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“I Almost Quit”: Exploring the Prevalence of the Ferguson Effect in Two Small Sized Law Enforcement Agencies in Rural Southcentral Virginia

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Abstract

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Organizational justice theory was utilized as the theoretical lens for this study. Research questions focused on exploring police officers' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of the Ferguson Effect phenomenon and willingness to partner with the community. Purposeful sampling was utilized and semi structured interviews were conducted of nine active sworn law enforcement personnel in southcentral Virginia. Data were analyzed through in vivo coding, pattern coding, and structural analysis utilizing NVivo 11 Pro. Themes included: (a) racial division, (b) rush to judgment, and (c) steadfast leadership. Findings indicated participants demanded clear and fair policies and procedures from leadership, increased effort of transparency in policing, feelings of racial tension, and the need to regain community trust post-Ferguson.

Keywords

Ferguson Effect, Organizational Justice, Rural Policing, De-Police, Hermeneutic Phenomenology

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“I Almost Quit”: Exploring the Prevalence of the Ferguson Effect in Two Small Sized Law Enforcement Agencies in Rural Southcentral Virginia

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Recent negatively publicized police-citizen interactions in the media, followed by a subsequent de-policing of police in the United States, has been named the Ferguson Effect. The Ferguson Effect has been explored by prominent scholars in the criminal justice community; however, little is known about how police officers in small rural police agencies perceive the Ferguson Effect. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of police officers regarding the Ferguson Effect in small rural police agencies, as well as police officers' perceptions of their own organizational justice. Organizational justice theory was utilized as the theoretical lens for this study. Research questions focused on exploring police officers' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of the Ferguson Effect phenomenon and willingness to partner with the community. Purposeful sampling was utilized and semi structured interviews were conducted of nine active sworn law enforcement personnel in southcentral Virginia. Data were analyzed through in vivo coding, pattern coding, and structural analysis utilizing NVivo 11 Pro. Themes included: (a) racial division, (b) rush to judgment, and (c) steadfast leadership. Findings indicated participants demanded clear and fair policies and procedures from leadership, increased effort of transparency in policing, feelings of racial tension, and the need to regain community trust post-Ferguson. Keywords: Ferguson Effect, Organizational Justice, Rural Policing, De-Police, Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Police officers are called to serve the citizens of their communities; however, when citizens perceive the police as being oppressive, there often is an increased demand for accountability of law enforcement officers and perceptions of police legitimacy are decreased (Walker, 2016). The citizens of the United States are no strangers to having a paradigm shift of transparency by the police. The early 1990s were an important era in policing because there was a demand by citizens for increased police professionalism and fairness of all citizens, regardless of race, religion, or gender (Bossler & Holt, 2013). The vicious assault of Rodney King by officers from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) on March 3, 1991, was a pivotal event in police history, leading to police reform (El-Enany, 2015). Notably, more recent events in America's history have led to an increase in public outrage of police officer's use of force, specifically in the Black community. There was public outrage after the officer-involved shooting (OIS) death of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida on February 26, 2012. Additionally, the OIS of Michael Brown, who was fatally wounded by former City of Ferguson Police Department Officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri (MO), appeared to be a breaking point of the public's perception of police legitimacy and trust and resulted in national outrage (Wolfe & Nix, 2016). Recently, a Dallas Police Department Officer (Amber Guyger) mistakenly shot a Black male citizen because she

thought he was intruding in her apartment; however, she was in the wrong apartment (Francis, 2018). The public's perception of Officer Guyger's actions was critical because she was a White police officer.

The OIS of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, MO rejuvenated a national conversation of increased police transparency (Gross, 2016; Mac Donald, 2016a, 2016b; Wolfe & Nix, 2016). We currently live in a digital era where adverse incidents involving the police spread regionally and nationally. It allows citizens to capture police actions on cell phones for upload on the internet and social networking websites such as YouTube and Facebook (Reilly, 2016). As a result, there are some people who are quick to make assumptions without viewing the entire video or knowing the totality of the circumstances surrounding the incident. Instant opinions are made of the officer's actions not only locally, but nationally and internationally. A rush to judgment could potentially lead to hesitation by law enforcement officers because they do not want to bring embarrassment to themselves, their families, or their employing organizations (Hawkins, 2016; Nix & Wolfe, 2016).

Mac Donald (2016c) suggested de-policing has increased violent crime. Morgan and Pally (2016) is the only empirical study found, to date, that explored de-policing in correlation to variances in incidents of criminality and was limited to only the city of Baltimore. Rigorous, empirical, published research studies are critical of correlating increased crime rates with the events in Ferguson, MO and perceived or actual de-policing (Pyrooz, Decker, Wolfe, & Shjarback, 2016; Rosenfeld, 2015; Towers & White, 2017). Gill, Weisburd, Telep, Vitter, and Bennett (2014) explored the correlation between an effective law enforcement agency being anchored with trust from the public. Gill et al. (2014) argued that public trust of the police and a mutual understanding of cooperation were pivotal to the success of any law enforcement agency.

