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Walker, Danielle, "The Epistemic and Psychological Mechanisms Perpetuating Racism Within the Criminal Justice System" (2019). *Theses*. 351.
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The Epistemic and Psychological Mechanisms Perpetuating Racism Within the Criminal
Justice System

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Thesis submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri- Saint Louis in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy

May 2019

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Abstract

Many attempts have been made by philosophers, political activists, psychologists, historians, social advocates, and others to explain the mechanisms at play in the perpetuation and resulting manifestations of systemic and institutional racism. On one side of the debate there lies a theory that there is an epistemic failure at the root of racial bias towards Blacks, *white ignorance*, a collective amnesia regarding what has and does take place in society, as it pertains to their oppression and isolation, like the view of philosopher Charles W. Mills. According to Mills, this type of ignorance, or non-knowing, is a cognitive phenomenon in which race plays a causal role. The other side consists of a refutation of the "myth" *white ignorance*, like the perspective of philosopher Tommy Curry. Under this stance, racist acts and ideologies are part of a deliberate and malicious strategy to keep Blacks in subordinate societal positions, where whites can comfortably maintain their social, political, and economic supremacy. In Curry's opinion, the assignment of whites as ignorant conveniently salvages their virtue, so they are then unaccountable for the suffering Blacks endure. This discussion provides an in depth philosophical, epistemological and psychological analysis of *white ignorance*, by incorporating cognitive dissonance; an internal conflict occurring when what we hold true is challenged, and the phenomenon psychologist Robert Jay Lifton calls *doubling*. In my analysis, I take the stance that even if white ignorance is not a sufficient explanation for certain instances of racism against Blacks, it can certainly prove helpful in explaining disparities within the criminal justice system. This includes not only the use of excessive force by white police officers, but also the arrests, prosecutions, convictions, and sentencing of Blacks.

Introduction

Racial prejudice within the criminal justice system has put African Americans at a significant disadvantage. Despite the yearly fall in nationwide prison counts since 2010, whites' skewed racial perceptions of crime (the strong association of it to racial minorities) has led to harsh and biased criminal justice policies. (Ghandnoosh, 2014, 3) Statistically, for the past three decades, the overall homicide rate for African Americans was 6.2 times higher than for whites. (Ghandnoosh, 2014, 11) Although Blacks are much more likely to be victims of violent crime, whites tend to be more in favor of harsher punishment. They also excessively associate blacks to criminality. (Ghandnoosh, 2014, 4) Whites, in general, have an exaggerated sense of endangerment. In addition, these racial misperceptions are further reinforced by tainted media and political portrayals of crime. Statements of policymakers, media coverage, and public opinion surveys all reveal the deeply rooted racial bias that plagues the criminal justice system. The problem is clear. Racial perceptions of crime are severely distorted. The reflexive association of Blacks to criminality and refusal to acknowledge the far reach of Black victimization are put in motion by epistemic presumptions of Black inferiority. When faulty perceptions of crime impact decisions of policymakers (those in positions of power), the result is a severe imbalance in crime penalties, with blacks at a significant disadvantage. These faulty perceptions will be discussed later in greater detail.

I shall take the stance that *white ignorance*, and the psychological phenomena doubling and cognitive dissonance, are possible mechanisms behind the reflexive association whites have of Blacks to criminality, as well as instances where law enforcement officers have responded over-aggressively during confrontations with them.

First, I introduce this paper with the use of statistical information related to disproportions within the criminal justice system and discuss how they are connected to faulty racial perceptions of crime and authoritarian moral inquiry. Second, I discuss the epistemic failure which philosopher Charles W. Mills calls *white ignorance*, and connect this phenomenon to how whites view crime. Third, I explain philosopher Tommy Curry's argument on why he believes white ignorance is simply a myth, not valuable in understanding anti-Black racism, which masks the deliberate efforts of whites to sustain their supremacy and Black oppression. Lastly, in an attempt to defend Mills' theory against Curry's critique, I highlight key similarities between the explanatory powers of white ignorance, cognitive dissonance, and doubling, to demonstrate why white ignorance is a feasible explanation for institutional discrimination that Blacks endure within the criminal justice system.

When The System Fails Us

Although I am aware that the average American has some knowledge base of hardships that Blacks in the United States face, the following text shall serve as a vivid reminder of the pervasive state of racism in this country, and an illustration of its interrelation to the criminal justice system. Racism becomes abstract as time passes. The "war on drugs", for instance, initiated by Richard Nixon, then later fueled by Ronald Reagan, was a political strategy to invoke fear among whites of Blacks, in order to sustain social hierarchies which benefit whites. An audio recording was released to the public, of Lee Atwater, a campaign strategist for Reagan, as he spoke of the intent behind one of Reagan's most notable political ventures. In the recording, he says,

“You start out in 1954 by saying nigger, nigger, nigger. By 1968 you can’t say nigger... that hurts you. It backfires. So you say stuff like forced-bussing, state’s rights, and all that stuff. And you’re getting so abstract now. You’re talking about cutting taxes, and all of these things you’re talking about are totally economic things... And the by-product of them is blacks get hurt worse than whites”. (Atwater, 1981)

When whites in positions of power intentionally manipulate the public perception of Blacks by playing on their opinions of economic and social dilemmas, it poses a threat to the overall welfare of Blacks. Whites control the lens that the public looks through to view the criminal justice system and its impartiality, or lack thereof. White politicians, the media, and members of law enforcement are allowed to criminalize Blacks, evoking fear, leading whites to believe they need protection from them. The government uses legal political strategies to extend white privilege and oppress the Black community.

