

IMPLICIT BIAS IN A POLICE DRAMA: AN ANALYSIS OF *S.W.A.T.*

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ABSTRACT

Implicit bias is, often unknowingly, inserted into the mainframe of the American psyche, prefacing each interaction in which we partake with an involuntary act of discrimination. One way in which implicit bias infiltrates society is through television. This is especially problematic for television dramas that display the most vulnerable interactions among its characters. The current study zeroes in on the imagery produced by police dramas. Specifically, it analyzes the beginning episodes of the first season of *S.W.A.T.*, a fictional police drama that follows the lives of a team of police officers within a tactical unit. This study will observe verbal and nonverbal cues exhibited within the first 10 episodes of the first season that signify implicit biases.

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INTRODUCTION

For the past few decades, police-community relations in America have consistently deteriorated. An accumulation of questionable occurrences exhibited by law enforcement officers have induced an inflammatory reaction from the American public. The increased availability of camera phones and the rapid development of media platforms has ensured that each incident remains unforgettable. However, the modern era of police dissatisfaction, especially from the African American community, was fueled long before the criticism was adopted by organizations like Black Lives Matter (BLM). Historically, unfair treatment of African Americans, particularly by legal actors, has caused a reactionary intolerance of police behavior that was generations in the making.

The longstanding issues have indeed made their way into American television. Police-citizen encounters have become an important part of the American evening routine, as individuals who rarely have such encounters absorb what is presented to them through the eyes of television writers and producers. This study sought to explore this issue on a deeper level. To do so, a historical record of destructive patterns that have been targeted toward the Black community was combined with behavioral and content analyses of entertainment media, specifically a television police drama. Due to the nature of this study, the particular context in which this analysis took place was integral. Circumstances that often lend themselves to unfavorable outcomes for African Americans are commonly associated with police encounters, being that the relationship between law enforcement and African Americans has historically been both complex and hostile. Though the focus of this study is not on the grievances of the past, it does examine the portrayal of interactions between police and community members informed by this historical reality. In other words, this study seeks to answer the question of how racially

stereotypical mechanisms used in entertainment media encourage the infiltration of implicit bias into society. Before presenting the results of this analysis, I first introduce the historical development which led to modern police departments. Then, I describe how the Black community became a collective target by not only law enforcement, but entertainment entities in order to perpetuate the idea that African Americans are of lesser value. This thesis concludes with a discussion of the results and limitations of the study, while also drawing conclusions

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

History recounts the existence of slave patrols, the earliest form of publicly funded policing that arose in the South. They were intended to disband the gathering of slaves in particular locations and manage race-based conflict in southern colonies. The responsibility of these officers was to regulate the movement of slaves and adhere to codes that were created to place limitations on Black Americans (Barlow and Barlow, 1999). These law enforcement officers were infamously cruel and maintained control over the slave population. Even after slavery was abolished, this patrol force was still very much alive (Durr, 2015).

The continuity of power struggles in earlier generations of American society paints a picture of relentless attempts to preserve not only the perception that African Americans are of lesser value, but the social and economic control over their existence. The only difference being that groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, federal military, and state militia, which emerged from disbanded slave patrols, were far crueler (Durr, 2015). These organizations eventually started to function in a manner akin to newly created police departments in the United States. The police beat was created by modeling this organization after slave patrols, wherein officers know every inch of an area or town spread across 15 square miles. Some scholars claim that in both the South and the North, the shift from slave patrols to publicly supported police agencies was

seamless, while others believe that slave patrols were the country's first officially acknowledged attempt at policing (Durr, 2015). As more immigrants landed on American soil and millions of Black Americans made the Great Migration from the South to Northern manufacturing areas, policing would become an important issue. Although they were granted citizenship in 1867, Black citizens' widespread exodus from the South was economically and strategically linked to both their inability to vote and the establishment of Jim Crow Laws as a means of maintaining boundaries between African Americans and White Americans. African Americans thereby endured coordinated brutality at the hands of the cops in American cities (Durr, 2015).

African Americans have long been singled out by the police and other law enforcement organizations and accused of breaking the law. Today's local governments have implemented forceful measures like Stop and Frisk, Racial Profiling, and Driving While Black as a more subtle version of the slave patrols (Durr, 2015). The majority of racialized police brutality in American cities during the 20th century can be attributed to the perception that the Black populace is criminal (Taylor, 2013). Over time, police officers have created justifications for their misconduct that has spanned centuries, which tends to be perpetuated by media outlets. The intent behind this cyclical pattern of misrepresentation was to encourage the idea that Black Americans were worthy of their eventual demise because they allegedly resisted arrest, fled the scene of the crime, attempted to seize a police officers' weapons, or were already riddled with disease – all this to justify their slaughter. The deceased's prior crime record, if there was any, and their medical records, though unconnected, are sometimes dredged up and proclaimed as contributing factors to the death. This happens when it is not expedient to draw from the accepted justifications (Iheme, 2020).

The tragic case of Rodney King, though not the first incident of police brutality, served as a marker. Past incidents have described in detail a brutal encounter with misconduct on the part of police; photographs have displayed the aftermath of an “alleged” assault. However, the common denominator in these cases is that they can be easily disproved using the same tactics of justification or complete denial on the basis of insufficient evidence. Not only was Rodney King victimized, but he was victimized on *camera*. The entirety of the assault was documented in real-time, completely exposing the deviance that had long been protested by African Americans – and now the world could no longer deny these claims. This experience was no longer to be isolated to the knowledge of the African American community, but it was now forced upon the nation in an undeniable fashion. Peter Davis (1994) notes that one reason as to why Rodney King’s case makes such a compelling example is that many Americans expected that the police officers who were responsible for the brutality against King to be expeditiously charged, convicted, and punished – “It’s in living color.” This case had such an impact on the public unrest that it had to be retried due to riots against the initial acquittal of all four officers involved and the subsequent media attention that this social dysfunction caused. Thus, ultimately illustrated the breakdown of confidence in the criminal justice system on a national scale.