My study is a unique and original contribution to the main body of knowledge because there are currently no known empirical studies in the extant literature that utilize a qualitative methodology to explore the Ferguson Effect in small, or rural, law enforcement agencies (Pyrooz et al., 2016; Wolfe & Nix, 2016). However, one study (Deuchar, Fallik, & Crichlow, 2018) was found that utilized semi structured interviews and participant observation to explore the Ferguson Effect in a southern American state. Deuchar et al. (2018) did not specifically address small rural law enforcement agencies. Wolfe and Nix (2016) addressed the need for additional research on the Ferguson Effect by speaking directly with individual police officers. Scholars currently do not know if police officers in small rural law enforcement agencies have changed the way they interact with citizens post-Ferguson. Assuming that since larger police departments are currently faced with a self-legitimacy (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2013; Nix & Wolfe, 2017) and de-policing crisis, smaller agencies also face this same crisis is more of an assumption and conjecture, rather than an empirically-explored finding. Although larger police departments are faced with self-legitimacy and de-policing crises (Nix & Pickett, 2017; Nix & Wolfe, 2016; Nix & Wolfe, 2017; Shjarback, Pyrooz, Wolfe, & Decker, 2017), there is no empirical evidence that indicates if the same is happening in small or rural agencies. Approximately 48 percent of local police departments have less than 10 full-time officers employed (Reaves, 2015), yet researchers of the Ferguson Effect have not yet explored the Ferguson Effect in small rural police departments. Police officers may have decided to decrease the amount of public interaction and cooperation they have within their communities due to increased scrutiny of their actions in the media in larger departments (Nix & Wolfe, 2016), but this cannot be confirmed in smaller rural agencies.

Problem Statement

The problem my research has explored is how negatively publicized events (Ferguson Effect) and the perceptions of police officers in small rural jurisdictions about their own organizational justice affects the manner, if any, in which they practice policing post-Ferguson. This gap was addressed in Wolfe and Nix (2016), who stated the Ferguson Effect should be explored by speaking with individual officers. This study is important for criminal justice scholars, those who are in police leadership positions, and police practitioners. One of the benefits of my study is increased awareness of police officer perceptions of negative media during a time of increased accountability of police actions. One of the main objectives of my study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of police officers who police in small rural departments and locations and how participants perceive the Ferguson Effect. Additionally, it was my objective to gather rich data from participants to have their voices heard in the literature and to provide recommendations to police leaders and police practitioners to counteract perceptions of decreased self-legitimacy and self-efficacy.

Policing in Rural Populations

Urban and rural policing have steadily been compared by their similarities and differences over the past decade (Falcone, Wells, & Weisheit, 2002; Terrill, Leinfelt, & Kwak, 2008). Rural areas are not microcosms of suburban and urban areas. Some rural areas may be isolated from the rest of the population (Ricciardelli, 2018), resulting in increased response time to calls for service. Small police departments frequently have lower budgets, fewer staff, and fewer written policies in place that govern individual police practices (Weisheit, Wells, & Falcone, 1994). Of critical importance, officers in small police departments or small towns often have frequent face-to-face contact with citizens whom they know personally (Weisheit et al., 1994), contrary to their suburban or urban counterparts who very rarely know a citizen they come into contact with on a personal level. To someone who has not experienced rural culture or rural life, it is hard to conceptualize and put into words (Prine, Ballard, & Robinson, 2001). Race is one of the most divisive social forces in rural and small-town living (Snipp, 1996). Close-knit communal relationships, oftentimes evident in rural areas, may be able to counter perceptions of decreased self-legitimacy of law enforcement officers (Weisheit et al., 1994) therefore, aiding in countering de-policing. The extant literature shows rural police agencies—by default small police agencies due to their smaller per capita total citizen population—are faced with a unique set of challenges that distinguishes them from larger/urban agencies (Pierce, 2001; Weisheit et al., 1994; Weisheit, Falcone, & Wells, 2006; Yarwood & Mawby, 2011).

Organizational Justice Theory as a Theoretical Lens

Organizational justice theory has been applied in the criminal justice literature (Bradford & Quinton, 2014; Myhill & Bradford, 2013; Tankebe & Mesko, 2015). John Stacey Adams' (1963) equity theory is the seminal foundation of organizational justice theory championed by Greenberg (1987). Fairness and equity are vital aspects of a motivated individual. Adams (1963) addressed the need to think of fairness or "equity" (p. 422) as something that goes beyond merely getting paid the correct amount of money for the predetermined number of hours worked for the day. Organizational justice theory is typically explored in the literature by examining the impact of all three components of organizational justice theory, which include: distributive justice, interactional justice, and procedural justice (Cuguelero-Escofet & Fortin, 2014).

