact, the presence of minority police officers has been shown to increase the likelihood of perceived departmental legitimacy while also incrementally dismantling the sociopolitical hurdles within the previously excluded field of American policing (Jollevet, 2008). Despite these advances, the African American community remains the (1) most likely to view police negatively, (2) least likely to support and/or call on law enforcement in times of crisis, and (3) least likely to view law enforcement as a career choice (Rocque, 2011). As a result, recruiting minorities into the ranks of American policing remains a sociopolitical and psychological challenge, ultimately impacting the degree and extent to which African Americans seek careers in law enforcement. Consequently, given this supposed “postracial” America, coupled with the consistent negative perceptions of police by the African American community, it is ever more critical that these barriers between the police and the hiring of African Americans remain at the forefront.

Given the increase in popular media outlets (Surette, 2007) and the controversial nature of many of the minority–police interactions, it is of no surprise that the media serve as a conduit of these often negative encounters. Research has demonstrated that these media outlets are reflectors and reinforcers of the sociopolitical law enforcement experience (Graziano, Schuck, & Martin, 2010). To date, examinations of media depictions of minority police officers are virtually nonexistent. We maintain this is due to the traditional approaches to academic media studies and the disconnect between media examinations and criminological research regarding law enforcement. Wimmer and Dominick (2003) point out that academic media studies are primarily centered around the antisocial and prosocial effects of specific media content, uses and gratifications, agenda setting by the media, and the cultivation of perceptions of social reality. It is this cultivation of perceptions of social reality to which this article lends its focus. More specifically this article points to the need for criminologists to explore what we are entitling criminological cultivation. Cultivation theory, one of the most widely used theories in mass media studies, hypothesizes that long-term exposure to a repetitive and stable system of messages delivered through media programming can have cumulative consequences leading to the gradual adoption of beliefs about the nature of the social world. Cultivation researchers maintain that these messages represent consistent patterns in the portrayal of specific issues, policies, and topics, many of which are in conflict with their occurrence in real life (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Similarly, criminological cultivation consists of the development of specific perceptions of any aspect of crime, deviance, and/or the criminal justice system due to long-term exposure to a repetitive system of messages delivered through media outlets. Criminological cultivation studies are differentiated from traditional cultivation studies in that the studies focus primarily on the disjuncture between media depictions and real-life occurrences regarding crime and the criminal justice system. More specifically criminological cultivation studies primarily utilize the criminology and criminal justice peer-reviewed literature to determine the baseline of what real-world occurrences entail. Further, specific emphasis is given to

how cultivated perceptions impact various aspects of the real-world criminal justice system.

First step of cultivation analyses consist of examinations of large blocks of media content to determine what overarching messages are being conveyed through the medium in question (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Second-step cultivation studies utilize these findings to determine if there is an actual cultivation effect. Therefore, the findings presented here represent the first step of the cultivation analysis process and do not seek to identify a cultivation effect. As Mastro and Behm-Morawitz (2005) state “Although effects cannot be determined from content, such data provide insights into the potential influence of consumption on consumers when viewed from the perspectives of cultivation theory” (p. 110). Therefore, we assert that our findings identify a potentially underexamined variable (i.e., depictions of African American municipal police officers) in the recruitment, acceptance, and retention of African American police officers. The findings of this study point to the need to expand the application of cultivation analysis to the field of criminology and criminal justice research. While this article has potential implications for those individuals employed by or seeking employment within law enforcement, the concept of criminological cultivation should be expanded to all players in the criminal justice system as well as the public’s perception of these individuals.

African American Law Enforcement Experience

Historical Context

Given the history of race relations in the United States it is not surprising that the experience of African American police officers differ considerably from White officers. In examining the history of law enforcement in the United States, there have been two distinct periods during which African Americans participated in law enforcement: post–Civil War and post–World War II (Dulaney, 1996). These reference points were separated by more than half a century, during which Blacks were systematically excluded from employment as police officers, consistent with other outlets of socioeconomic advancement at this time. Therefore, before exploring the quantity and quality of African American police officer portrayals in film, one must first understand the progress made by African Americans in law enforcement, in spite of the documented employment challenges.

The first African American police officers in the United States were known to be “free men of color,” who served as members of the New Orleans city guard in 1803 (Dulaney, 1996; Moskos & Jay, 2008). These men held their positions as a result of their status in the city’s unique multiracial society. They sought to establish their connection to the city’s White citizenry and distance themselves from the subservient reality of being Black in the South. It is estimated that at the turn of the 20th century Blacks comprised 2.7% of all law enforcement and firemen (Kuykendall & Burns, 1980). Given the race relations in the country, Black officers experienced differential treatment by their fellow White officers and supervisors. This racist treatment was

echoed in Rudwick's (1962) classic research in which he surveyed 130 police departments and found that 53% of the departments required Black officers to request assistance from White officers before they arrested other Whites. In other locales, Black officers were subjected to riding in police cars marked "Colored Police" and were only allowed to police other Blacks (Dulaney, 1996; Sullivan, 1989). It was not until the 1960s that there began to be major advances toward the hiring of Black officers, primarily in the major urban communities across the country.