From this point on, one would assume that this incident would encourage reform and increased measures to not only rectify this incident but prevent future occurrences. However, Rodney King’s victimization incited a complete disruption in the social order because of the magnitude and the way in which it was carried out. Further, the media attention added fuel to the fire by prolonging the pain felt by the African American community, and it seemed that the frequency of police brutality against Black Americans grew to be commonplace. The cases of Tanisha Anderson, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile,

Breonna Taylor, Daunte Wright, and an increasingly long list of more names who are of African American perception. Male African Americans symbolize a group that has endured extensive discrimination in society at large. Additionally, the obstacles to genuinely autonomous Black male agency are pervasive and deeply ingrained as a result of the growing prison industrial complex, mass incarceration, and persistent racism. Thus, prejudice and discrimination worsen Blacks' psychological suffering while also contributing to their reduced mortality rate in the USA (Chaney and Robertson, 2013).

The perception of Black Americans grew from a place of deep-rooted disdain and intolerance for their existence, forcing upon them an identity that was created to vilify them and rob their right to victimhood. From a historically established culture of population control over African Americans, the evolution of association and biases attached to the Black body were a direct result of the predecessor. Though attitudes may not be as harsh as they were decades in the past, the effects of their adoption and the attempts to maintain their social dominance have created a breeding ground for manipulative tactics that are subtle enough to allow for the infiltration of bias.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Uncommon knowledge to most, bias does not come about without the existence of an *association*. One must have the ability to associate a particular idea or perception with someone or something before bias begins to infiltrate. An implicit association does not suggest one's particular judgments of a certain group in the same way that implicit bias functions. As human beings, it is our tendency to associate one thing with another, regardless of our beliefs concerning the subject. Often, people will summon a moral crisis within themselves because much research has proven that we unconsciously associate people with specific characteristics

that may have a negative connotation, for example, the idea that Black women are “ghetto” and lack decorum or that Black men are thuggish and aggressive. In this way, we fear that we possess racist thoughts or that we are indeed racists. This is simply not so. Associations appear as naturally occurring habits that humans use to organize their thoughts and make observations to identify things in our everyday lives. Thus, this escapes the argument of biases as the weight of these psychological tendencies greatly differ in their implementation. It also does not truly speak to the phenomenon of bias. In his article, *Bits of Bias*, Jerry Kang maintains, “...even if it's ‘natural’ for us to like ourselves and dislike others generally, that psychology doesn’t tell us which specific groups to like, for what reasons, and with what intensity. That’s provided instead by our history, culture, and politics (p. 2).”

Our society has long established that race was a determining factor in our economic and social placement as a product of the “natural order,” not man-made biases. Even if we acquire psychological tendencies by our very own nature, there is an external catalyst that instructs us to designate the fine points as to where a boundary line must be drawn. This can be traced back to decades of sociological shifts amongst racial groups who rejected the idea of associating with one another until they equally became a target of racial bias in America, thus, they found a greater sense of fulfillment in banding together as one community with a common enemy. This is true of certain Asian communities, such as those of Korean and Japanese descent, who may have originally segregated themselves completely, but this generation of Korean and Japanese Americans now identify each other as a collective (Kang, 2012). This set forth the standard for generations of perceptions founded on the concepts created by a racially defined society. Thus, today we see the effects of a standard that has yet to dissipate. Though such racial biases are not accepted in the same manner, they still hold weight amongst the agents of influence. In most

cases, this phenomenon goes unnoticed due to the normalization of it in Western culture. It persists so comfortably amongst us that it remains incognito from our social lens. The entertainment industry has been one of the, if not the most, dominant figures in implementing this practice. They, amongst other agents, hold power to tilt the narrative in a direction that centralizes socio-economic prosperity in one racial group. By manipulating the image projected to viewers, microaggressions, stereotypes, beliefs, expectations, and norms are established.

Understanding how these implicit biases are formed and what suggests them to viewers for the effect of an unconscious reformation remains a primary concern. The way in which individuals are presented, regardless of the fictional undertone, noticeably have a direct influence on the viewer's perception of a racial group in the real world. However, it is evident that, regardless of the portrayal, certain groups are overlooked for their race in order to focus solely on the deviance, others, not so much. Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001) noticed this trend in their research experiment that studied automatic prejudice as a product of images displaying admired and disliked individuals. They found that even when disliked members of the racially dominant groups were depicted in the media, their race was generally not noteworthy. They were instead presented primarily as deviants, but not of association with a group. In direct contrast, the journalistic coverage attached to African American criminals usually emphasizes the individual's race (Dasgupta and Greenwald, 2001). Consequently, this exposure to significantly varied images of both African Americans and White Americans whilst highlighting different aspects has proven to have an implantation of implicit bias on viewers, especially those of the dominant race. These details expose a harsh truth about the foundation of implicit biases and how they are formulated in Western culture. Though people can individually and personally make their own associations without the external influence of societal measures, this does not clearly explain

how associations turn into racially motivated biases. In other words, the application of targeted prejudice to certain groups in society based on their race are not simply formulated based on the nature of our cognitive development, but an outer force that enforces this narrative.

Television entertainment has become one of the most prominent forms of not only recreational pleasure, but a form of informational consumption for understanding the world. Because television programs often aim to attract viewers by reflecting our wants and needs, our minds are vulnerable to gluttonous media consumption in which we are easily manipulated. We become drunk on our own misconceptions. Though the tolerance for racially motivated speech has shrunk, television shows have found more subtle ways of incorporating biases into their products (Kang, 2012). These biases do not come outrightly; instead, they are found within the nonverbal cues often only visible through careful observation. Nonverbal race bias that is depicted on television shows was found to have accounted, in part, for the race bias that viewers possess. For example, nonverbal patterns proved to be quite influential on the attitudes of White viewers as shown when looking at the frequency, subtlety, and effects of nonverbal racial bias by measuring reaction-time and self-report measures (Weisbuch, Pauker, and Ambady, 2009). This study went on to argue that nonverbal race bias wields a distinctly indirect impact because the viewers have a small chance of recognizing it. Even when viewers are putting forth efforts to detect patterns of racial bias, as the subjects of this study did, they still possess some level of difficulty doing so, which implies the unconscious influence that race bias brings to bear.