The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution defines it as unconstitutional for someone to be held as a slave, however, the penal labor exception creates a loophole. It provides an exception for slavery, if an individual is a criminal. (U.S. Constitution, 1865) This has been exploited by white patriarchal society, leading to a permanent stigma of criminality associated to Blacks. Let us consider differences in sentencing for crack and powder cocaine. Since the declaration of the “war on drugs” during the Regan and Nixon administrations, there has been harsher sentencing for crack, which statistically is more commonly used within urban areas predominantly populated by Blacks. In August of 2010 President Barack Obama signed the Fair Sentencing Act, a bill which aimed to reduce significant sentencing differences between crack and powder cocaine convictions,

which disproportionately punished Blacks with excessive penalties in comparison to whites. This legislation reduces the sentencing disparity from 100 to 1, to 18 to 1, by raising the quantity of crack required to trigger specific mandatory sentencing initially established in 1986, and also eliminates the minimum mandatory sentencing for possession of crack. (Nellis, 2016, 1) “Jim Crow and slavery were caste systems. So is our current system of mass incarceration.” (Alexander, 2010, 7) The United States Census Bureau reports that 54 percent of young white male high school drop outs were employed in 2014, compared to only 25 percent of their Black male counterparts, taking into account incarcerated individuals. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014) Without factoring in those incarcerated, statistics stand at 60 percent for white male drop outs versus 36 percent for Black male drop outs. Mass incarceration masks a significant amount of social and economic inequality.

Lack of education and unemployment have a direct link to poverty, and mass incarceration is directly connected to Black poverty and economic inequality. By connecting mass incarceration of Blacks to poverty, we may gain a bit of insight into the causes. Blacks are imprisoned in this country at a rate of more than five times that of whites, and at least ten times the rate in five states. (Nellis, 2016, 1) “Tough on crime” policies such as stringent drug policies, stop-and-frisk, mandatory sentencing, and harsher treatment of parole violations have led to a disproportionate impact for people of color. Incarceration increases poverty because it creates employment barriers, reduces earnings and decreases economic security through criminal debt, fees and fines, makes access to public benefits difficult or impossible, and disrupts communities where formerly incarcerated people reside. (Nellis, 2016, 7) With two-thirds of incarcerated

individuals reporting annual incomes under \$12,000, mass incarceration only continues the cycle of poverty, with Blacks at the greatest disadvantage.

The expectations placed on released Black offenders closely resembles the “tested emancipation” of slaves described by philosopher Elizabeth Anderson. “Since the justification for the slave system rested on the assumption that slaves were unfit for freedom, the test examined how the freed people exercised their freedom.” (Anderson, 2016, 14) The slave master’s ideas about freedom were starkly different from how the slaves themselves envisioned it to be. Numerous restrictions were placed on them. Freed people were denied independent access to land, ensuring that they had no choice other than to keep working on the plantations, which caused them to be dependent yet again on their masters in a re-shaped continuation of slavery. (Anderson, 2016, 16) Field hands were bound by one-year contracts, restricted from changing plantations, and disciplined with fines up to the amount of their entire salary. There is a distinct resemblance here to the conditions awaiting Blacks who are released from prison. While many Blacks hope to get a “second chance” at life, they face a road which leads them back to prison. The conception of freedom that dominant white society has is very different from that of Blacks who are paroled, and a racially biased system determines the requirements of their release. Perhaps this factors into why so many Blacks released from prison become reoffenders. Judgements about institutional racism from the perspective of white society are driven by authoritarian moral inquiry. Moral inquiry is authoritarian when:

- (1) it is conducted by people who occupy privileged positions in a social hierarchy,
- (2) the moral principles being investigated are those that are supposed to govern relations between the privileged and those who occupy

subordinate positions in the social hierarchy, and (3) those in subordinate positions are (a) excluded from participating in the inquiry, or (b) their contributions--their claims--are accepted as requiring some kind of response, but where the response of the privileged fails to reflect adequate uptake of subordinates' perspectives, but rather uses their social power to impose their perspective on the subordinates. (Anderson, 2016, 3)

Paroled Blacks are expected to find and maintain employment, even though there are very few employers that are willing to hire convicted felons. They are also expected to avoid contact with fellow convicts, when unfortunately, the environments where they were raised and are familiar with likely have a high concentration of individuals who also have criminal backgrounds. Law professor and author Michelle Alexander emphasizes that because of an unjust criminal justice system, Black men are disenfranchised—prevented because of their felony convictions from voting and from living in public housing, discriminated in hiring, excluded from juries, and denied educational opportunities... seventy percent return to prison within two years. (Childress, 2014, 1) There is little assistance available for paroled individuals to have a fair chance at a life without crime. Many have too many odds against them to be successful at rehabilitation and modification of their behavior. In reference to this, Curry writes,

“Unprepared and lacking options for employment, many Black men turn to illegal activities as a means of economic sustenance. Participating in criminal activities in an effort to survive within a society that will not educate, hire, or train Black men and boys inevitably places these young

Black males in contact with the criminal justice system and the ever-expanding prison industrial complex.” (Curry, 2017, 109)

Structural disadvantages within Black communities lead to high rates of offending/reoffending and arrest, while stereotypes and implicit bias in decision-making both drive disparity. (Nellis, 2016, 9) Authoritarian moral inquiry into methods of maintaining social order within society imposes an epistemic injustice on Black former convicts, by placing high expectations, without the availability of resources to accomplish them.