Distributive justice entails an individual's perceived fairness of rewards and promotion decisions being distributed evenly throughout the organization. Distributive justice was the central concept explored in the infancy of organizational justice theory (Greenberg, 1987; Myhill & Bradford, 2013; Nix & Wolfe, 2016). Interactional justice is concerned with the extent to which employees perceive they are treated with dignity and respect by those in positions of authority over them (Greenberg, 1987; Nix & Wolfe, 2016). Procedural justice posits that individuals identify value on the perceived fairness of both the official and unofficial procedures of an organization that is used to come to a decision (Greenberg, 1987; Nix, Wolfe, Rojek, & Kaminski, 2015). A critical component in the law enforcement profession is that of fairness, whether the fairness takes the form of using officer discretion when deciding to give an individual a warning for speeding, or fairness in the form of being treated fairly and respectfully by an officer's administration.

Patten, Caudill, Bor, Thomas, and Anderson (2015) stated most of the criminal justice literature has focused on examining police departments and prisons or jails, but there have not been many studies that have utilized organizational justice theory as a theoretical lens in sheriff's offices. I selected organizational justice theory as the lens for my study because procedural justice is a crucial component of police-citizen interaction (Tankebe, 2014) and procedural justice is a component of organizational justice theory. Organizational justice theory has been used as a theoretical lens to explore the Ferguson Effect phenomenon prior to my current study (Wolfe & Nix, 2016). Wolfe and Nix argued that police organizations and supervisors who were perceived as being fair by their employees are likely to gain more significant commitment to an organization's goals and not de-police. It was beneficial for Wolfe and Nix to utilize organizational justice theory because their quantitative study explored police officer satisfaction with their organization's fairness. Fairness is a small, yet powerful predictor of employee satisfaction and compliance with following policies and procedures (Wolfe & Nix, 2016).

Literature on the Ferguson Effect

The Ferguson Effect phenomenon could be a result of three hypotheses: (a) police have decided to de-police because of negative media attention pertaining to police behavior (Maguire, Nix, & Campbell, 2017; Nix & Pickett, 2017; Nix & Wolfe, 2016; Nix & Wolfe, 2018; Wolfe & Nix, 2016); (b) escalating events, such as in Ferguson, have led the public to believe justice is not being administered equitably across the community—especially the Black community (Gonzalez & Cochran, 2017), and the legitimacy of the law should be questioned; (c) the declination in crime rates in the United States since the 1990s were destined to increase, and the events in Ferguson had nothing to do with an alleged increase in crime rates in the United States (Pyrooz, Decker, Wolfe, & Shjarback, 2016; Sinyangwe, 2016; Towers & White, 2017).

A major underpinning of the Ferguson Effect is that society perceives the police occupation as less legitimate than in the pre-Ferguson era. Maguire et al. (2017) identified the need for de-policing research and echoed the consensus among the majority of criminal justice scholars that police agencies are currently in a legitimacy crisis because of publicized negative media portrayals of incidents where police officers have used force to protect themselves or the community. Data from the Officer Down Memorial Page (ODMP) was analyzed utilizing time series analysis, and results indicated the Ferguson Effect did not affect the number of police officers killed in the line of duty (Maguire et al., 2017). Because there is currently a demand for increased police transparency whenever force of any kind is used against someone, and a current apparent decrease in police legitimacy perception by the public, police officers could be hesitating to use deadly force even when it is warranted.

The events in Ferguson, MO started a conversation in the literature as to the validity of the Ferguson Effect phenomenon, since the phenomenon was first coined by powerful officials in the United States to include the President of the United States and former Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mr. James Comey. Police are currently in an era like no other where every incident involving force could be uploaded onto social media networks or e-mailed to local news agencies. A review of the extant literature indicates a consensus among scholars that police have chosen to de-police because of media scrutiny, and there is currently a racial—especially in the Black community—and ethnic divide between the police and minority citizens. The threat of being the center of the next viral video has caused law enforcement officers to alter the way in which they individually police their communities. De-policing can be detrimental in increasing community cooperation and citizen perception of legitimacy of police work. Consistent with the purpose of my study and the gap addressed, there is empirical evidence to support the Ferguson Effect phenomenon is not an isolated phenomenon and is worthy to be explored in small rural police agencies.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore how police officers in two small police agencies in rural Virginia explained their shared experiences regarding the Ferguson Effect, as well as their perceptions of their organizational fairness. To examine the aforementioned, the following research questions were formulated: (a) How do participants describe their experiences of the Ferguson Effect in the performance of their law enforcement duties? (b) What are participants' perceptions and experiences on the importance of fairness in police organizations?

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher is that of an informed inquirer because I am currently an active-sworn federal law enforcement officer and have been performing law enforcement duties, primarily investigations, for 16 years. I conducted my study because of the limited available research about the explored phenomenon and was inspired to further investigate the Ferguson Effect phenomenon after conversing with local and state law enforcement colleagues who routinely patrol rural areas.