Despite the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, there were as many as 28 law enforcement agencies that continued to limit the arrest powers of Black officers in the mid- to late 1960s, the majority of which were located in the segregated South (Ebony, 1996). In the 1960s, as a result of race riots, it was theorized that the hiring of minority officers would decrease the tensions between the African American community and law enforcement personnel. An example of this was the Kerner Commission's recommendation to hire minority officers as a way to halt the serious race riots of the day. The Commission cited that the lack of diversity was a major impetus behind the heated racial tensions. The 1970s ushered in a significant increase in African American officers as a result of Supreme Court decisions, governmental reports, Congressional legislation, and the formation of Black police unions. In the following decade, there was a continued increase in the number of African Americans into the ranks of law enforcement; and by the 1990s, African American officers accounted for 10.5% of local police departments (Reaves, 1996).

More recently it has been reported that African American's comprise approximately 20% of metropolitan police agencies with representation dwindling in smaller departments (Gabbidon & Greene, 2013). In spite of numerous challenges, the percentage of African American police officers today approximates their proportion in the general population (Gaines & Kappeler, 2005). However, despite increased representation, African American police officers continue to encounter various community and organizational challenges. African Americans face many challenges that deter them from entering a career in law enforcement or from achieving success once they choose this career path. Some of these barriers include racist attitudes, and various forms of racial discrimination and harassment, often expressed as a lack of recognition, rewards, support from superiors, and favoritism (Leinen, 1984).

Proportional Representation and Dual Marginalization

The barriers to increasing the number of African American law enforcement officers have typically been in the form of institutional and cultural challenges (Gaines, Kappeler, & Vaughn, 1997). These institutional challenges have typically come in the form of a host of complicated application processes, a lack of diversity, and discriminatory assignments. Many of these issues reportedly remain today, all across the country (for a detailed discussion, see Brunson & Gau, 2011).

However, the most difficult barrier, according to Peak (2005), has to deal with the image that minority communities have of police officers. It has been well documented that traditionally police officers have been seen as symbols of oppression that use

excessive brutality and are often perceived as an army of occupation (see Alexander, 2010; Shelden, 2008 for examples). Perceptions of African American officers impact not only the way in which Blacks working in law enforcement are treated but also the possibility that they will choose law enforcement over other career paths. For many of those African Americans in uniform, a double marginality has existed, whereby they feel accepted neither by their own minority group nor by the White officers. This observation was supported by Kaminski (1993) who examined whether attitudes toward the police affected the likelihood of high school seniors responding positively to a hypothetical offer of a job as a police officer. The Black respondents expressed less favorable attitudes toward the police than the White respondents. However, Whites were somewhat less likely to accept the job offer when they believed that police treated minorities unfairly. The Black respondents were significantly more likely than the White respondents to report that people who live in their neighborhood did not respect the police and therefore expressed less interest in police work. These findings are not surprising, given the apparent view by many in the African American community that the police serve as, or an extension of, an oppressive regime. Therefore, joining the police force would be viewed by some in the African American community as “Uncle Tom-ing,” or selling out. Such views could impact the recruitment and retention of African American police officers and, to a lesser degree, any who see the position as discriminatory.

This double marginality among African American officers results from feelings of social isolation and social distancing (Buzawa, 1981). As a result of this social isolation and distancing one often finds a sense of racial pride and solidarity among African American policemen (Strokes & Scott, 1996). This has arguably contributed to a more aggressive, assertive posture than has been seen in the past. Dowler (2005) found that African American police officers were more likely to feel criticized and believed they were perceived as militant. Therefore, African American police officers are often encumbered with the choice between social isolationism and being perceived as a militant. The impact of social isolationism and public perceptions of African American police officers is not restricted to law enforcement organizations and the police culture. This same affect has been observed within the African American community (see Wilson, 1990). Therefore, this article seeks to determine the quantity of African American municipal police officer depictions as well as the quality of the depictions in order to determine the overarching messages conveyed through the core cop film genre. We go on to explore the potential role of film depictions in the cultivation of social reality perceptions that may amplify the aforementioned double marginalization between African American officers and the communities they serve. Before doing this however we briefly discuss the primary tenets of cultivation theory and the cop film genre.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory, as it was originally developed and tested by George Gerbner in the 1970s, hypothesizes that long-term exposure to a repetitive and stable system of

messages delivered through television programming can have cumulative consequences. More specifically, it is believed by cultivation theorists that the viewing of television leads to the gradual adoption of beliefs about the nature of the social world. Beliefs that conform to the selective representation of reality were portrayed in a systematic way on television (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

Cultivation studies consist of two separate steps. In the first step, large segments of media content are analyzed to identify the overarching messages delivered by the media source. It is believed by cultivation theorists that these messages represent consistent patterns in the portrayal of specific issues, policies, and topics, many of which are in conflict with their occurrence in real life (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). The findings acquired in Step 1 studies are utilized in Step 2 studies to develop a set of questions that are designed to detect a cultivation effect (see Wimmer & Dominick, 2003 for more details).