These ideas are further asserted in television media regarding specific stereotypes attached to the “ideal” Black person. Tyra Wooten (2007) identified this through the persona of the “Mammy”, as one of the primary stereotypes that is in favor of the White gaze. The Mammy character possesses characteristics of obedience, faith, and presents herself as somewhat of a

domestic servant. This goes one step further to point out that she is often heavy in weight, dark-skinned, and does not have a sexual desire. Similarly, to the roles of the three Black female leads in the movie *The Help*, the Mammy is the ultimate caregiver who delights in providing her nurturing, especially to White Americans, even if that means giving up on the priorities for her own self. Essentially, there is an ideal depiction that White people tend to empathize with far more than other instances – only so long as there is more than enough conformity.

Throughout film and television, the Mammy role eventually evolved into an arguably more favorable depiction of Black women: the “Jezebel.” As a fair-skinned woman who was curvaceous, seductive, and tempting to the lustful eye, she used her body to her advantage, and by doing so, she was rewarded accordingly. The Jezebel makes a frequent occurrence amongst popular culture television and media. The character’s stereotype replaced the Mammy as the predominant representation of Black women in American popular culture in 1970s Black exploitation films. Similar to the Mammy stereotype, depictions of Jezebel date back to the time of enslavement, when Black women were depicted as the sex crazed seductress and the Jezebel persona was an attempt at justifying the sexual interactions among White men and Black women. The Jezebel stereotypical image implied that because Black women constantly yearned for sex, they were unable to be suffer the victimhood of rape. And without the societal or legal consequences to deter this behavior, offenders would never face justice for violating Black women. (Toms-Anthony, 2018). Contemporary adaptations of this character depict her as a commonly recognized stereotype in the modern era known as an aggressive Black woman who will, by any means, barge her way to the top – usually with the presumption that she “slept” her way there. Because of the highly demoralizing nature of these images, it makes it extremely

difficult for modern Black women to express their sexuality without being tied to the unfavorable characteristics of the Jezebel (Toms-Anthony, 2018).

The last, and likely most recognizable portrayal alludes to the stereotype of the angry black woman as the "Sapphire," which gained popularity in the 1940s and 1950s with the emasculating, "finger-waving, neck snapping" irate Black character Sapphire on *Amos 'n' Andy*. More notable is Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth of NBC's *The Apprentice* as a revised example of the Sapphire stereotype that has previously become prominent thanks to reality television and ability to create hilarity around such characters, even though the amusement is at the expense of exploitation of stereotypes. Today's "Angry Black Woman" is perceived to be excessively aggressive and masculine, hyperfocused on success, authoritative and rigid, and lacking compassion. (Toms-Anthony, 2018)

Author K. Sue Jewell (1993) points out that, "mainstream media have historically served the interests of the privileged, who have defined African American women and other disenfranchised segments of the population as possessing certain values, belief systems and lifestyles that do not entitle them to receive societal resources, but account for their marginal status in salient societal institutions" (p. 10). Essentially, after viewing pictures of Black women on television, viewers may come to believe that these women are reasonably positioned in society due to the values they hold, their beliefs, and their lifestyles. However, negative stereotypes nevertheless have the ability to perpetuate deeply ingrained assumptions about Black women being of lower class and the rationale for their inferior status (Freeman, 2018).

To say that the implication of such depictions stop here would only scratch the surface of this phenomenon. It is evident that this concept possesses a multi-faceted body which encompasses layers of thick, stiffened clay that has hardened to its base – much like the artificial,

theatric identities that have been assigned to Black Americans, anchoring them to archetypes. These identities are based in stereotypes that ultimately alienate particular groups and enforce division amongst individuals. Stereotypes are preconceived notions that result from group participation and create racial and gendered social classifications. These classifications affect behavior and shape how people see themselves and other people. While stereotypes do promote brain efficiency and may represent some true information, because they are self-replicating, they are frequently incorrect and troublesome (Parrott and Parrott, 2015). Stereotypes have multiple origins, but mass media especially bears a heavy weight. Although stereotypes do not necessarily have a good or bad connotation, the meanings that are attached to them do have an impact on attitudes and cognitions. In this way, television shows that feature stereotype-consistent and/or inconsistent information about gender, race, violence, and crime in the United States may act as enforcers of belief systems and behavior, and they may even have the potential to reinforce prejudiced, untrue stereotypes in society through the process of repeated association (Parrott and Parrott, 2015).

When we couple the concentration of stereotypical devices with cinematic themes that are less focused on portraying accuracy and more focused on indulging the viewer in a favorable plotline, the reality of such manipulation dissolves. In this sense, accuracy afforded to the individual is not a prerequisite. The pursuit of a facade depicts a cost-benefit analysis that favors the longevity of misconception. Thus, society assigns integrity media output, as one would, without the prior understanding that images depicted are not founded in truth, but what would be convenient if it were. As such, racial stereotypes and depictions assigned for the convenience of a racial association conjure realities to translate into film and television with the goal of influencing false ideas of race relations especially. The audience members' impressions of racial

relations will be significantly impacted by the projected visuals depicting interactions and relationships between individuals from various ethnic and racial origins. In the interest of appealing to a wide audience, movies frequently utilize exaggerated characterizations and minimal roles for Black characters (Glenn and Cunningham, 2009). Of these minimal roles are the reinvention of racist stereotypes, which are not limited to the aforementioned Mammy, Jezebel, and Angry Black Woman, but to the extension of Black male-dominated roles like Uncle Tom, the magical Negro (Glenn and Cunningham, 2009; Nowak et al., 2010), or black men in general as aggressive, oversexualized, inferior, unsuccessful, lost, and of course criminal (Adams, 2015).

This remains a crucial turning point for the social stability of the Black community. Such misconceptions depicted in film also have the capacity to be accepted in mainstream news media outlets who may knowingly or unknowingly vilify Black men or hold the preconception that they *must* be the perpetrator. Kumah-Abiwu (2020) attributes this to a tactic called *media gatekeeping*. In its broadest sense, media gatekeeping is the act of condensing or winnowing a large number of communications into a smaller number of messages before transmitting them to an individual or group within a society. Media gatekeeping is composed of two distinct aspects in order for the process to be sufficient to its definition: the gatekeepers, who may be illustrated as X, and the “gated” – those who are targeted as a result – for these particular messages being espoused. Kumah-Abiwu (2020) also notes that media gatekeepers could equally be described as active agents – media professionals – who engage in the process of message selection. He brought about this phenomenon in context to the representation of the Black man. He contends, theoretically, that the way race, institutionalized/social organizations, and media (i.e., media

gatekeepers) intertwine in the societal creation of Blackness might explain the unfavorable image of Black males.