Anderson asserts that establishing social conditions of accountability is critical for ensuring compliance with “known” moral codes, and learning what those codes are. (Anderson, 2016, 5) Moral errors are said to be corruptions in moral thinking, which occur when moral inquiry is authoritarian.

“Suppose a person not only has no one holding him to account but has the power to enforce the demands he makes on others. Such an experience of unaccountable power would produce profound moral confusion. It would be difficult for such a person to distinguish what is good from his perspective from what is morally right.” (Anderson, 2016, 19)

Here lies a key issue with the mass incarceration of Blacks and institutional racism in general. Governmental entities arguably have unaccountable power. The Blacks confined within prisons have lost the power to speak up and stand against injustices, such as sexual and physical abuse by prison staff, and are isolated from the rest of society. (Curry, 2017, 33, 90-92) Likewise, the dominant group is isolated from those oppressed.

This isolation, as mentioned above, corrupts the thinking of the dominant social group. Furthermore, any formal investigations which occur into unjust protocols within the criminal justice system have often lacked transparency in the information provided to the Black community, the victims of those injustices.

In modern society, social practices tied to the criminal justice system are fostering racism. Take for example the recent slaughter of Blacks by white police officers. In April of 2015, white officers beat Freddie Gray so severely during an arrest that his spinal cord was severed. He was also videotaped (by a bystander) being carried into a police van with injuries so severe that he could not straighten his legs, walk, or hold his head up. He also received delayed medical attention, and never regained consciousness. There was excessive use of force, endorsed by governmental entities, that cost him his life, yet Baltimore police officers faced no indictment for their crimes. Also, take into consideration the shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice. He was shot in a park while playing with a toy gun after a white person reported a “Black man was pointing a gun at people”. Tamir was shot and killed within less than 60 seconds of officers arriving on the scene. The officer was not prosecuted. Another example is the shooting of John Crawford III, who was shot and killed within 30 seconds of contact with police officers, inside a Walmart store after picking up a BB gun from a shelf and walking to a register to purchase it. A white male shopper called in and reported a “Black man waving around a rifle at customers”, which video footage clearly refuted. A grand jury did not indict the two

officers for his murder. Philando Castile, an elementary school teacher, was videotaped by his girlfriend being shot by an officer in his car, while seated with hands in plain view. The officer was acquitted of all charges. The list goes on. White society lacks a widespread acceptance that such discrimination is wrong. Quite the contrary, these murders represent state sanctioned use of force against blacks.

These publicized acts of excessive force occur, often times with the full support of the white community. Even in the face of definitive evidence that biased decisions are made by the police force, whites fail to leave their comfort zone of complicity to realize fatal errors within the criminal justice system are perpetuating racism. Law enforcement agents are given the power to unjustly criminalize Blacks. Take for example stop-and-frisk policies, commonly viewed within the Black community as racial profiling. The Fourth Amendment requires that before stopping a subject, the police must have a reasonable suspicion that a crime has been, is being, or is about to be committed by the suspect. If the police reasonably think a person is armed and dangerous, they have the right to search them. The issue with such a policy is the subjectivity of the word *reasonable*. Several publicized instances have ensued, such as the ones mentioned above, where unarmed non-threatening Black individuals have been searched, detained, and/or murdered due to suspicions based on no other factor than the color of their skin.

As Mills asserts, “Often times for their survival, they must work to understand a race that has a frightening power over them, that in certain time periods can determine their life

or death on a whim.” (Mills, 2007, 18) Punitive tough on crime policies disproportionately applied, such as stop-and frisk and three-strikes, allow whites in positions of power to impose their will, often with the claim of justification due to “fear”, and excessively associate criminality to subordinated blacks. Police are more likely to pull over Blacks for investigative reasons. Blacks are also more likely to be searched and arrested, although whites who are stopped are more likely to possess contraband. (Balko, 2018) Racism is allowed to fester due to corruptions in moral thinking and fine print within legislation.

Black men, women, and children have been murdered while shopping at Walmart (John Crawford III), sitting in a car with friends listening to music (Jordan Davis), while laying on their own couches in their own homes asleep (Botham Jean), while driving (Philando Castile), while asking a stranger for help with injuries after a car crash (Renisha McBride), while walking down their own street at night in a hooded sweatshirt (Trayvon Martin), while playing at the park (Tamir Rice), while doing their elementary school homework in their room (Aiyana Jones), and even while following commands of officers and verbally pleading for their life to be spared (Daniel Shaver, Alton Sterling). All instances of force via racial discrimination were endorsed by legislation and even public opinion in the form of grand juries, which labeled these acts of violence as “justified”. White police officers are given a pass when they terrorize Black communities.

White Ignorance

Now, instead of physical captivity of African slaves in the U.S., there is institutionalized racism. This form of discrimination either goes under the radar of white consciousness or is blatantly and intentionally rejected as being an actual problem. As Mills stated, there is a “refusal to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today, and all of its consequent advantages in negotiating opportunity structures.” (Mills, 2007, 28) Blacks face significant systemic barriers to equality in education, housing, health care, and within the criminal justice system. White society simply chooses to ignore them and maintain their complicity with Black trauma.