Several examinations of cultivation studies (see Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Morgan & Shanahan, 1997; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Shrum & O'Guinn, 1993) have established that the research as a whole has demonstrated a consistent television-viewing effect on a variety of subject's perceptions of social reality (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Due to Gerbner developing the theory in the late 1960s and early 1970s, television was for a longtime the primary medium cultivation researchers would examine. But over time the number of television channels, media outlets, and viewer types has also expanded. Due to this perpetual expansion, the types of mediums examined by cultivation researchers have also expanded (Wilson, 2009). One now sees cultivation researchers examining mediums such as newspapers (Vergeer, Lubbers, & Scheepers, 2000) and video games (Williams, 2006), among others. However, with this expansion of visual media sources comes the ability of viewers to watch increasingly more narrow or specialized genres (Prior, 2005). In fact, some studies have shown that the power of the cultivation effect increases the narrower the genre viewed (Hawkins & Pingree, 1981). This study expands cultivation research not only to the field of criminology and criminal justice but continues the expansion of mediums by examining film. It also focuses on a narrow or specialized genre, core cop film genre, to determine both the quantity and the quality of African American municipal police officers portrayals in the first 40 years of the genre.

Cultivation research has long appeared on the periphery of criminological studies through examinations of the mediated depictions of various variables such as race, gender, sexuality, and crime, among others. Second-step cultivation studies have examined the subsequent impact of such mediated depictions on the perceptions of social reality. However, with the possible exception of Escholz, Sims Blackwell, Gertz, and Chirico's (2002) examination of the impact of watching reality police programs on attitudes toward the police, the research on the depiction of homosexual police officers by Wilson, Longmire, and Swymeler (2009) and female police officers by Wilson and Blackburn (in press), virtually no one has utilized cultivation theory in the direct context of criminological and criminal justice research. In this study, we seek to bring cultivation theory out of the periphery and into the center of criminological and criminal justice studies. This study represents the first step toward future

cultivation analyses concerning the cultivation of African American police recruits, police officers in general, and the general public's perceptions of African American municipal police officers. However, before discussing the methodology and findings of this study, it is necessary to be clear as to what films constitute the core cop film genre.

Core Cop Film Genre

The law enforcement figure was portrayed primarily in Westerns and noirs up until the 1970s. They were portrayed as lone sheriffs or detectives. Depictions of foolish patrolmen (keystone cops), tough federal agents, or cool private investigators were how police officers were portrayed (Rafter, 2000). While the lampooned police officer continues today (Surette, 2007) the Western and noir era gradually lost its appeal throughout the 1950s and 1960s, opening the door for the cop film era to arise (Rafter, 2000; Surette, 2007). In the 1960s and 1970s public opinion began moving toward the law-and-order perspective, arguably due to the unrest of the 1960s, allowing film-makers to transform the lone gunslinger of westerns to a modern municipal police officer (Rafter, 2000). Compelled by the underlying belief that liberal laws had tied the cops' hands, thus keeping them from catching criminals, the 1971 release of the vigilante-like justice film *Dirty Harry* would serve as the archetype for the modern cop film genre.

Rafter (2000) reveals the cop film genre as not so much a new genre but rather a new strategy for investigating the nature of heroism and the hero's relationship to society:

Like the Westerner, Harry Callahan patrols a border between barbarity and society, abandon and self-control, what John Cawelti in another context calls the 'frontier between savagery and civilization. That frontier is both geographical and psychological, a line that must be drawn within the city and within the hero himself. (Rafter, 2000, p. 76)

In the 1980s and 1990s, the genre would develop subgenres of the traditional cop film genre. These splinter or subgenres include, but are not limited to, the "rogue cop films," "corrupt cop films," "buddy cop films," and "cop comedy films," among others; arguably moving further and further away from the initial characteristics of the cop film. However, these researchers argue that despite the splintering of the cop film genre, the core characteristics that originally defined the cop film have endured and it is those films that make up the core cop film genre.

The intent of this study is to examine the quantity and quality of African American police officer portrayals in the core cop film genre to determine the overarching messages conveyed over the first 40 years of the core cop film genre. The unique contributions of this analysis are fourfold. First, we address the gap in the literature regarding the mediated depiction of African American municipal police officers in theatrically released films. More specifically we identify a disturbing 40-year trend of African American municipal police officers being depicted as either comedic fodder or sellouts to the African American community. Second, the article addresses the

potential impact of said images on the recruitment, retention, and perceptions of African American municipal police officers. Third, this study seeks to introduce as well as promote the utilization of cultivation theory, what we establish as criminological cultivation, in the field of criminal justice and criminology. Finally, we introduce the reader to the unified film population identification methodology (UFPIM), a relatively new methodology that many may not yet be familiar. The UFPIM provides future researchers with a mechanism for establishing entire film populations that have clearly defined parameters as opposed to the utilization of traditional convenience sampling techniques that are open to criticisms of representativeness and replicability.

Methods

Identifying the Study Population

In an effort to address the issue of population replicability in studies of social science issues in theatrically released films, Wilson (2006) developed a methodology for systematically identifying large replicable film populations. Wilson (2009) later refined the parameters of the said methodology and named it the UFPIM. The UFPIM is specifically designed to help film researchers systematically identify replicable film populations (Wilson, 2009).