Method

Participants

I interviewed nine sworn police officers and sheriff's deputies employed in two small (less than 35 sworn officers employed) law enforcement agencies in the southcentral portion of Virginia. The sheriff's office employed a total of 26 active law enforcement officers and the police department employed 29. Of the total participant pool of 55 law enforcement officers, 15 met the criteria to participate in this study. Besides having to be employed at a small rural law enforcement agency, each participant had to have been employed by their agency for at least one year prior to August 9, 2014 (date of Michael Brown incident in Ferguson, MO), and be currently assigned to patrol or investigative duties (most probability of having frequent citizen contacts). Making the prerequisite of having performed duties of at least one year before the events in Ferguson ensured law enforcement officers could recognize any variations in their behaviors in the performance of their duties. I obtained the official government e-mail addresses for the 15 officers who met the criterion to participate in the study and subsequently

randomly selected 10 to e-mail a recruitment flyer. 10 officers were selected instead of the total pool of 15 in order to comply with my approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol.

The sheriff's department was geographically encircled within the territorial and legal jurisdictional boundaries of the city police department, and both had a combined citizen population of 64,369. Participants included eight males (89% of the sample) and one female (11% of the sample). All self-identified as White. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant after the interview, and a master participant code sheet was utilized to assign a unique identification number to each participant. The mean age was 37.3 years with a standard deviation (SD) of 9.1 years. The mean years of experience for the participants was 12.2 with a SD of 9.5 years. The least amount of years of service was four years, and the most senior participant served 33 years. Table 1 provides further details about participants; however, it should be noted that the total years of police service of all participants combined was 110 years.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Rank	Years of Service	Duty Position
James	M	Patrol Officer	4	Patrol Officer
Timothy	M	Deputy	33	Patrol Deputy
Henry	M	Sergeant	6	Detective
Johnathan	M	Sergeant	17	Patrol Sergeant
David	M	Deputy	7	Patrol Deputy
Brandon	M	Detective	5	Detective
Herbert	M	Deputy	5	Patrol Deputy
Samantha	F	Corporal	16	Patrol Corporal
Robert	M	Captain	17	Captain

Procedures

Data was collected upon approval from the IRB of Walden University, (Approval No. 10-12-17-0527483), and after obtaining letters of cooperation from the partner law enforcement agencies. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Telephonic interviews of participants were conducted in an attempt to negate any feeling of possible reprisal from their respective law enforcement leaders from Oct-Nov 2017. A handheld digital recording device with attachable earpiece was utilized to record each interview. Interviews ranged from 28 to 62 minutes in length, averaging about 45 minutes.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the nine interviews, the textual transcript was verified for accuracy by playing the audio of each interview and reviewing the transcript word-for-word three times. The rich data gathered from the study were subsequently analyzed in NVivo 11 Pro[®]. I utilized hermeneutic phenomenology in data analysis. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows the researcher to be an active participant in the process of meaning-making (Sloan & Bower, 2014) and is concerned with the exploration of human experiences (Laverly, 2003). Heidegger (1962) purported understanding was connected to an individual's historicity, and this important aspect of interpretation could not be eliminated and first introduced the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle involves moving from the experience to the whole of experience, and back and forth again to understand spoken data. The hermeneutic circle involves "two endpoints of a line that are joined, with knowledge informing perspective and perspective informing knowledge...the information acquired through conducting an inquiry is thereby accommodated

into the researcher's perspective, and this creates a back-and-forth process" (Wardrop & Popadiuk, 2013, p. 8). In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher and the participant are linked to create the overall findings, and in essence, the participant could be the co-researcher (Lavery, 2003).

Thematic analysis was utilized to document the relevant codes, themes, and subthemes in the study and to confirm the initial understanding of the participant's spoken data. Saldaña (2016) stated a code is a word or short phrase used by a researcher to assign attributes for language or things that are visual. In vivo coding during first cycle coding was utilized after the naïve reading. In vivo coding is also known as verbatim coding because the participant's own words dictate the subsequent code assigned by the researcher. In vivo coding is applicable in almost all qualitative studies (Saldaña, 2016). Bhattacharya (2017) posited interpretation was already embedded in rich spoken data. Stringer (2014) argued a researcher was more likely to capture a participant's experience when in vivo coding is used. Second cycle coding is often used to reorganize and reanalyze data coded in first cycle coding (Saldaña, 2016). Pattern coding was utilized during second cycle coding. Pattern coding is suitable to group and summarize first cycle codes into smaller categories and is useful in identifying emergent themes in the data. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) further stated pattern coding is useful in finding explanations in data. Additionally, I utilized member checking in an attempt to increase trustworthiness.

Results

Themes

During the naïve reading and structural analysis, emerging themes and subthemes from the participant's narratives regarding their lived experiences of viewing negative media portrayals of the police, and their perceptions of the importance of fairness within police organizations emerged. Three main themes emerged from the data, as well as seven subthemes. Each theme and subtheme corresponded to the particular node where a specific in vivo code and pattern code was categorized. A node is merely a single point or connection in a network or a simulated bucket to store information (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). These themes aided in answering the two research questions.