Faulty perceptions of Blacks can be attributed to what Charles W. Mills describes as *white ignorance*. This term can be used to signify both false belief and an absence of true belief, by which white racism and/or domination and their ramifications play a causal role. (Mills, 2007, 9) White ignorance is a deliberate effort that extends white privilege and supremacy into a culture of non-knowledge. As whites selectively remember and rewrite history in correlation to their own understandings, they change the rules that everyone else is subject to, specifically Blacks and other minorities. That is the key issue with such ignorance. This intentional misunderstanding of everything around them, or what Mills describes as being aprioristically intent on denying what is before them, allows whites to profit from inequality. They end up being unaccountable for the negative impacts on oppressed groups. Statistics related to crime in this country are readily available to

everyone, in some instances documented by whites themselves, yet they fail to acknowledge that their belief in Black inferiority and criminality lacks justification. White ignorance successfully tells members within dominant white society that what they observe does not exist. Mills asserts that “the dynamic role of *white group interests* needs to be recognized and acknowledged as a central causal factor in generating and sustaining white ignorance.” (Mills, 2007, 23) Blacks have been historically viewed as inferior, and whites have only understood Blacks in relation to themselves and their own needs. Therefore, self-determination of blacks is a threat to their position of dominance. Mills highlights that, central to the shaping of white opinion, is perception of their group interests:

“The threats Blacks appear to pose to white’s collective well-being, not their personal welfare. Race is the primary social division in the United States, and whites generally see Black interests as opposed to their own. Inevitably, then, this will affect white social cognition—the concepts favored (e.g., today’s “color blindness”), the refusal to perceive systemic discrimination, the convenient amnesia about the past and its legacy in the present, and the hostility to black testimony on continuing white privilege and the need to eliminate it to achieve racial justice.” (Mills, 2007, 35)

As Mills asserts, white ignorance has been able to thrive for so long because it has been shielded by a white epistemology of ignorance. This is perhaps another reason why the mass incarceration of Blacks has not been recognized as systemic discrimination, and the

criminal justice system remains “selective”. There is a deliberate dismissal of truth and facts that expose it. Blacks are assumed guilty, until proven innocent. And even after evidence is discovered which refutes their guilt, particularly post-conviction, members of law enforcement go to great lengths to keep these individuals incarcerated.

“Whites exhibit a general inability to perceive the persistence of discrimination and the effects of more subtle forms of institutional discrimination. In the context of color-blind racial ideology, whites are more likely to see the opportunity structure as open and institutions as impartial or objective in their functioning.” (Mills, 2007, 28) Despite conflicting evidence, whites view the distribution of punishment within the criminal justice system as justified and neutral. The oppressed Black population is excluded from participation in moral inquiry into how to correct disproportions, therefore there is an authoritarian social epistemology. Moral thinking is corrupted.

Social moral epistemology studies how social institutions and practices foster or impede the acquisition of true moral beliefs and true factual beliefs insofar as they bear on moral questions. (Goldman & Blanchard, 2016, 23) From an epistemological perspective, any institutional arrangement or legal adjudication system can be evaluated by how well it succeeds in the pursuit of truth. (Goldman & Blanchard, 2016, 23) Within the criminal justice system, the “truth” seems to change based on the perspective from which it originates. When prosecutors, jurors, judges, and even defense attorneys hold preconceived stereotypes about the character of Black suspected criminals, it corrupts

moral thinking and significantly impacts the outcomes of cases for Blacks, as well as the acquisition of truth.

Mark Godsey, a former prosecutor, attempts to shed light on the politics and psychology behind injustices within the criminal justice system, particularly the conviction of the innocent and subsequent difficulty in overturning those convictions. In his book *Blind Injustice*, Godsey argues that when it comes to challenging and attempting to overturn convictions, even in the face of newly discovered indisputable evidence (e.g. DNA), law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and judges have a difficult time dispelling their previously accepted belief that a convicted person is in fact guilty. He found that these members of law enforcement will do anything in their power to keep falsely accused prisoners in jail, including a refusal to admit mistakes and unethically covering up information which substantiates a person's innocence. There is a psychological denial that prevents them from objectively evaluating new evidence, whereby they are unable to mentally or emotionally accept the truth. (Godsey, 2017, 12)

Applying his ideas to my discussion, the refutation of "facts" whites have internalized for years may cause what he characterizes as an internal mental and emotional conflict, "leading them to avoid facing the unfaceable". (Godsey, 2017, 12) In regards to the chance of innocent people being convicted, innocence exists only in an abstract way, and reality is avoided. His discussion in many ways mirrors that of Mills' on white ignorance. He characterizes our criminal justice system as one of blind injustice, whereby

“Individuals and society as a whole are blind to the flaws in the human psyche that cause actors in the criminal justice system to behave in bizarre and incredibly unjust ways without being aware they are doing so”. (Godsey, 2017, 3) Godsey argues that most denial comes from those deeply invested and imbedded in the system. The ones who socially have the most to gain from the incarceration of Blacks are whites, as Blacks pose a threat to white supremacy.