The UFPIM utilizes the Internet Movie Database Power Search (IMDbPS) as part of its three-phase process of identifying specific film populations (for further details see Wilson, 2006, 2009). However, it is designed so that any searchable database of films could be substituted for the IMDbPS depending on the researchers' desired parameters. In Phase I of the UFPIM, the relevant literature associated with the film population in question is used to develop a definition of the film population to be analyzed. In Phase II, the IMDbPS is utilized to identify a base film list. This list is developed by utilizing at a minimum the IMDbPS search criterion of "key words in the movie plot summaries," "movie genre" (the primary genre to which the IMDbPS associates a film), "year" (the year or series of years in which films were released), and "key words" (for further details see Wilson, 2006 or Wilson, 2009). Phase III constitutes a two-stage process, the first of which involves the development of an identification-coding sheet designed to further isolate those films that meet the definition established in Phase I. Stage II involves the examination of plot summaries for all the films identified in Phase II utilizing the aforementioned coding sheet. In Stage II of Phase III, plot summaries from at least two independent sources, in this study IMDb and Amazon.com, are to be examined to help ensure the accuracy of the final population. In this study, the UFPIM was used to identify the core cop film population to be examined.

Analysis

In this study, Phase I resulted in the first four decades of the core cop film genre being defined as (a) theatrically released films between 1971 and 2011, (b) that take place in the United States, (c) where one or more actors play the hero who is an active urban

(municipal) police officer of traditional ranks, (d) either acting alone or with a partner in a street cop/detective role, (e) in the past or present, that appear to be reality based. Given this definition, films that depict police officers who are outside their jurisdictional boundaries (i.e., the *Beverly Hills Cop* series), in specialized units that do not traditionally fall into the day-to-day crime fighting units in police department organizational structures (i.e., internal affairs, forensic units) or scenarios that do not appear to be reality based (i.e., supernatural phenomenon, alien encounters, and/or futuristic depictions) are excluded from the genre.

When this research was conducted, films could be categorized into 19 genres in the IMDb (action, adventure, animation, comedy, crime, documentary, drama, family, fantasy, film noir, horror, music, musical, mystery, romance, sci-fi, thriller, war, and western). In order to further isolate those films that met the core cop film definitional criteria of “occurring in the past or present and appearing to be reality based” each of the IMDb genre definitions was examined to determine which would be searched and which would be excluded. Of the 19 potential genre classifications, 8 of the film genres were chosen to search for films (crime, drama, action, adventure, mystery, family, romance, and thriller). Based on the genre definitions provided by the IMDb (see Wilson, 2009), the remaining genres were excluded. A total of four searches were conducted on the eight chosen genre categories using the IMDb Power Search for a total of 28 searches. The IMDb Power Search categories used included “plot summary words,” “country of origin,” “genre,” “language,” “year,” “must have,” “TV movies,” “direct to video,” and “TV series.” Each of these categories assisted in the isolation of strictly theatrically released films between 1971 and 2011. In each of the four searches under each of the eight genres, the search criteria constituted films (a) that occurred in the United States (country of origin), (b) in which the dominant language was English (language), (c) released in theaters between 1971 and 2011 (year), and (d) that had to contain a plot summary (must have) and excluded films (e) that went direct to video or were TV movies and series. The only categories that were adjusted were the genres searched and the key terms searched for in the plot summary. Based on common language utilized both in film research literature and in law enforcement research literature, the key terms searched for under each genre in the plot summaries were “cop,” “police,” “detective,” and “law enforcement” (Wilson, 2009).

At the end of Phase II, a base film list of over 500 films was produced. In Stage I of Phase III, the core cop film identification-coding sheet was developed. In Stage II of Phase III, over 1,000 plot summaries from both the IMDb and Amazon.com were evaluated using the core cop film identification-coding sheet resulting in a final population of 130 films. However, throughout the examination process, several films were excluded for a variety of reasons. Eight films could not be located and were determined to be out of production. The three films, *Electra Glide in Blue* (1973), *The Indian Runner* (1991), and *Partners in Crime* (2000), were excluded because the films involved officers who were not municipal police officers. Additionally, two films were excluded due to not fitting into one of the required genre categories. Upon viewing, it was determined that the film *The Black Marble* (1980) was a comedy and the film *God Told Me To* (1976) fell more appropriately into the horror film genre. The

film *The Onion Field* (1979), although dealing with the shooting of police officers, primarily focused on the justice system rather than law enforcement. The films *Wild Things* (1998) and *Cement* (1998) both were excluded due to the fact the police were not portrayed as heroes in any way. Finally, two films were excluded due to the leading heroic characters were not law enforcement officers. In *Unstoppable* (2004) Wesley Snipes' character is a military retiree and in *Gone Baby Gone* (2007) Casey Affleck's character is a private investigator. Therefore, due to the fact that 8 films could not be located and an additional 10 films were excluded for the reasons noted previously, the final population for the first four decades of the core cop film genre totaled 112 films. Each of the 112 films represented units of analysis and was examined to determine both the quantity and quality of African American municipal police officer depictions. Specifically, films were viewed and film jackets were referenced in order to determine if a film portrayed an African American municipal police officer in the leading or joint leading role. Further, detailed notes were taken in regard to how the African American municipal police officers were portrayed informed both by the literature associated with real-world police officers and by independent observational notes.