Theme 1: Racial Division

During structural analysis, experiences of *racial division* emerged from the data as the first theme. I defined the theme of racial division as a perception of racial inequity and mistrust between the community and the police that was not perceived prior to the events in Ferguson. Evidence of racial division was found in Herbert's lived experiences when he stated:

I feel like we've almost went back to '60s, '70s type of mindset, of in the Black community and in the White community. 'Cause, I feel like White, especially police officers, now, you're afraid to say certain things to certain people, um, because if you do, you don't want to affect your family, your livelihood, anything like that.

Herbert perceived racial conflict between White police officers, who belonged to the White community, and Black citizens. Subthemes of racial division consisted of *fearful outcomes*, *living the paradigm*, and *us vs them*. Participants provided, in detail, their lived experiences with racial division.

Fearful outcomes. Fearful outcomes was the first subtheme that emerged under racial division. I defined the subtheme of fearful outcomes as a perception of fear of negative consequences or hesitation as a result of viewing negative media portrayals of police officers post-Ferguson. Evidence of fearful outcomes was found in the spoken data. For example, Brandon, David, Johnathan, and Herbert all experienced a form of hesitation or fear to perform their duties. Brandon stated, “My family could be affected because I might lose my job ‘cause somebody said something wrong. It turns a good decision into what can seem like a bad decision. It makes you not want to do anything.” David stated:

I really hope he doesn’t produce a weapon. I really hope, you know, um ... Just because of what I may face on the backside of that. Uh, we are heavily scrutinized in everything we do. Uh, if we violate somebody’s constitutional rights, that is addressed immediately.

Hesitation or reluctance to perform one’s duties, due to a perception of unfair or bias treatment by police leadership, is detrimental to police morale. The participants experienced perceptions of negative consequences for performing their duties.

Living the paradigm. Living the paradigm was the second subtheme that emerged under racial division. I defined the subtheme of living the paradigm as a perception of confirmatory negative experiences that participants experienced after the events in Ferguson that were not experienced pre-Ferguson. Evidence of living the paradigm was found in the spoken data. For example, Robert stated, “I know it was mentioned, again, you know it’s something you talk about in the shift change, they see the news...oh my god, well we can’t even stop anybody anymore...it’s harder emotionally to do the job.” Samantha described an incident when she had to arrest a Black citizen in front of a crowd and experienced the following:

Well, so we’re walking him out and then he decides that he’s gonna start showing out and immediately the cell phones come out...I saw them cell phones pop out it was like, Oh man, cause he’s not getting in the vehicle, you know, he’s not getting in the back of the car...we were trying to push his head down and, and, you know, force his body into the back of the car. And when I saw the cell phones it was an immediate crap!

Henry described a lived experience where a Black officer assisted him on a call for service for a domestic violence situation, where the suspect was also Black, and perceived the Black officer was perceived as a “traitor” by the suspect. Henry stated:

Me and this, uh, gentleman, we start fighting in the middle of the road. Um, try to get him detained, he starts to reach in his pocket, did have a knife in his pocket, um. Another Black officer gets on scene, helps me wrestle this guy. As soon the arrest is now getting in hand cuffs, he just 100% comes off of me, doesn’t say anything to me. Focuses in straight on the Black officer and it was the worst racial, about the worst racial slurs I could hear, from a Black man to another Black man.

Negative media portrayals of police officers almost made Henry resign and stop policing for his agency and go to a separate field of law enforcement where he had minimal citizen contact. Henry stated:

I almost left because I didn't feel appreciated. And why these...the-the new people come and apply here, I have no idea. There's so many other things they could do...that's beyond me. But uh, I alm- ... I almost left doing like local law enforcement work, and I was gonna go to, uh, like the-the forest land law enforcement for the state, working the parks and stuff. Just to kinda get away from the-the public view a little bit.

The majority of the experiences of the participants were found during traffic stop initiations, during the arrest of an individual, and during town hall meetings.

Us versus them. Us versus them was the third subtheme that emerged under racial division. I defined the subtheme of us vs them as a perception of police officers the public perceived them as showing no remorse in using force on citizens, especially in Black communities. Evidence of us versus them was found in the spoken data. For example, Brandon described an experience where he was arresting a Black citizen and stated that citizen stated, "I don't want to get beat by the cops. I'm gonna record you...something like that or 'hands up, don't shoot.'" Johnathan reported, "And then post-Ferguson it came up 'hands up, don't shoot' and that message was spread across, it just took like wildfire."

This subtheme is directly associated with the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, as the phrase, "hands up, don't shoot" was commonly used after the events in Ferguson by citizens throughout the nation to communicate their mistrust of the police.

Theme 2: Rush to Judgment

Rush to judgment emerged as the second theme. Subthemes of rush to judgment consisted of *citizen dissension* and *police response to negative media*. I defined the theme of rush to judgment as a perception that police leadership and/or citizens form quick, non-factual opinions based on negatively portrayed law enforcement actions in the media. Evidence of rush to judgment was found in Henry's lived experiences when he stated:

Other areas of the city, uh, you-you lay hands on somebody to arrest them, and the first thing they start shouting is people's names from some, from some of these shootings that they feel were unlawful, or start shouting out their lawyers names.