According to Mills, “White ignorance has been able to flourish all of these years because a white epistemology of ignorance has safeguarded it against the dangers of an illuminating blackness or redness, protecting those who for “racial” reasons have needed not to know”. (Mills, 2007, 24) In other words, those who benefit from structural racist practices, have an investment in protecting their advantages. The white dominant social group benefits from the mass incarceration and extermination of Blacks, so from their perspective, it is not an issue that needs to be rectified. Voting and drug laws, like the ones aimed at individuals on probation/parole or with felony convictions, limit millions of Blacks by restricting them from contributing to rectification of injustices through judicial measures. Loss of voting rights may be the biggest impact mass incarceration has on the Black community. If we consider voting to be the most fundamental expression of democracy, these types of laws not only marginalize convicted Blacks, but essentially erase them from social participation... often for life. They become unable to democratically resist white political interests.

The Myth

Tommy Curry, in several of his publications and public interviews, has attempted to debunk the “myth” of white ignorance. He is dismissive of any such suggestion attempting to explain or help eliminate racism against Blacks. According to Curry, as explained during his interview with “The Context of White Supremacy” host Gus T. Renegade, the term attempts to endow whites with an undeserved innocence and maintain virtue, elevating white morality, despite their intentional anti-Black oppressive acts. He sees this ideology as nothing more than empty rhetoric, part of a societal propaganda attempting to preserve the false idea that white people have changed and are making progress. Curry states that Black academics are simply giving whites a pass by using this term, which they then use as a coping mechanism for their own humanity. (Renegade, 2014) According to Curry, citing ignorance denotes innocence, and implies that whites are objective but just need to be taught, which is not a realistic explanation. Central to Curry’s reasoning for dismissing the “myth” of white ignorance is the repetitious racist patterns of behavior by whites which occur throughout history, despite awareness of its effects on the black community. These repetitious oppressive behaviors, according to Curry, is not proof of ignorance, but that of knowledge of how whites can treat Blacks with little or no consequences received. (Renegade, 2014)

In his book, *The Man-Not*, Curry analyses how critical race theory has neglected to bring attention to the realities of the Black male experience. He asserts that the study of Black male suffering is overlooked by gender theory, leading them to be omitted from philosophical and conceptual study. This omittance, according to Curry, “Is not the result of ignorance, but instead part of a deliberate effort to displace and eliminate our

knowledge of the realities that facilitate the death of Black men and the violence against Black boys”. (Curry, 2017, 139) Disregarding Black males maintains the disconnect between disciplinary knowledge and their problematic existence in a society ruled by whites.

Curry asserts that subordinated Black males are targets of the most extreme forms of lethal violence and discrimination, in comparison to Black females, because instead of coercion or control, their oppression situates them as targets of extermination. (Curry, 2017, 34) Black women are seen as competition for resources, while Black males are viewed as biological and cultural threats to white patriarchal societies. Black males are thought of as degraded and deficient men who compensate for their lack of manhood with hyper-masculinity and predatory inclinations, characterized by deviance and violence. (Curry, 2017, 3) The faulty perception of Blacks, as Curry describes it, is not rooted in ignorance as Mills asserts. Instead it is part of a purposeful scheme to preserve both racism and white supremacy.

“To accurately identify racism as white supremacy, we must start to look deeper for the source of the phenomena popularly considered racist. Racist acts by individuals have to be understood not simply as individual ignorance or the spontaneous appearance of personal bigotry but as particular instances of whites' part in the larger historical narration of white supremacy-an orientation that continues to define, sustain, and justify judgments about Black inferiority and to bolster individual whites' identity to this very day.” (Curry, 2010, 556)

Whites continuously claim justification for malicious acts towards Blacks to preserve their own morality, and these claims are validated by this country's judicial system. "The patriarchal violence enacted against Black men and boys is not only wielded by white men and women but also actively enforced by the state." (Curry, 2017, 139) Deliberate and often times fatal acts of aggression are generally accepted as justified within white patriarchal society by "fear".

Within his paper, "Robert F. Williams and Militant Civil Rights", co-authored by Max Kelleher, Curry references white ignorance and its inability to explain racism in America stating,

"The history of civil rights and American race relations proceeds from a romantic view of racial change which erroneously presupposes that appealing to a virtuous white character is the basis of all attempts to solve or respond to anti-Black racism. This presupposition demands nonviolence to be the only strategy made available to oppressed people that challenges racism while honoring the personhood and humanity of white Americans." (Curry, 2015, 47)

While Mills sees the root of white racism and/or white racial domination as being aprioristic denial and false beliefs, Curry sees it as being a conscious and purposeful effort by whites to maintain their position of superiority in relation to Blacks. In Curry's opinion, labeling these efforts as ignorance is unrealistic, and assists whites in evading responsibility.

In his paper "We Who Must Fight in the Shade", Curry argues that the term white ignorance as a slippery concept. In opposition to Mills, he asserts that,

“In a white supremacist society, racism must be dealt with as a matter of white existence, not their pontifications about how they think about themselves amidst conditions that make their social privilege and power a certainty. The persistence of white supremacy is not some accident perpetuated by the mistaken moral codes of truly good white folks that have been led astray.” (Curry, 2014, 11)

When Mills defends the point that whites could become enlightened and overcome their ignorant yet calculated efforts to oppress non-whites, Curry claims it is this normative decree which causes his argument to fail. Curry believes that Mills oversimplifies ignorance as a misguided white interest instead of a structural feature of whiteness. He argues that in order to remedy oppression, the conditions that sustain and enforce it must be eliminated, but also Blacks must reject the desire to exercise control over one’s world as the white racist does within white supremacist society. (Curry, 2014, 11)

Disempowering whites requires Blacks not to idolize or mirror their inhumanity. Instead of compliance and assimilation into a society ruled by white supremacy, Curry suggests we disengage with white visions of success, power, and social privilege. Curry urges Blacks to accept and embrace the reality of inequality. (Curry, 2014, 6)

Just A Myth?