Findings

Dynamics of Representation

Before discussing the following findings, it is important to reiterate that this is a first-step criminological cultivation study to determine what overarching messages are being conveyed regarding African American municipal police officers. We are not seeking to determine an actual cultivation effect but rather provide the basis for future second-step cultivation analyses. It is also important to emphasize that the definitional parameters of the core cop film genre were designed to allow for the isolation of those cop films that portray leading hero characters in the most serious and realistic municipal police officer depictions. That said, in the first four decades of the core cop film genre, White municipal police officer depictions dominated the genre. Of the 112 films analyzed, White officers were depicted as the sole leading character 64% ($n = 72$) of the time. Whites were also joint leading character with another White officer in 15% ($n = 17$), with an African American officer in 9% ($n = 10$) and an Asian American officer in 1% ($n = 1$) of the films analyzed. Therefore, White officers were depicted as leading or joint leading municipal police officer characters in 89% ($n = 100$) of the 112 films produced between 1971 and 2011. Comparatively, African American municipal police officers represented the second highest depiction rate at 19% ($n = 21$) followed by Hispanic Americans at 2% ($n = 2$) and Asian Americans at 1% ($n = 1$). Given that African American police officers have exceeded their national proportion in the general population, comprising 20% of the nation's metropolitan police force, the percentage of African American municipal police officer depictions appears, at face, to be representative (Gabbidon & Greene, 2013). These aggregate numbers are, however, deceiving, given the temporal placement and quality of the said depictions; in short, the depictions are not distributed evenly across the four decades.

Table 1. Core Cop Films Depicting African American Municipal Police Officers in Lead or Joint Lead Role by Year of Release.

Core cop films	Year	Lead role	Joint lead role
<i>The Organization</i>	1971	X	
<i>Fatal Beauty</i>	1987	X	
<i>Lethal Weapon 1</i>	1987		X
<i>The Kill Reflex</i>	1989	X	
<i>Lethal Weapon 2</i>	1989		X
<i>Downtown</i>	1990		X
<i>Lethal Weapon 3</i>	1992		X
<i>Rising Sun</i>	1993	X	
<i>Seven</i>	1995		X
<i>The Glimmer Man</i>	1997		X
<i>Murder at 1600</i>	1997	X	
<i>Lethal Weapon 4</i>	1998		X
<i>Rush Hour</i>	1998	X	
<i>In Too Deep</i>	1999	X	
<i>The Bone Collector</i>	1999		X
<i>Shaft</i>	2000	X	
<i>Training Day</i>	2001		X
<i>Kept</i>	2001	X	
<i>Dirty</i>	2005		X
<i>Miami Vice</i>	2006		X
<i>Inside Man</i>	2006	X	

Of the 21 films that depicted African American municipal police officers, 95% ($n = 20$) did not occur until after 1987 (see Table 1). Additionally, 52% ($n = 11$) portrayed the officer in a joint leading role and 48% ($n = 10$) as the leading municipal police officer character. These statistics reflect that despite the steadily increasing number of African Americans becoming police officers in the United States, the core cop film genre has traditionally not portrayed them in leading roles. This is demonstrated by the fact not only that the majority of films that present African Americans as primary or joint leading characters came into being after 1987 but that of those African American municipal police officer characters who share the lead character role, all but one shared that role with a White officer. In fact, throughout the first four decades of the core cop film genre, only the film *Dirty* (2005) depicted minority municipal police officer partners (Hispanic and African American) in a joint leading role. Therefore, based on the definitional parameters of what constitutes a core cop film and the IMDbPS primary genre categorizations at the time of this study, there were no films in the first four decades of the core cop film genre that depicted two African American municipal police officers in joint leading roles.

Due to the strict parameters for inclusion of films, it could be argued that we should have included such films as *Running Scared* (1986), *Bad Boys I* (1995), and *Bad Boys II* (2003). Each of these films depicted African American municipal police officers and in the case of the *Bad Boys* series the depiction of two African American

municipal police officers in joint leading roles. However, these films were excluded in the initial analysis due to being classified by the IMDb as part of the comedy genre; a genre excluded due to the definitional parameters of what constitutes a core cop film. Additionally, as was stated earlier the *Beverly Hills Cop* series (1984, 1987, and 1994) was excluded due to taking place outside the officer's jurisdictional boundaries as well as being classified as comedies. Similarly, the films *Rush Hour 2* (2001) and *Rush Hour 3* (2007) were excluded due to taking place outside the United States and being classified as comedies. We mention these excluded films at this point because we believe that the inclusion of the aforementioned excluded films, given their comedic nature, would have only served to amplify the findings that follow. Additionally, given this study was designed to isolate those films that depict officers in a serious and realistic light, we posit that the restrictive standards and subsequent exclusions only serve to solidify the importance of our findings.

The aforementioned aggregate findings arguably portray a dependency upon White counterparts. This perspective is only strengthened when the quality of African American municipal police officer depictions is examined. Analysis of these depictions reveals two stark findings. First, a trend of Stepin Fetchit caricatures in depictions of African American municipal police officers was revealed. Second, the few depictions of double marginalization that did occur were portrayed as the officer either having to be a sellout to their community and/or becoming a corrupt police officer if they are going to continue to be a police officer. We will first address the issue of Stepin Fetchit characterizations.