Citizen dissension. Citizen dissension was the first subtheme that emerged under rush to judgment. I defined the subtheme of citizen dissension as a perception of decreased police legitimacy within the community. Evidence of citizen dissension was found in the spoken data. Participants experienced a perception or decreased police legitimacy from the citizens in their communities. The exceptions were Samantha and Robert. For example, Brandon stated, "Because the negative publicity...It's not only an officer who makes this decision on a call, and that's perceived negatively. It's, okay, now cops are bad, and people want to hurt cops. So now you gotta worry about your off-duty."

David stated:

I rolled up into the, uh, community apartments, all the little boys just stand there with their hands up, 'cause they, you know, they don't know any better. That's just what mom and daddy told them to do.

Henry and Timothy both experienced perception of a decrease in citizen legitimacy of law enforcement officers. Henry stated, “Respect as a whole has went down...for law enforcement.” Timothy stated, “What- what- what’s going on nowadays is there is a total lack of respect for the police.”

Robert was the only participant who stated his perception of the relationship between his department and the community was better post-Ferguson and negative media scrutiny. Robert stated, “So I think that relationships have actually gotten better since Ferguson, at least in our small community here. We just...we started talking about the issues, opening a dialogue and answering some questions.”

Police response to negative media. Police response to negative media was the second subtheme that emerged under rush to judgment. Specifically, the events in Ferguson. I defined the subtheme of police response to negative media as the perceived alteration or non-alteration of the performance of one’s duties or fairness within their organization as a result of viewing negative media post-Ferguson. Evidence of police response to negative media was found in the spoken data. Participants stated negative media scrutiny, and the events in Ferguson made them alter the way they practiced policing and interacted with citizens post-Ferguson. For example, Brandon, James, and Henry experienced a change in perception of policing and increased awareness to procedural justice concepts, but no alteration in the way they interacted with citizens post-Ferguson. For example, James stated, “Negative media doesn’t, for me personally, it doesn’t affect me at all. The last thing I worry about is the media... I’m more worried about my safety and my fellow officer’s safety.”

Henry stated:

You do keep that in the back of your mind when you are dealing with people, and you’re thinking, ‘What if this happens next? I’m gonna be on CN-CNN tomorrow? So that was probably the only thing that changed how I looked at stuff. I did my work the same.

Participants experienced an alteration in the way they interacted with citizens post-Ferguson and their police leadership philosophies. For example, David stated, “I’ve studied up on my civil liability... I’ve increased my tactical training.” Herbert and Robert indicated they altered the way they interacted with citizens post-Ferguson by radically explaining their actions to citizens, to seek increased transparency—which they did not do previously. Herbert reported:

Communicating why I’m there, what I’m doing and why I’m doing it a lot better than what I probably did before. Um, you know, I’ve dealt with some young kids, 19 to 20, 21 years old, those seem to be the ones that like to cause an uproar a little bit more, um, over police for some reason.

Samantha and Robert indicated their leadership styles had changed since the events in Ferguson by incorporating more analytical thinking when interacting with citizens. For example, Robert stated, “Now, it’s a lot more dialogue...you have to talk people down, we have to deescalate, separate ourselves from the emotion and it’s a lot more of a thinking man’s game than it is a wrestling game anymore.” Samantha stated:

I no longer just let, you know, just, just let the guys go and do their jobs. Um, I definitely have to think past that and think, okay, not only do I need to, you know, be concerned about the citizen, be concerned about the officer, I need to

be concerned about the perception that could be, you know, misconstrued later on.

Themes' one and two answered the first research question of the study: How do participants describe their experiences of the Ferguson Effect in the performance of their law enforcement duties?

Theme 3: Steadfast Leadership

Steadfast leadership emerged as the third theme. Subthemes consisted of *expendable resource* and *procedural fairness*. I defined the theme of steadfast leadership as the perception of needing police leaders who were fair in all aspects of leadership, and the establishment of clear and concise policies and procedures. Evidence of steadfast leadership was found in Brandon's lived experiences when he stated:

At least I can say with my department, and with the city, if something was a gray area they didn't leave their officers hanging out to dry. If some similar issue came up across the country in the media, they were real good about saying, 'Well we kind of have a gray area here too. Let's clear that up. Let's make sure that nobody, my officers can say, well I didn't know.'

Expendable resource. Expendable resource was the first subtheme that emerged under steadfast leadership. I defined the subtheme of expendable resource as a perception of being underappreciated and not valued by police leadership. Evidence of expendable resource was found in the spoken data. For example, David stated, "So, leadership gonna be covered. Um, they've got no problem chopping your head off-...making an example out of you. Whether it be an honest mistake, or egregiously." Herbert perceived the following:

I feel like our department, with our policies, I feel like they're fair. I feel like they have, but I also feel like that you have that sort of instance if you screw up, even if you're not breaking policy or if you're going out and being proactive, and you're in a gray area, you're not breaking policy, I still feel like, you are going to be in that, well this doesn't look good for the department, it might be best if you, you know, leave. I have become less proactive, uh, in the last year and a half. I try to stay proactive, but I will not do much anymore by myself.