Many behaviors displayed by white members of law enforcement directed towards Blacks, such as excessive hostility, disregard for their safety, etc., I believe can be attributed to what psychologist Robert Jay Lifton characterizes as *doubling*. This psychological phenomenon is the division of the self into two functioning wholes, so that

a part-self can act as an entire self. (Lifton, 1986, 418) In this regard, an opposing tendency of self can become hazardously unrestrained in its psychological adaption. Lifton uses this phenomenon to explain the psyche and inhumane behaviors of Nazi doctors during the Holocaust. This, according to Lifton, resembles the integral adaptations which take place in the psyche of a soldier during combat. “Doubling, is a means of adaption to extremity, which requires a dissolving of psychic glue, as an alternative to a radical breakdown of the self”. (Lifton, 1986, 422) While doubling can be lifesaving in salvaging sanity, it can also lead to a barbaric and evil lack of inhibition. This lack of inhibition mirrors the unaccountable power which creates moral confusion among white members of law enforcement in their interactions with Blacks. The opposing self has its own concept of what is good, such as one’s adherence to duty and loyalty to a group. This according to Lifton frees the original self from the guilt of responsibility for certain immoral acts, and is not an elimination of conscience, but a transfer of conscience. (Lifton, 1986, 421)

While Curry pushes us to view all acts of violence, aggression, and dehumanization of Blacks by whites as their conscious and active participation in creating a social climate where they can maintain their privilege, Mills sees black victimization of the past and its causal role in continuing Black oppression in the present to be the result of a collective amnesia or non-knowing. As Mills describes it, “the mystification of the past underwrites a mystification of the present”. (Mills, 2007, 31) A historical account of racism, from the perspective of those oppressed (Blacks), claims knowledge that is not supported by white epistemic authority, thus is dismissed. Said differently, history is whitewashed to fit into the virtuous characterization whites have of

themselves which is starkly different from reality. Black accounts of oppression they experience are discredited. As Mills states, Black testimony is automatically viewed as “epistemically suspect”, therefore unreliable to the white narrative and not included. As described by Curry, white ignorance is a consequence of racism which guards the white psyche from acknowledgement of the suffering of the oppressed. (Curry, 2014, 10)

Through convenient individual and group forgetting, white ignorance, like doubling, may shield the entire self from awareness of one’s own moral guilt. This may particularly be the case during life and death decisions which must be made in an instant, like that occurring in many police shootings of Blacks. As a group, whites have been cognitively trained, by movies like *The Birth of a Nation* and *Training Day*, media outlets, and public statements from sitting presidents and others within positions of authority, to fear Black bodies and assume the roles of victims. Input of information from the environment is processed by a group, then results in behavioral outputs. (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, 230) Although it is true there are certain socially overt manipulations of white privilege, as Curry suggested, this does not fully explain what manifests as impulsive and almost instinctively aggressive “crimes of passion” against Blacks, which seem to occur without premeditation. When white police officers have a conscious (or subconscious) fear of Blacks as a perceived threat to their safety, they seem to enter into an instinctive “fight or flight” mode. Courage is a value cited within many oaths taken by members of law enforcement, and the perceived threat, whether real or not, is met with aggression and violence. These officers believe themselves to be responding to a threat, instead of creating one, as they often do. By way of doubling, these individuals may adapt to the extremity of murdering innocent Blacks.

As Mills asserts, “Inference from perception involves the tacit appeal to memory, which will be not merely individual but social. As such, it will be founded on testimony and ultimately on the perceptions and conceptions of others”. (Mills, 2007, 24) White testimony negates Black testimony, which allows whites to selectively remember a version of history that works in their favor and impose that version on Blacks. In reality, contrary to their own narrative, whites have historically been the aggressors in most if not all political and social conflicts between them and people of color; Blacks, Native Americans, Mexicans, etc. The need to fear Blacks has been instilled within the white mind repeatedly throughout history, and when Blacks are slaughtered by white police officers, these acts of aggression are vindicated when the media, juries, and judges support these acts of violence as justified by “fear” alone. One of the most troubling things about this is many whites genuinely *do* fear Blacks. These faulty perceptions cannot be resolved without being challenged.

When whites are confronted with information that conflicts with their most deeply held beliefs about the character and behavior patterns of Blacks (laziness, hypermasculinity, social deviance, violent tendencies, etc.), their psyches may experience cognitive dissonance. The theory of cognitive dissonance was developed by social psychologist Leon Festinger in the early 1950s, and is arguably one of the most influential theories in the history of social psychology. When cognitive dissonance occurs, an adaption similar to doubling takes place, where two conflicting beliefs cannot be maintained simultaneously. This leads an individual to deny conflicting information, rationalize that their most important belief is correct, and overcompensate for that rationalization by lashing out against the competing belief. (Godsey, 2017, 18) White

ignorance, like cognitive dissonance, features a hostility towards information that challenges a person's most deeply held beliefs. Beliefs are part of our identity, and shape who we are. In the case of white ignorance, Black inferiority and violent animalistic nature is commonly the false belief being challenged. I believe that the internal conflict cognitive dissonance may help explain impulsive acts of aggression towards Blacks by law enforcement, as well as the presumption of guilt beginning with the first point of contact. A challenge to the faulty beliefs held by white law enforcement officers does not only challenge what they think or think they know; it challenges what they stand for and the value of white humanity more generally.