The propensity for simplistic "news" reports fosters the unwillingness to move past these conventional images, which keep Black males in the marginalized category (Patton and Syder-Yuly, 2007). African American men are more frequently presented as criminal suspects than real-life crime figures would indicate, according to studies on realistic genres, and the methods by which they are portrayed propose that their actions have a tendency to be particularly aggressive or menacing (Oliver, 2003). According to studies conducted by Fyock and Stangor (1994), memory typically indicates humans tend to retain information regarding circumstances or persons that is compatible with previous attitudes or views, similar to studies on interpretation and enjoyment. In this sense, biases in recall ought to contribute to a higher recollection of black than white criminals featured in news programs if people hold preconceptions of them as criminals. They may even lead to erroneous memories of witnessing a black suspect depicted when either no racially identifiable data existed or when the suspect turned out to be white (Drabman, Robertson, Patterson, Jarvie, Hammer, & Cordua, 1981).

There is a revolving utilization of methods that illustrate innate tendencies that humans possess. According to Feldman and Donohoe (1978), we develop the natural ability to differentiate between races by the age of three or four, and by that point, there exists a differential affective feeling, especially regarding Black and White Americans and the relationships between these racial group members. With this in mind, Feldman and Donohoe (1978) conclude that nonverbal behavior signifies a person's attitude toward that of whom they are interacting. Even if unintentionally or unconsciously so, such attitudes are perceived.

DePaulo (1992) adds that common examples of nonverbal behaviors are often limited to facial expressions and bodily orientations, however, attire and even the arrangement or decor in a space can indicate some disposition. Sometimes called *nonverbal expressive behaviors*, these behaviors convey more than just attitudes, but values, psychopathologies, and cognitive states. She uses the example of a college student who wishes to express their pride in a nonverbal manner by simply dressing in university attire and drinking from university mugs. Further, people use nonverbal devices such as these in situations that are not particularly for the benefit of the actor, but for the audience. Termed “tie-signs,” behaviors used by individuals in a relationship in order to assert the status of said relationship to external viewers. And though these nonverbal behaviors are considered acts of self-representation because they are yet still acts of expression that carry characteristic dispositions, they hold the power to inflict such dispositions in a negative manner. When this is displayed between two same-race actors, this is typically not a cause for concern. But the act of displaying verbal and nonverbal cues with a prejudiced undertone has overshadowed what could be considered commonplace innate behaviors.

Racism in American culture has evolved over time, moving from overt actions and signals to covert and implicit displays (DeVos & Banaji, 2005; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). These expressions, which go by the names of aversive racism, implicit racism, and modern racism, are found in well-meaning people who are unaware of the fact that their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors frequently prejudice against Black Americans (Sue, Capodilupo, Holder, 2008). The quick, frequent, and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental insults and humiliation aimed toward Black Americans, frequently automatically and unintentionally, can be referred to as racist microaggressions (Constantine and Sue, 2007). Many microaggressions are ambiguous, which puts Blacks in the difficult situation of attempting to

determine the communication's significance, whether the occurrence was purposeful or inadvertent and the conundrum of figuring out how to react. Microaggressions invariably result in an intersection of racial facts, pitting Black people's experiences of racism against White people's perspectives, who have the authority to describe the scenario in nonracial parameters (Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder 2008).

In summary, this review of the literature sought to establish the deep-seated history behind the image of African Americans and the torment that it was bred from. This proves to be a sinister reality due to the fact that such depictions are highly glamourized in the media without acknowledging the darkness of their depths. Though it is notable how far we have evolved from our foundation, it must be understood that evolution does not necessarily mean betterment. Evidently, the utilization of the Black image has become more frequent, but to say that it has become significantly more favorable would be an observation of the surface without considering the thick meters below it. It has become easier to *conceal* the abuse of the Black image and benefit from it in excess, but the problem remains in the integrity of incorporating such images in entertainment. However, in order to understand why this is an assault on the perception of viewers, a considerably in-depth analysis of how exactly this image can be abused in subtle ways must be conducted. By incorporating this study of implicit biases, we can further ascertain how this pattern of abuse is taking place before our very eyes. This study ventures into the darkest corners of human mannerisms and visual techniques to uncover the sheath of distorted perception and mechanism which perpetuate ideas that we did not permit to obstruct our psyche. Here, we are given the opportunity to consider the less-than-obvious reality that we have been made to understand that we no longer squabble with issues of inclusivity, race, and sheer foolery at the expense of Black Americans. With this in mind, this study will not only use the many

references that call upon the disturbing beginnings of Black stereotypes, but also the perceived ‘endings’ that created a mindfield vulnerable to puncture.

METHOD

The present study implements a method similar to Weisbuch, Pauker, and Ambady (2009), where they looked at the frequency, subtlety, and effects of nonverbal racial bias. They noted that nonverbal racial prejudice exists on television and that exposure to this bias, as measured by reaction-time and self-report measures, contributes to white viewers' own racial bias. Furthermore, nonverbal bias behaviors had an impact regardless of whether they were unable to be explicitly acknowledged. Specifically, I examine nonverbal and verbal cues of racial bias in a television show under the genre of crime and drama titled *S.W.A.T.* The television drama follows the life of an African American police officer, amongst other supporting characters with a similar role, in Los Angeles who faces an abrupt shift in his career after his lead officer is relieved of his duty due to shooting an African American teenage civilian and severely injuring him. This tragedy caused an uprising in the urban community of Los Angeles and the police department found it necessary to replace the former White officer with the main character of this show, Hondo, who faces the moral dilemma of being an African American man from the slums of Los Angeles in a controversial position. Yet, while he still has the desire to fight crime and defend his community, he often fights crime in his own childhood neighborhood. It is a typical story of a Black American who came from the very little and now fights for something greater.