Samantha perceived the following:

I do think that officers can be replaced...and I think it's easier for them to set an officer free, even though it's setting 'em up for a major civil lawsuit, or even a criminal lawsuit. Um, I think that they, that they would rather throw the officer under the bus on that one than they would to take the public scrutiny.

David, Henry, Herbert, James, and Samantha perceived their administration as being willing to sacrifice the career of an individual officer for the sake of being transparent to the citizenry.

Procedural fairness. Procedural fairness was the second subtheme that emerged under steadfast leadership. I defined the subtheme of procedural fairness as the perception of fairness in departmental policies and procedures, as well as the perception of overall fairness by the public and media. Evidence

of procedural fairness was found in the spoken data. For example, Henry stated: “If you’re right off the bat told you’ve kinda, you’ve kinda screwed up, and you feel like you know what the outcomes gonna be, why would you go out and put yourself in a, in a mess again?”

James perceived unfairness in the media and called for the need for procedural fairness to cross-occupational borders into fair and accurate media reporting. For example, he stated, “So being fair, but that’s what the media needs to do. The media needs to be fair.”

Samantha stated:

I think that they would struggle with it. Um, I think if there was an, if, if you’re talking about something major such as a shooting and you had a loss of life, I think that they would weigh on the side of the public to try to appease them, um, over the officer at, at this point.

Of the other two additional organizational justice concepts (distributive justice and interactional justice), procedural justice perceptions and lived experiences of the participants were most prevalent in the data. All participants experienced both good and bad leadership throughout their respective careers. Participants credited fair procedural justice within their law enforcement agencies as a critical reason why they did not, and would not, become less willing to interact with the community or become less proactive post-Ferguson. Conversely, participants also stated a lack of procedural justice within their law enforcement agencies caused them to de-police. Theme three answered the second and final research question of the study: What are participant’s perceptions and experiences on the importance of fairness in police organizations?

Discussion

The purpose of my hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore how police officers in two small police agencies in rural Virginia explained their shared experiences regarding the Ferguson Effect, as well as their perceptions of their organizational fairness. To examine the aforementioned, the following research questions were formulated: (a) How do participants describe their experiences of the Ferguson Effect in the performance of their law enforcement duties? (b) What are participant’s perceptions and experiences on the importance of fairness in police organizations? Participants in the study discussed their lived experiences with policing in a time of intense media scrutiny, and their perceptions of the importance of fairness in police organizations. Three major themes were identified: (a) racial division, (b) rush to judgment, and (c) steadfast leadership.

Regarding the first research question, the evidence of my study suggests participants in small rural law enforcement agencies perceived the events in Ferguson—and subsequent negative media scrutiny of police officers in the media—as a crossroads in modern-day law enforcement. Data showed law enforcement officers in two small rural police departments felt as if they were in a constant battle to regain the public’s trust since the events in Ferguson, specifically in predominantly Black neighborhoods within the communities they policed because of an overwhelming sense of racial division. This finding is in agreement with the extant literature (Deuchar, Fallik, & Crichlow, 2018; Nix & Pickett, 2017; Nix & Wolfe, 2016; Nix & Wolfe, 2018). However, this finding further extends the main body of knowledge on the Ferguson Effect to small rural police agencies because most all current studies explore large police departments (Nix & Wolfe, 2016, 2017). Participants shared their lived experiences of citizens criticizing their intent for initiating traffic stops, as well as the reasons for arrest. This

finding is in agreement with the literature (Nix & Wolfe, 2018; Oliver, 2015; Shjarback et al., 2017)—specifically traffic stops—and organizational justice theoretical framework as data indicated participants altered their traffic stop disposition decisions to be perceived more procedurally equitable (Nix, Wolfe, Rojek, & Kaminiski, 2015) by citizens. Findings from this study showed participants were very concerned and fearful of negative ramifications of being the center of negative media and for possibly having to use any type of force to arrest an individual, specifically a Black citizen. This finding is supported in the literature. Nix and Pickett (2017) posited police had been adversely impacted, specifically by negative media portrayals, which has aided in a current police self-legitimacy crisis. Several other studies in the literature support this finding as well (Nix & Pickett, 2017; Nix & Wolfe, 2017; Nix & Wolfe, 2018). Data indicated a perception of lack of confidence participants had in their authority (self-legitimacy) because of a perceived lack of public support.