Remnants of Sambo and Stepin Fetchit in Policing Portrayals

Our findings highlight a continued portrayal of stereotypically derogatory comedic depictions of African Americans within the film industry. In fact, the storied history of African Americans as comedic outlets extends back to the slavery experience (Hall, 1993). During this period, African Americans were often utilized as comedy for the dominant majority. As a response to the cultural and personal degradation, Blacks began using this role to diffuse the often physical and emotional abuse received. It is this experience that arguably serves as the embryonic stage of the comedic experience that soon manifests as an often-portrayed African American stereotype. Ultimately, it was this socially accepted and culturally internalized misperception that served as the motivating catalyst behind the minstrel shows of the mid-1830s and the concept of a Sambo.

The minstrel shows parodied African Americans as buffoons among other derogatory characterizations (Kentrick, 2003; Pilgrim, 2012). The blackface characters generally appeared as servants who served as comedic relief in the shows (Cockrell, 1997). According to Cockrell (1997), *The Boston Post* reported in the 1830s that Queen Victoria and Jim Crow were the most popular characters in the world at the time; Jim Crow being in reference to a famous blackface song and dance number entitled "Jump Jim Crow." These early 17th-century Sambo characters were first portrayed by White actors in blackface. It was not until the 1840s and 1950s that one saw African Americans performing in the minstrel shows (Toll, 1974). And while the

minstrel show represented one of the first opportunities for African Americans to gain access to the American entertainment industry, the stereotypes popularized through the minstrel shows resulted in members of the African American community facing White retaliation if they did not fulfill the stereotypical expectations (Watkins, 1994). The derogatory characterizations would continue until the demise of the minstrel show in the early 1900s, but the derogatory depictions would continue to be perpetuated in film.

While the derogatory minstrel characterizations in film began with White actors appearing in blackface, Black actors would soon follow suit. Perhaps the most popular, of these Black actors was Stepin Fetchit, the stage name of Lincoln Perry. It was in the 1920s and 1930s that Perry helped popularize the stereotype of the lazy and simpleminded Black man through film; still providing the comedic relief. His portrayals became so synonymous with the stereotype that in the African American community Stepin Fetchit, not unlike the term Sambo used in the 1800s, is often used to denote any African American whose job can be seen as a form of entertainment for Whites (Baraka, 1987). As Dirks and Mueller (2007) point out modern popular culture depictions of African Americans have changed very little since the time of the minstrel show Sambo but potentially have a large impact on the African American community than earlier depictions.

Under critical historical examination, images of “blackness” found in popular culture today have shifted very little from their historical counterparts. Yet, as Patricia Hill Collins (2004) explains, “In modern America, where community institutions of all sorts have eroded, popular culture has increased in importance as a source of information and ideas” (p. 121). This is particularly problematic for black American youth, as popular culture has come to authoritatively fill the void where other institutions that could “help them navigate the challenges of social inequality” are beginning to disappear (p. 121). (Dirks & Mueller, 2007 p. 124)

Given our predominant findings of Black police officer depictions as comedic caricatures, it appears that African American police officer portrayals are not immune to falling into the scope of the Sambo and Stepin Fetchit lineage; in fact, they appear to personify it.

The analysis of the quality of African American municipal police officer depictions revealed that 52% ($n = 11$) of the 21 films that portrayed an African American municipal police officer in a sole or joint leading role portrayed the officers in a comedic light. While these are qualitative observations, we define comedic light as the character serving as the primary source of comedy in the film; either by being the specific target of jokes, subject of comedic situations, or their comedic banter with other characters. This does not mean the character is void of serious moments but rather that the comedic depictions were prominent in the film and often a key element to the character’s personality. Arguably the most prevalent example of such portrayals occurs in the *Lethal Weapon* series (1987, 1989, 1992, 1998). Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) consistently finds himself either the subject of his White partner’s jokes and/

or facing embarrassing situations (i.e., stranded on his toilet due to a bomb being placed under it, being made fun of due to his daughter's condom commercial, having his boat destroyed, or being asked to strip down to his heart-covered boxers and cluck like a chicken to distract a criminal so that the White officer can save the day). No matter what the situation, Murtaugh finds himself most often the focus of the humor and quite often the officer in need of rescue by his White partner. Similarly, to varying degrees, Whoopi Goldberg in *Fatal Beauty* (1987); Keenen Ivory Wayans in *The Glimmer Man* (1997); Wesley Snipes in *Rising Sun* (1993); Chris Tucker in *Rush Hour* (1998); Ice-T in *Kept* (2001); and Cuba Gooding, Jr. in *Dirty* (2005) all find themselves the object of humor from both their White colleagues and/or members of society.