I decode behaviors in this show in order to place emphasis on cues that are not outrightly present and emit instead as subtle instances of bias implantation. The sample size is consistent with the deliverance of seasonal episodes, though I will only be focusing my analysis on the

episodes provided in season one. Season one contains 22 episodes that each range from 41-44 minutes in duration, with the considerable presence of advertisements. The streaming being used for this viewership is Hulu, a popular streaming format for shows that are still actively being aired on cable television. Each episode was viewed twice and examined thoroughly. In the first viewing session, no note taking methods were employed and no direct attention to specific nonverbal or verbal cues as the intent was to expose myself to the context, setting, storyline, and theme within the episode. The second viewing of the episode required note taking materials to conduct the in-depth observations of both verbal and non-verbal cues.

Cues were decoded and diagrammed in the manner of their presentation. Each cue was represented by a particular symbol and diagrammed according to frequency. Cues were separated into two different categories, those being verbal and nonverbal. Additionally, these categories comprised different subtypes. In the verbal cue category, the subtypes identified were direct and indirect verbal cues. Direct verbal cues focused on dialogue that is specific and clear, with a particular purpose in mind and an anticipation for a response. Conversely, indirect verbal cues were more subtle and less outrightly present. The nonverbal cue category included kinesics, which are body movements and gestures displayed by characters, facial behaviors, physical appearance, and environmental details (DePaulo, 1992).

Perhaps one of the most important factors that will be considered is the agent taking part in either cue. The racial identity of the agent was differentiated between White Americans and Black Americans. The racial identity of each actor was also noted with each cue. This data will play a role in understanding a possible distinction between the representation and behavioral practices among either race, and how these portrayals can be received by viewers. Because this

study is focused primarily on the differentials between African Americans and White Americans regarding entertainment depictions, my focus did not extend to other races and/or ethnicities.

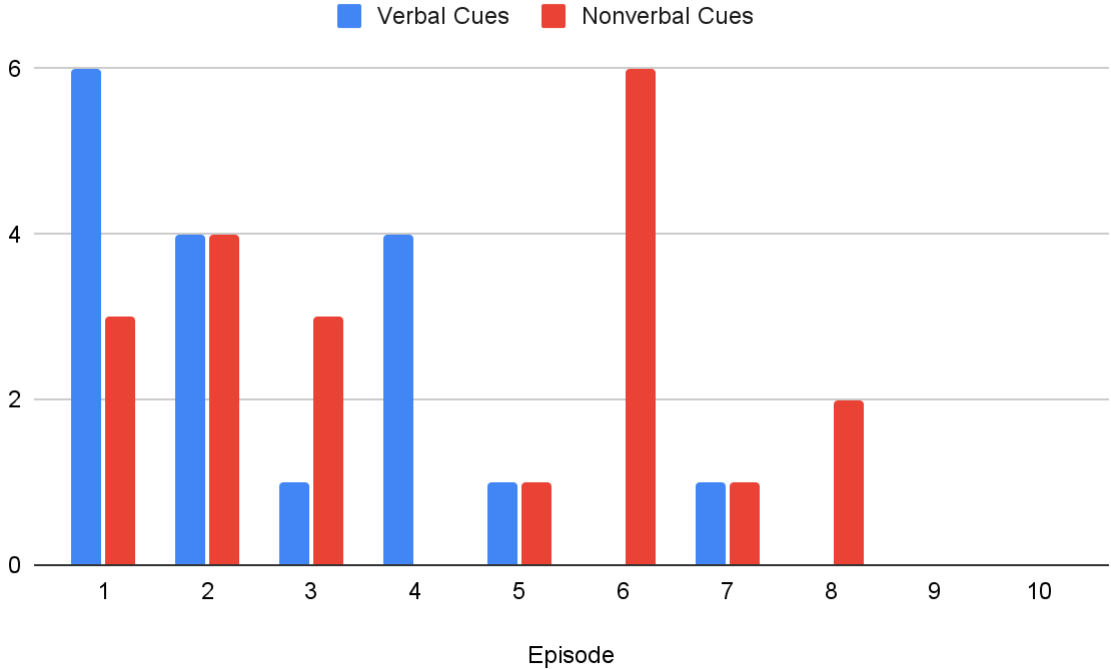
RESULTS

This analysis was conducted in two stages. The first stage examined each episode without collecting data or documenting the occurrence of cues. Effectively, this built a familiarity with the plot and allowed me to focus on studying all elements of each episode without interruption. The second stage both examined the episodes and documented instances of verbal and nonverbal cues by identifying dialogue and behaviors, as well as presumptive settings and relationships that display racial stereotypes. Data was extracted using inductive analysis and incorporating in vivo coding methods. Instances that were detected were first numerically documented and placed in a column-based model to exhibit the consistency of such observations. Additional data that dissected the particularities of each cue was documented and therefore used to validate the inclusion of such observations in the dataset. Racial descriptions of each actor were both documented and utilized during data collection. Additionally, tonal variations and circumstantial details were of considerable usage during this observation. Such circumstantial details included in this data collection were socioeconomic position and character background analysis.

Cues that were observed and noted in this sample included setting, character development, socioeconomic status, dialogue and verbiage, mannerisms, circumstantial details, and plotlines. Compiled data revealed recurring instances in which cues were used to portray biases directed toward the African American community. Stereotypical mechanisms remained fairly inconsistent throughout the duration of this analysis and this study ultimately reached saturation after episode eight, and cues became less visible. This was notable in the graphic,

which displays a steady decline in occurrences, thus, the study commenced after a total of 10 episodes.

TABLE 1
Measures of frequency amongst verbal and non-verbal cues.



DISCUSSION

This study indicated an inconsistent usage of verbal and non-verbal cues, such that there remained no pattern to suggest that these instances were no more than convenient for the sake of the plot development. Noticeably, there were a great number of observations within the first episode, which established the story and thus the trajectory of the series. These establishments, though, utilized cinematic mechanisms that would serve as moments of awe or ‘triggers’ that were intended to draw upon the viewers’ emotions. Evidently, it succeeded in creating uncomfortably frustrating character conflicts that would directly question the moral compass of the audience.