White ignorance, like the avoidance of cognitive dissonance, involves an individual denying what is before them, in order to circumvent accountability. The phenomenon of cognitive dissonance may play a significant role in the outcomes of altercations between white police officers and Blacks, which is often the death of that Black person. The important thing to note however, is that whites *do* have a choice. For instance, during World War II, there were Germans who left the party and also those who risked their lives to protect Jews from the tyranny of Adolf Hitler's rule. Others, unfortunately, chose to deny the events before them or overcompensate by aggressively adopting the Nazi party's plans. The white members of law enforcement, who murder innocent Blacks, may possibly be attempting to internally justify their beliefs and choices by responding to conflict over-aggressively. This certainly seems to be the case in confrontations where there is "overkill", and a Black victim is shot 10, 20, or even 30 times. In fact, many of these officers have been recorded continuing to shoot long after their victim is visibly subdued, or the suggested "threat" has been eliminated. Cases such

as these resemble crimes of passion, yet the only trigger is the race of the other person involved. Connecting white ignorance to cognitive dissonance and doubling, in regards to anti-Black racism within the criminal justice system, members of white society benefit from turning a blind eye to these unjust instances of excessive force and the criminalization of Blacks, through an avoidance of accepting blame.

There is significant comradery among members of law enforcement, as well as an expectation of loyalty. With both doubling and cognitive dissonance, the opposing self has its own conception of right and wrong, such as loyalty to one's group. Loyalty is especially a factor when the media and high political officials declare a "war on drugs", or crime, creating a battleground that is situationally understood as 'us vs. them'. This added to the prevalent historically based characterization of Blacks as social deviants is a deadly combination. Through the self-deception of white ignorance, whites convince themselves that the aggression and hostility towards Blacks is warranted. Similar to life and death choices made by Nazi doctors during World War II, white police officers likely experience internal conflict in deciding whether to stay loyal to their group (the police force), to stand against discriminatory practices and advocate for those being oppressed, altogether deny the dangerous racial climate, or aggressively overcompensate to convince themselves that biased acts are justified and morally sound. Psychologically, doubling, like the avoidance of cognitive dissonance, seems to directly contribute to the inhumane treatment of Blacks by members of law enforcement.

Doubling occurs as part of a larger institutional structure which encourages or even demands it. White ignorance has proven to do the same, within the criminal justice system. Lifton describes the behavior of Nazi doctors to resemble that of certain

terrorists and “death gangs”. In these situations, profound ideological ties shape criminal behavior. (Lifton, 1986, 423) The collection of false beliefs held by whites about Blacks similarly impacts behavior of members of law enforcement in their encounters with the Black community. The use of excessive force against Blacks has been common practice, without penalty, and laws within the criminal justice system allow a broad authority for violence against these Black victims. During this adaption to extremity, the murder of innocent Blacks, while in a position intended to protect and serve (like the intended role of doctors), guilt of responsibility is transferred to the opposing self, thereby avoiding internal conflict with known rights and wrongs. Knowing and complying with moral codes is dependent on the establishment of social conditions of accountability, but these conditions cannot be established without the modification of deeply held false beliefs that whites have in general about Blacks. White criminalization of Blacks shapes the narrative of our society, and that fictitious narrative in turn is used to justify that criminalization. Racism has become cyclical.

White ignorance, doubling, and cognitive dissonance are all associated with a hostility or aggression towards evidence which jeopardizes the stability of previously upheld beliefs. This may be helpful in understanding the recent increase in deadly use of force by white police officers towards Blacks, like those cited above. In alignment with the psychological phenomena of doubling and cognitive dissonance, the more a deeply held belief is challenged, the more the human psyche attempts to preserve it. The recent rise in publicized instances of unnecessary force against Blacks is presenting an insurmountable challenge to the faulty perceptions and prejudicial beliefs of whites.

Mills believes that it is important to combat white ignorance as not only an ignorance of facts *with* moral implications, but also incorrect judgments about the rights and wrongs of moral situations themselves. (Mills, 2007, 23) This may be a complicated task with police officers, because they are trained to know that it *is* permissible to use deadly force if there is an immediate threat to their safety or the safety of others. The problem with this is flaws in perception play a significant role in what and who these officers view as a safety threat. Many if not most scenarios involving police confrontations with Blacks would not yield the same results had they been confrontations with whites. In fact, there are entire television shows dedicated to showcasing police interactions with white (a majority) suspected criminals; such as *Dog the Bounty Hunter* and *Cops*. During filming, whites being pursued commonly behave recklessly, aggressively, and pose imminent physical threats to law enforcement officers. These white suspects regularly shout, curse, spit, bite, throw objects, brandish and fire weapons, and commit assault against them... but live to tell about it. Yet when police officers have confrontations with non-threatening Blacks, even those who visibly flee or put their bodies in positions of surrender, they are choked, shot, and beaten to death. Knowledge which opposes the false belief in Black criminality is cognitively and socially suppressed. (Mills, 2007, 21) A reduction and/or elimination of these deadly encounters would seemingly require white cognition to 'go against the grain', so to speak, and reject societal pushes (norms as agreed by Mills and Curry) to accept and uphold biased conclusions about the characters of Blacks as violent and aggressive. Ultimately, improvement of cognitive practice should result in a heightened sensitivity to Black oppression, which should theoretically help to end it, as Mills suggests.