The Stepin Fetchit role of entertaining Whites is arguably still present if one considers that of the 11 films that portray the African American officer in a comedic light, 82% ($n = 9$) have the officers partnered with either a White officer or a White civilian. The remaining 18% ($n = 2$) team the African American officer with another minority. However, the two films in which African American officers are teamed with another minority, *Rush Hour* (1998) and *Dirty* (2005), the African American officer is still portrayed as a source of comedy for their White superiors. As for the 10 films that portray the African American officer in a serious light, 40% ($n = 4$) have the officer partnered with a White Officer. The remaining 60% ($n = 6$) depict the African American officer in a sole leading role. Therefore, of the 112 films that comprise the first 40 years of the core cop film genre African American municipal police officers were only depicted in a noncomedic light while teamed with a White officer or civilian in 4% ($n = 4$) and in a noncomedic light sole leading character role in 5% ($n = 5$) of the films.

The potential significance of this finding is only amplified when one considers that of the 100 films that depict a White municipal police officer in a joint or sole leading character role, 17% ($n = 17$) depict a White officer in a comedic light and 83% ($n = 83$) in a serious light. A stark contrast to the 52% ($n = 11$) of African American depictions in a comedic light. Additionally, of the 89 films that depict a White municipal police officer in the sole or joint leading role with a character that is not a minority police officer, 92% ($n = 82$) depict the White officer or officers in a serious light, while only 8% ($n = 7$) portray that officer in a comedic light. Further, if the films that team the White municipal police officer with a nonpolice officer minority character are excluded, only 3% ($n = 3$) of the 89 films portray White officers in a comedic light.

It should be made clear that while these African American police officer portrayals are the subject of jokes, they often make others the object of humor as well. Therefore, these researchers are not trying to portray the African American officers as defenseless victims. Instead, it is simply being noted that based on these findings there is a clear pattern of African American municipal police officers being portrayed in a comedic light at a much higher rate than White officers. Based on cultivation theory's basic premise that long-term exposure to a repetitive and stable system of messages delivered through various mediums can have cumulative consequences, these findings at a minimum raises the question as to what impact such depictions might have on the expected role of African American municipal police officers by both fellow officers and the community.

A majority of research in this area has centered on the news and entertainment outlets and has primarily relayed a stereotypical perception (Ramasubramanian, 2011). Within criminal justice studies examining the portrayal of African Americans in film is virtually nonexistent. In fact, few studies on media representations have sought to determine the degree and extent to which the depictions influence actualized realities, stereotypes, and the perceived legitimacy of various criminal justice institutions and positions. This lack of criminal justice research is all the more troubling, given the impact of media portrayals on the social judgments of others, self, world-views, emotions, and expressed bias toward others (Shrum, 2008).

Our findings demonstrate the continued misrepresentation of African Americans in the media. Scholars in various other disciplines have long noted the relationship between stereotype portrayals and a host of negative outcomes. More to the point of our findings, Akbar (1996) held that, "Mockery is one the more sophisticated forms of humiliation." Therefore, we suggest that along with additional first- and second-step cultivation studies, researchers also examine the impact of such depictions on various behavioral and emotional outcomes.

Community or Department? Depictions of Double Marginalization

It is more than feasible that the domination of White police officer portrayals contributes to the development of societal perceptions of police officers. Perhaps the best real-world indicator in the literature at this time, of these perceptions, concerns the fears African Americans have in regard to becoming a police officer. Recruiting minority police officers has proven a difficult task for police departments. This is primarily associated with the image the minority community has of police officers as an army of occupation. Police officers are associated with the use of excessive force and oppression on minorities; therefore, when an African American becomes a police officer, they are often viewed as a sellout by their community. "For many of the African-Americans in uniforms, a so-called double marginality has existed, whereby the African-American officers feel accepted neither by their own minority group nor by the White officers" (Peak, 2005, p. 364). Therefore, this double marginalization is rooted in perceptions, which we believe are created by and/or perpetuated, at least in part, through media depictions.

While a few films hint at the dual marginalization of African American officers, only a few portray it in detail. The films *In Too Deep* (1999), *Shaft* (2000), *Training Day* (2001), and *Dirty* (2005) specifically portray African American municipal police officers that have or are struggling with being accepted by both their department and their community. These four films present two competing natures of double marginalization. The films *In Too Deep* (1999) and *Shaft* (2000) serve as examples of good officers dealing with the struggle of not being fully accepted by their community or the police force. In *Shaft*, the officer is forced to leave the force to protect the community properly; while in the film *In Too Deep*, the officer had to watch his community suffer in order to be a good cop. In short, *Shaft* makes the statement that he is "too Black for the uniform, too blue for the brothers." In this one sentence, *Shaft*

summarizes the double marginalization that Black police officers often experience. The films *Training Day* (2001) and *Dirty* (2005) arguably serve as examples of why African American officers are often ostracized by the African American community. Both films depict officers that abuse their powers in an effort to gain status within the police force and power over the community rather than serving the community. So in sum when the double marginalization of African American municipal police officers is depicted the depictions are of selling out one's community or giving up the force to rejoin the community.