Trauma for Views

The first episode of *S.W.A.T.*, in comparison to the following, created a foundation for the trajectory of the series by formulating the primary conflicts that the characters would later be subjected to. It was saturated with discomfiting plotlines and visuals that portrayed symbolic elements likened to real-world events. It recreated trauma and thus began the series with an anchoring effect, which is a cognitive bias wherein a person's judgments are impacted by a specific reference point – an anchor. In this instance, the anchor was the moment that a White male officer unintentionally shot an African American boy whilst in the pursuit of an offender. This was the first major display of a nonverbal cue that ultimately held a great amount of weight as my perception began to unfold into my observation.

Leading up to this moment, each occurrence was anticipated to a certain degree considering that the genre of police dramas is heavily utilized in television media. However, such a display made a direct reference to controversial events in real time, commonly associated with the grievances of Black Lives Matter (BLM), a movement created to protest acts of brutality against Black Americans. The event that ultimately redirected the show in its entirety was the unjust shooting of a Black boy, which ensued a collective outburst from the Black community upon the Los Angeles police department. This aggressive dissent, similar to real-world, suggested an immediate termination of the officer at fault for nearly taking the life of an innocent Black youth.

The casual viewer could draw comparisons like these due to the frequent media presence of social justice issues in real-time, but there remains a reason as to why this plotline proves to be eerily useful in more ways than not. By making a moment of extreme trauma the undertone of a series, it is not only acknowledging the problems we suffer in the real world, but it is also using

trauma to increase viewership. Though this method could be perceived as a public service announcement or even an attempt to awaken even the entertainment industry to social justice, the utilization of real trauma to embody a drama series is convenient, to say the least. Media outlets routinely flock to the scene of yet another Black man gunned down by law enforcement, and by doing so they breathe life into an already hyperventilating social unrest that victimizes the Black community. A revolving door of trauma is awakened with each instance, never truly evolving into a feeling that one can get used to, but a nightmare that one is afflicted by. To bring attention to this cycle in an informative manner is enough to shatter the psyche of an already grieving community. However, when this phenomenon is used in the entertainment industry as a foundation for a story to build upon, it calls into question the integrity of the industry. Why must the trauma of Black Americans be a source of entertainment? Further, does the brutality against Black Americans as a storyline become the standard – blueprint – for successful police dramas?

This utilization almost guarantees an increase in viewership due to the controversial nature of these cases, but one may venture to say that it glamorized trauma and the stereotypes necessary to sustain it in a series. By making this the basis for a successful television show, it risks doing less to inform and more to force upon viewers biases that are associated with Black trauma. *S.W.A.T.* was not hesitant to incorporate multiple instances of stereotypical mechanisms to propel a narrative. Therefore, we find ourselves lost in translation. The cost-benefit analysis reads more as a tradeoff of one moral standard for vice. The exchange of trauma for views. Yet the means to attain this do not heavily weigh on sound judgment, but audience approval. So, we must begin to wonder who really benefits from this behavior. Not only are Black Americans suffering the repeated exposure to trauma in real-time, but they are also faced with it in entertainment, which relies upon dramatization and a stable narrative to stay afloat.

Black Savior

In the subsequent aftermath from the unjust shooting of a Black teen, the response from the police department was not only an immediate termination, but a reinstatement of a new head of *S.W.A.T.*, the only African American man on the team, Sgt. Daniel “Hondo” Harrelson, played by Shemar Moore. This particular cue played a secondary role in demonstrating another mechanism used to cure social unrest from the Black community. To halt the backlash that followed the misconduct of a former Sergeant, the police department conveniently adopted a Black “savior” in order to adopt the trust of the Black community, as opposed to acquiring by means of legislative methods, administration, reformation initiative, or integrating proper training methods for all departmental roles. This approach was forfeited and temporarily remedied with a familiar face. Though it would not be uncommon under most circumstances to demote or terminate an officer of any racial class after a serious violation, what made this instance unique is that Hondo was later revealed to not be the primary candidate for *S.W.A.T.* team commander. It just so happened to be another White male officer that the department felt was more deserving. Hondo was handed this role to save face. As opposed to working through a recovery plan for the community most affected by this, Hondo was chosen as the Black hero to silence the accusations of racism. This decision would certainly not do very much to halt the protests that would later come, but it decreased anxiety for a brief moment.

There is a tendency to use a Black face as a soothing agent for the discomfort of the Black community. If a Black person is the model, then there is no such reason to be apprehensive to certain ideas. This leads to an infiltration of bias in not only non-Black Americans, but Black Americans in equal measure. This purports that major social justice issues within the Black community can be solved by simply inserting a Black role model in the picture; this makes

everything “fair.” This gives society free reign to avoid efforts toward a solution-based approach and it gives African Americans a false sense of resolve. An influential Black figure in and of themselves cannot “solve” anything, but it is convenient to make them the face of change and acknowledgment of community grievances because it is implied that Black Americans will only ever trust the faces of *each other*. This is harmful because, if we move forward with this mindset, we will be no closer to a balanced society wherein racial tension has little impact on our functionality. This is a well-hidden mask that trots along many storylines throughout the entertainment industry, but it is detrimental to our advancement. Essentially, the method goes on with the placement of a Black protagonist with the expectation that the face of any other race, a White individual especially, will trigger an engulfment of flames. Therefore, not only do we accept that a Black person is all that the Black community can trust, but that is also the expectation that we place upon receiving parties. We then subscribe to this idea that it is okay to lack trust in another race and it is okay for other races to neglect that very idea, so convenience becomes the only viable option.

This observation was particularly aggravating to the plotline because it was trailed by the perception that African Americans are not rewarded with career advancement because of their own skill set, but instead the idea that they can contribute to diversity and uplift the image of a corporation. Thus, this disintegrates the objective to build trust within the community, and there remains no expectation for comradery between law enforcement and the Black community. At the core of this cue is a multilayered set of unstable principles and norms. This cue suggests that there lies an irreconcilable difference between the Black community and the authoritative class. It is essentially better suited to portray comradery than it is to truly possess it, and as such,

asserting the bias that it is less than worthwhile to consider and take head to the grievances of African Americans. As if to say their grievances are unreasonable.