Evaluating racism with an incorporation of white ignorance is not a futile task, as Curry seems to believe. It is true, as Mills asserts, that since there is a sociology of knowledge, there should also be one of ignorance. (Mills, 2007, 23) While I don't believe white ignorance is an adequate explanation for *all* manifestations of anti-Black racism, I do believe this theory can prove helpful in explaining white cognition in certain instances of racial profiling and excessive force, that manifest as crimes of passion by law enforcement officers. Curry claims that white ignorance does not exist at all, but the cognitive phenomena described within this paper, having strong correlation to white ignorance as described by Mills, conflict with that claim when applied to the mistreatment of Blacks within the criminal justice system.

Curry and Mills' views are not in opposition to the extent that Curry believes. One aspect of Mills' argument that I feel the need to clarify against Curry's scrutiny is his suggestion that white ignorance, as described by Mills, denotes innocence. Quite the contrary, Mills is not attempting to bypass white accountability. This form of ignorance is not essentially passive, as is often the case in the traditional sense of the word, but instead is a type of willful ignorance which rebels against knowledge. In fact, they share the usage of specific terminology to describe the perpetuation of racism within society; *deliberate* and *intentional* efforts to sustain white privilege, *historical denial*, *self-deception*, *hostility* to Black testimony, etc. Whites should be held accountable. The term "Black" has a pre-embedded narrative within its concept, which logically determines particular conclusions made by those who lie outside of that identification. Once a concept is established within the social mind-set, its influences (e.g. bias), are difficult to overcome, because instead of things being perceived independently but related

to the concepts, they are seen *through* the concepts. (Mills, 2007, 27) Perception (how we see things) depends on conceptions (our theories of the world), which are based on social influences. When a society has unequal power structures, whites with the advantage, their conceptions of the world are affected. Whites benefit from their self-delusion and work hard to maintain it. Any moral inquiry into racist ideologies or practices is authoritarian, meeting the criteria described above provided by Anderson. But just because the moral way to think or act cannot be performed effortlessly, does not make it impossible, or change the nature of what is morally right or wrong.

As previously stated, ignorance, as Mills describes it, is defined by the beliefs being held, i.e. false belief and/or absence of true belief. (Mills, 2007, 16) White ignorance is a resistant cognitive delusion, which presents itself as knowledge, yet is not. It functions with a social cognition that distorts reality, therefore cannot be genuine knowledge. White ignorance, particularly the delusion of Black inferiority it features, is encouraged and reinforced by social practices mentioned in prior sections. In regards to white ignorance, Mills does not seek to excuse or justify racist beliefs or behaviors directed towards Blacks. Instead, the argument Mills presents is explanatory, stating the flawed way he believes white cognition works. Mills agrees with Curry that racism and white supremacy have not been simple anomalies but have been the norm. Mills does not however assert that the norms of belief are the right ones. In a more general sense, knowledge requires justification. White belief in Black inferiority and criminality lacks justification. The façade of justification which whites bask in originates from unreliable cognitive processes. There is a disconnect between the mechanisms that form/sustain the beliefs whites hold and reality. Distorted perception is an unreliable source for

knowledge. White ignorance does not suggest knowledge, but the avoidance, suppression, and dismissal of it through self-deception.

Conclusion

As with Mills, my discussion does not attempt to epistemically homogenize whites or claim that white ignorance is a flaw possessed by all within that particular group, or that it can explain all instances of racial discrimination, hostility, and aggression. Since race is not the only factor that has an impact on beliefs and cognitive patterns, there will indeed be a certain amount of variation. I recognize the merit in seeking an explanation for modern instances of distorted perception, hostility, and excessive force that has cost so many Blacks their lives, which goes beyond alluding to a default of pure evil, though is realistic in its comprehension of the history of racism in this country. Curry asserts that the conditions which sustain and enforce Black oppression must be eliminated to remedy it. But I conclude that white ignorance, doubling, and cognitive dissonance help to illuminate the psychological and cognitive conditions sustaining racism and Black oppression within society. The complexity of racial bias requires a multifocal approach in any attempts at resolution. White cognition, as evaluated by Mills, features a troublesome flaw; one that doubling, cognitive dissonance, and white ignorance can assist in explaining. Policies within the criminal justice system are established and enforced based on flawed white perception, and these policies reinforce white conception of superiority. The unaccountable power possessed by members of law enforcement has led to moral confusion. Moral thinking is corrupted by authoritarian moral inquiry by whites on how to investigate moral principles, and

whites comfort their own consciences and bypass internal conflict, via doubling and the avoidance of cognitive dissonance, when they avoid facing evidence which refutes their deeply held false beliefs about Blacks. Perhaps internal conflict is what needs to occur to modify white cognition and create societal change. And after widespread conflict and confrontation with ignorance and self-deception, there may be moral resolve and modification of oppressive and dangerous behaviors.

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