Additionally, because of this perceived lack of public trust, data showed participants increased their efforts to become more transparent and explanatory when interacting with citizens post-Ferguson. Data further indicated the use of body cameras were mandated by their organizations to aid in transparency. These results further widen our knowledge of the Ferguson Effect to include small rural police agencies and are in agreement with organizational justice theory because the aforementioned (excessive explanation and body camera usage) were all efforts to increase distributive, interactional, and procedural justice. Of note, it was expected close-knit communal relationships would be able to abrogate perception of decreased self-legitimacy by participants (Weisheit et al., 1994); however, this proved to be an inaccurate assumption as a result of the conduct of the current study. The results of my study offer compelling evidence the familial-type relationship between the police and citizens of rural areas does not negate officer perceptions of mistrust by the community. Data indicated law enforcement officers who policed in two small rural police agencies in southcentral VA initially perceived the Ferguson Effect would not impact their tight-knit communities, but over time, they perceived an effect. The events in Ferguson not only impacted officers in Missouri and the city of Ferguson but law enforcement officers as far as southcentral Virginia were impacted.

Regarding the second research question, the evidence of this study suggests participants in small rural law enforcement agencies perceived the need for clear policies and procedures from their administration or leadership to perform their duties without fear of negative consequences. Of distributive, interactional, and procedural justice, procedural justice was shown to be the most prominent used by participants post-Ferguson and desired to be represented by a supervisor. These findings are supported in the extant literature (Nix & Wolfe, 2016) and organizational justice theory. No employee should perceive his or her employer as being selfish and should be considered a valued member of the organization as a whole. Data showed participants who perceived their administration as being procedurally and distributively fair did not perceive an alteration in the way they interacted with citizens in their community post-Ferguson. This finding confirms previous evidence in the literature (Deuchar et al., 2018; Nix & Pickett, 2017; Nix & Wolfe, 2016; Nix, Wolfe, Rojek, & Kaminski, 2015) that procedural justice is of vital importance to counteract de-policing and hostile media effects, as well as correlates positively with organizational justice theory. Nix and Wolfe (2018) posited even police supervisors were affected by negative media and had de-policed. Participants of the current study who were in supervisory positions perceived they de-policed and felt the need to more closely supervise junior police officers, especially in possibly highly volatile situations where citizens may record police encounters.

Limitations

While my study has contributed to increased awareness and understanding of the Ferguson Effect in smaller rural law enforcement agencies, several limitations should be noted. First, this study applies to smaller law enforcement agencies and not larger ones; therefore, is not representative of all police agencies in the United States. Second, interviews were conducted telephonically and often when participants were on their lunch breaks or off-duty at their homes. Participants could have felt rushed to respond because of competing priorities. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated generalizability was typically not a goal of qualitative research. In this regard, my position is that the results of my study would be the same with different data. Finally, most of the participants from my study were primarily White males, which does reflect both agencies demographically. It is possible that Black or more female participants would differ in some way from those participants for my study, ultimately improving diversity, but it is my opinion the overall findings would be the same.

Recommendations

The lived experiences and perceptions of the participants in my study has informed several useful recommendations for stakeholders and police leaders in combatting de-policing and the Ferguson Effect. Every police office should be trained on citizens' rights to record police officer interactions (Wasserman, 2017) and this training should also be incorporated into police academy programs of instruction, as well as sustained career progression training. I recommend an increase in Town Hall meetings (Wantchekon, 2017) as it was evident in the participants' lived experiences this aided in increasing transparency and earning the trust of the community, thus increasing perceived self-legitimacy. Data from my study suggest care must be taken by police administration when mandating all police officers increase community engagement because not all police officers have the same strengths or the same weaknesses. One officer may be very good at community engagement, and another officer may be very good at finding narcotics. It is up to police administrators to take a personal interest in finding the individual strengths and weaknesses of every officer under their command.

I recommend stakeholders constantly re-evaluate and refine their policies and procedures to make them clear and understandable without *gray* areas, as numerous participants in my study called them. Finally, I recommend law enforcement agencies establish or continue critical discussions and relationships with their local media reporting agencies. Establishing or continuing liaison with news agencies and having a good amicable relationship could allow law enforcement agencies to tell their account of what happened to the public efficiently and effectively, if needed, instead of perceiving the media as reporting any story that gets ratings and that are not based on fact or prior verification.

Implications for Future Research

My study focused on the experiences of nine law enforcement officers employed in two small rural law enforcement agencies in Virginia. The results of my study outline several recommendations for future research. First, the study took place in rural southcentral Virginia. Expanding it to other areas throughout Virginia and the United States could aid in gathering other empirical data that corroborate or refute these findings. Second, future studies should be conducted utilizing—a qualitative method—to explore how police officers in larger sized law enforcement agencies experience the Ferguson Effect. Third, future studies should be conducted to explore minority police officer perceptions and lived experiences of negatively publicized media of police. One of the participants in this study shared an experience where he

was involved in responding to a domestic violence call for service, and he perceived a Black offender in this particular incident as perceiving a deputy that was also Black (who was assisting on the call) as a “traitor,” because he was helping the participant arrest him. Finally, future studies should be conducted to explore female police officers’ perceptions and lived experiences of the Ferguson Effect phenomenon.

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