Using the Black authority figure as a savior for each and every instance where a Black male is in an unfavorable situation promotes a standard that even the Black community accepts. Black people cannot trust anyone other than Black people, and there will be no effort on the part of the community to vouch for them besides fellow African American members. This cyclical pattern of disconnect is intensified by media outlets and shows such as these create a realistic depiction to associate biases with. Thus, making everything *real*.

Familiarity with Deviance

The show goes on to explore presumptuous verbal cues that indicate the stereotypical view of the average African American experience. In particular, a verbal cue displayed by the main character, an African American police officer, maintained that he was from Los Angeles, so he knew “every dope spot.” This is especially strange because, in this case, being familiarized with a city is often a very innocent remark that does not inherently suggest that one knows where drug transactions take place. However, our African American main character, Hondo, is not only given a high level of familiarity with Los Angeles simply due to his being raised there, but this familiarity is in context with drug trafficking.

This verbal cue portrays a common problem of associating African Americans with deviant themes and getting away with in such cases because the association does not always present itself as strikingly unethical. Additionally, the depth of this association thus far has allowed it to comfortably remain in the collective perception of Black Americans. This only absorbs the issue that the Black community faces wherein the expectations of them are not

favorable. If one is expected to be deviant or to be associated with deviant principles, then therein lies a darker reality that unfolds. It brings us to question whether society would feel inclined to support or to empathize with the Black community if their direct association aligns with deviant attitudes and motives. Naturally, society's willingness to consider one's humanity depreciates when they are revealed to not uphold acceptable standards of societal norms. Therefore, if this depreciation is already onset upon the recognition that one is of the Black race, it immediately places the Black community at a disadvantage. If there is no honorable expectation, that perception ripples through multiple different aspects over the duration of one's life, creating a generational curse that punishes them with a dark shadow which lasts forever.

Socioeconomic Confinement

Further, a non-verbal cue that presented itself as a socioeconomic presumption of the Black community was the setting in which Black Americans were often displayed in this series. Most, if not all, instances where African Americans were seen in group displays were in neighborhoods that could be considered 'the hood.' This was evident based on the depictions of small, less appealing homes that were separated by metal-wire fences and automobiles that could be considered of lesser value. It did not resemble a community that was 'thriving.' Though this was a matter of production setting and not an outright behavioral display made by a character, it speaks volumes as it represents the perception that the common person has when they theorize where African Americans are usually founded. This idea of confinement alludes to the fact that it is expected for Black communities to reside in struggling neighborhoods. The depiction of this phenomenon on shows, which extend far beyond *S.W.A.T.*, has been established as a common occurrence. In such a way that it is unusual to see settings of low-income neighborhoods that are not saturated with African American faces. Therefore, it has now been accepted as a theme

across media platforms and, in some cases, a sort of accessory to one's character development, which we can see as Hondo is made to be the only one who can relate to the grievances of the Black community because he was born and raised in 'the hood.' At times, we can see this play out directly in conversation as part of his persona is to make it point that he is an authentic member of his community because he is a product of the 'the hood' environment. Not only does the simple depiction of Black Americans in large gatherings focused on low-income communities a pulsating factor, but the tendency to make one's 'hood' background an aspect of their character.

What contributed to the previously discussed narrative of lower-income communities mainly being composed of Black Americans was a depiction of an upper-class suburban household. However, instead of seeing the typical representation of a suburbia, being the Caucasian nuclear family, we are exposed to an interracial marriage between a Black woman and a White man, with one biracial teenage daughter who is seen in a school uniform – usually indicating private school enrollment. From the surface, this can be perceived as a great representation of the Black community in a position of status in order to reflect that not *all* African American communities reside in low-income areas. Though this is an attractive conclusion, it certainly overlooks the dark underbelly of this display of nonverbal cues. In reality, this depiction, on a deeper level, only suggests that African Americans cannot be seen in a high socioeconomic role without the assistance of or a relationship with a Caucasian individual, a male in most cases. In this study sample, there were no images of non-interracial African American families seen in suburban living areas. Again, suggesting this idea that the only place in which African Americans can be found is in low-income communities is extremely harmful to the social construct of America and the only appealing socioeconomic depiction of a

“Black” family being through interracial marriage encourages the expectation that African Americans cannot prosper on their own. The hierarchical structure remains that African Americans are confined to the bottom, and the only cases in which they are found at the top is by acquiring some sort of White sentiment by a variation of means.

“Remain in your place”

We were introduced to a supporting character that came about as the mother of a Caucasian officer, named Street, under Hondo’s leadership. The moderate quarrel that takes place between Hondo and Street’s mother was influenced by her request for her son to take part in an illegal act on her behalf that ultimately ended with him being reprimanded. Being that Street’s mother was imprisoned and responsible for drug-dealing from within the facility, she had set her son out to take care of reinforcements. This was later brought to Hondo’s attention, and he took it upon himself to approach her for a visitation at the prison facility where she resided. Upon his confrontation, which was unprovoking, Street’s mother, a Caucasian woman, proceeded to angrily question Hondo about his audacity to question her morals. She barked, “Who do you think you are? Black guy hot shot.” This remark was an outright display of a racialized verbal cue in such a way that is loudly and intentionally asserting her disapproval. In this context, she seemed to feel insulted by a Black man confronting her for her largely questionable actions that resulted in the consequence of her own kin. To be faced in such a manner, she was immediately overcome with anger to the point in which she revealed her truest self in a matter of seconds. The idea that a Black man approaching a White woman in this way was her grievance, and she took the opportunity to “remind” him of his place by bringing up his race in the midst of her anger. Her brief reaction only supports the idea that Black Americans must be put in their place or correct themselves when approaching a White person. This can also

be considered “code-switching.” A term commonly used in the Black community. This entails Black English and Standard English switching, which is commonly described as the employment of two or more linguistic varieties in a single discourse or engagement (Koch, Gross, and Kolts, 2001). They must adjust their speech to their liking so as to not be perceived as uncivilized or a threat to the decorum in favor of White Americans. This conduct is not only used in the midst of regular conversation, but in instances where African Americans are in a professional setting, such as school, work, or even in the midst of obtaining a job. It is often used as a way to suppress one’s innate desire to be casual and speak in their natural dialect, which can be considered unprofessional to Caucasian individuals. Most times, in order to escape the stereotypes that are forced upon Black Americans, they alter their speech and their mannerisms out of fear that they will be judged or simply that they will lose opportunities for employment or advancement. But this can extend beyond professional settings, as seen in this case, wherein a Black person is constantly expected to conduct themselves a certain way to cater to the White race, which suggests that they should be submissive in conversation and identify the White party as the dominant figure, even still. Though there simply may just be a racist undertone for this particular situation, this is not unusual for African Americans to come across, both overtly and covertly.