Conclusion

While this study focused on theatrically released films, we do not purport to downplay the influence of other media outlets. In fact, we contend that media outlets can no longer be considered mutually exclusive of one another and that the focus should turn toward preferred content by the viewer. As was stated earlier, cultivation theorists have traditionally focused on the impact of repeated messages conveyed through television. This is due to the fact that the theory was developed in the 1960s and 1970s when television programming was relayed across just three major networks and concerns of television influence first began to arise. Still today these concerns are arguably well founded if one considers that until the "1990's television viewing ranked as the third most time-consuming activity (after sleep, work, or school) for Americans" (Surette, 2007 p. 13). Further, for the average American, for every 10 years of life a person spends one solid year (8,760 hours) watching television (Surette, 2007). Nielsen (2011) noted that the amount of television viewing has only increased. The average American now spends over 34 hours per week watching live television. This means the average American will now spend over 2 years (17,680 hours) for every 10 years of their life watching television. This does not include the additional 3–6 hours watching programs that have been recorded. The report also reveals that approximately 36 million Americans are watching video on smartphones now. Additionally, it points out that as Americans grow older, they watch more television programming. These numbers in conjunction with the fact that through various sources, be it normal network programming, movies on demand, and so on, collectively this new and recycled content makes crime and violence the most common content found on television (Surette, 2007). In short, we currently live in the most mediated society.

However, despite the continued prevalence of television programming in recent years with the proliferation of various media outlets, the mediums examined in cultivation studies have expanded (newspapers, video games, film, etc.; Wilson, 2009). It has also been shown that with the expansion of media choices it is now easier for people to view their preferred content (Prior, 2005). In his study of 2,358 U.S. residence, Prior (2005) found that content preference became a better predictor of political knowledge as media choices increased compared to the number of options available. Additionally, cultivation studies have also shown that the cultivation effect increases when narrow genres of programming are watched (Hawkins & Pingree, 1981). Therefore, in this study, we expanded cultivation analysis to theatrically

released films and narrowed our examination to the specific genre of core cop films. We contend that the influence of theatrically released films can no longer be viewed as stopping at the theater. Films released theatrically are quickly being absorbed by other media outlets and thereby arguably having their overall influence amplified. For example, *The Economist* (2011) reported:

Films open on big screens but make money on small ones. After a four-month exclusive run in cinemas (a “window”, in Hollywood jargon) they become available as DVDs and Blu-ray discs—and, often, as on-demand videos and digital downloads. In 2010 Americans spent \$18.5 billion on such things. Just \$10.6 billion was spent on cinema tickets in North America. Another window opens about six months later, when films are sold to cable- and satellite-television companies. Perhaps two years after that they will be sold to free broadcast channels. Like cars, films become cheaper as they age.

Therefore, theatrically released films quickly become integrated into television programming, arguably still the most influential source of cultivation today.

Given that this study did not propose to determine the level of a cultivation effect but rather to identify the dominant messages conveyed through the core cop film genre, the extent to which recruitment, retention, and the acceptance of African American police officers are influenced by media imagery and representation is not clear. The role such representations might play in the double marginalization of African American police officers often face is unexplored. However, the findings presented here, when considered in a cultivation context, at a minimum points to some stark possibilities as to what socially constructed perceptions are being cultivated. First, if the mere portrayal of a particular race of police officer does cultivate public perceptions, then the dominant accepted image would be that of a White officer; given that White officers were the leading or joint leading character in 89% ($n = 100$) of the 112 films examined. Second, if the quality of depiction plays a role in the cultivation process then social realities would be tainted to expect African American police officers to serve as comedic relief, sellouts to their communities, and/or become corrupt officers. In short, African American municipal police officers would not be viewed as serious or deserving of the respect afforded to honest law enforcement officers.

Indications of a cultivation affect in which viewers of specific forms of media expect offenders and police officer to be of a certain race may have already been identified. For example, in his study of light and heavy television news viewer's, Dixon (2007) explores their perceptions of lawbreakers and law defenders. In Dixon's study, subjects were exposed to embedded crime stories in newscasts. If the race of the perpetrator was not revealed, subjects rated a high likelihood that the perpetrator was Black. Further, heavy news viewers were more likely than light news viewers to express a high likelihood that an unidentified officer would be White. Additionally, heavy viewers were more likely than light viewers to not have positive perceptions of Black police officers featured in newscasts.

Supported by the existent literature such as Dixon's (2007) study coupled with the exponential growth of visual media viewership and our findings, we suggest future

researchers examine the impact that mediated messages and images play in the cultivation of perceptions of African American municipal police officers. Additionally, given that law enforcement research makes specific distinctions between types of law enforcement (municipal, county, state, federal, etc.) future criminological cultivation researchers should also make these distinctions in an effort to (a) better understand any differences that may exist and (b) more readily compare findings to the policing literature. However, given the widespread depiction of various aspects of the U.S. Criminal Justice System in the media (Surette, 2007), the scope of such research should not be limited to just law enforcement officers or theatrically released films. First-step criminological cultivation analysis, which consists of examinations of large blocks of media content, can be applied to the depiction of all players in the criminal justice system (i.e., judges, lawyers, prison guards, criminals, victims, etc.). Additionally, first-step criminological cultivation analysis should not just be applied to the players in the criminal justice system but also the depictions of criminal justice issues (e.g., policies, laws, deviant acts, crimes, etc.). Upon completion of first-step criminological cultivation research, second-phase projects that explore the actual impact on criminal justice employees and citizens should be pursued. Finally, while this study focused on theatrically released films, future research should examine television programming and continue to expand into other mediums (e.g., print media, video games, YouTube, social media, music, etc.).

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