Further into the season was a less-than-outright verbal cue that seemed to resemble an interaction between an authority figure and a youth. To better understand the interaction, we must consider that there is often the expectation that Black individuals, men especially, will not respect law enforcement officers. In this manner, there is this unresolved tension that comes about in the midst of confrontation – that does not necessarily warrant such a climate. In this case, there was a brief, yet anxiety-inducing, moment wherein the department commander, an elderly Caucasian male, found himself in conflict with Sgt. Hondo, a Black male. In this

interaction, the Caucasian male suggests, “I know you don’t respect me.” Though this may come across as a less-than-kind slight, or even a challenge, this a suggestive remark that has unfavorable implications because it enforces the idea that there is an inherent disrespect for authority or, in some cases, for a Caucasian authority figure. Even under circumstances where the Black male just so happens to be an authority figure himself, it provides quite a bit of perspective as his status still becomes overridden by the aforementioned tension. What only intensifies this interaction is the fact that it was prompted due to a disagreement in the effectiveness of the White male’s authority. Hondo questioned his integrity and his ability to conduct his job in a utilitarian manner. Similar to the previously discussed conflict, there is no tolerance for judgment or questioning when it is directed to a Caucasian member of authority, or even society. The only time when this is usually appropriate is when it is directed upon the African American, which was immediately assumed to lack respect when the circumstances did not call for that suggestion. This has an impact on the view of the African American male, which has already been tarnished by long-established stereotypes, but especially in the wake of chaos surrounding police misconduct against African Americans. In most circumstances, the Black community will shy away from confrontation with a Caucasian person, much less correct them; theirs is a stain of hierarchy and privilege that constructs a barrier of ignorance. Thus, conduct that should not be considered aggressive or disrespectful is categorized as such when it comes from certain mouths. Then, this turns into a convenient justification to call one disrespectful toward authority, knowing that the implication behind this is detrimental. The continuity of this narrative only seeks to further sink the African American population into a falsified perception of deviance and ill manners, making them seem somewhat deserving of their consequences in society.

Disposability

We are brought back to the storyline of a young, African American minor, Ray. He was the victim of the accidental shooting in the first episode, having survived his injuries but suffering from the trauma of the incident and the subsequent uprise that followed, he had quickly spiraled into a deviant trajectory. These circumstances forced his mother to reach out to Hondo, the man who had ultimately contributed to saving his life and had waited at his hospital bedside to give him some words of encouragement. As a last-ditch effort, Hondo visited the teen to check on his mental state and inquire about his recent behaviors. According to the teen's mother, he had been reprimanded for truancy, decided against going to college, contrary to his previous desire before he was shot, and bought a firearm off the streets. This episode was heavily saturated with nonverbal cues, which concentrated on one character: the victim. In the span of just a few minutes, the show exemplified a large majority of nonverbal cues associated with common stereotypes of the "typical" Black man. By alluding to delinquency, lack of academic ambition, an interest in weaponry or violence, and most importantly, the only trusted authority figure in the Black community being the Black man. What was noticeable in this episode was that Hondo was the go-to contact for *all* of the Black offenders or persons of interest. Without considering that the trauma inflicted upon this minor was likely the detrimental factor which ultimately triggered his discontent and the lack of assistance in addressing his mental health, he is used as a poster child for deviancy in Black youth. This feeds into a common misconception that Black youth simply just end up this way because of the community being prone to deviance. In opposition, it must be considered that there are specific reasons as to why youth fall into this pattern, and Ray was a perfect example of a victimized youth who was only noticeable once his trauma was translated into delinquent behaviors. And instead of having a collective

acknowledgment of this, the Black male officer who has noticeably been the only one concerned for his well-being was called upon to be his savior and convince him that not all cops are bad. Though, we can see that the weight of his trauma has applied much pressure to his psyche as, now, he is convinced that there is only one good cop: Hondo.

LIMITATIONS

Being that this is the first study to truly explore this issue in a police drama, there were circumstances that made collection more difficult or could have been an instance where bias played a factor in my judgment. Data collection relied on my ability to perceive and document biases, however, my perception could have been influenced by my own personal bias, as well. Additionally, with the nature of implicit biases being subtle, there may have been details that I missed, even after having watched each episode twice. Further, the study sample consisted of 10 episodes, accounting for roughly half of season one's full quantity of installments. Though saturation was reached by episode 10, it must be considered that further analysis of the remaining installments could have revealed more data. Observations revealed a diminishing presence of biases before data collection concluded, but it limited data consumption that could have been more plentiful if the entire season – 22 episodes – was considered.

CONCLUSION

This study serves as an entryway into a complex and sensitive area of study. It breeds controversy, but also truth. African Americans have unfortunately been subjected to the reality of their circumstances in a cyclical manner, experiencing every moment in the form of trauma and angst. One would only expect that this chaos would expire and those who it has wreaked havoc upon could retire their melancholy. But the truth's most adamant opposition is not ignorance, but

comfort. In this state, we are moderately aware, but comfortable enough to accept things as they are. Implicit bias forces one to wrestle with their psyche and, most times, the psyche gives in. It is difficult to enact change upon things that you can hardly see, and once this state of blindness is fossilized, we become victims to it. But before we claim victimhood, it is important that we hold those who are eager to utilize associations to glamorize the impact of implicit biases. At some point, the difference between acknowledgement and entertainment must be certified. It will reveal our dark passengers, but it will also shed them. This study, though open to modification and improvement, brought forth the past so that the present could be explained. In response to this, we can act upon the subtleties which perpetuate our demise, or we can extend our realm of thought and become vulnerable once again. But instead, we become vulnerable to betterment and not the bias that assaults it.

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