

Police Body Cameras and Us: Public Perceptions of the Justification of the Police Use of Force in the Body Camera Era

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Using an experimental design, this research looked at the medium of presentation (text, audio, video) through which members of the public were exposed to a controversial police shooting. Furthermore, this research tested whether the officer's immediate reaction to the shooting (crying, talking, or calling his attorney) across mediums of presentation impacted the public's perception of justification. We found that the medium of presentation did matter; those who were exposed to the shooting through video were significantly more likely to perceive of the shooting as unjustified when compared to those who were exposed to the shooting through text or audio. However, officer's reaction did not have an impact on perceptions of justification for the shooting. Implications of these findings are discussed.

What is the significance of this article for the general public?

This study suggests that in addition to the good that police-worn body cameras may provide, the cameras also provide a new window into the profession that may negatively impact the public's perception of police officers.

Keywords: police, body camera, use-of-force, police shootings, public and police relations

The introduction of body cameras into police departments across the United States has led to several large-scale studies analyzing the impacts of cameras on the officers wearing them and the departments for which those officers work (Ariel, Farrar, & Sutherland, 2015; Ariel et al., 2016; Jennings, Lynch, & Fridell, 2015; Ready & Young, 2015). On the whole, these studies indicate that body cameras appear to be good for the officers, their departments, and maybe even suspects—suspects who are much less likely to encounter force from an officer wearing a camera than one who is not (Ariel et al., 2015).

Less understood, however, is the impact of police-worn body cameras on public perceptions of police; while some states prohibit access to body camera footage (see [Reporters Committee, 2016](#)), the introduction of body cameras means that society may now be able to see events that were previously only known through other mediums (e.g., newspaper reports). To address this gap in the literature and aid our understanding of the impacts body cameras may have on public perceptions, we conducted an experiment in which study participants were exposed to the same use-of-force incident—a fast and controversial police shooting—through different mediums of presentation (text, audio, and video). Furthermore, because body cameras may now allow us to see the officer's actions in the lead up to and immediately following the use-of-force incident, we also manipulated the officer's reaction to the incident within each medium. The study participants were then asked questions about the incident they were exposed to, specifically questions relating to the justifica-

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tion of the officer's use of deadly force. These responses were analyzed.

Body Cameras

Following the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, the apparently racially motivated stop-and-frisks in New York City (Ariel, Farrar, & Sutherland, 2014), and other similar incidents, police-worn body cameras have quickly emerged as a technological means to curb potential police misbehavior. To this end, the U.S. government has made substantial grants available to law enforcement for the purchase of body cameras and helped encourage quick and wide-scale adoption of the technology (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015).

Three key studies provide much of the current understanding of the practical impacts of placing body cameras on police officers: the Rialto experiment, the Mesa experiment, and the Orlando experiment. All of these were large-scale field tests of body cameras where researchers studied the impact of body cameras on police departments and police behaviors. In the Rialto experiment, Ariel et al. (2015) found that officers wearing cameras incurred substantially lower rates of complaints and engaged in significantly less use of force. Echoing the findings of Ariel et al. (2015), Jennings et al. (2015) conducted a randomized experiment in Orlando, FL, where they found that the presence of a body camera decreased use-of-force incidents by over 50% and serious complaints by almost two-thirds.

Taken together, the Rialto and Orlando experiments seem to suggest that body cameras change the dynamics of the contact between the officer and the public. However, while Ariel et al. (2015) and Jennings et al. (2015) opined that cameras may significantly change police behavior, their experiments do not directly address this issue. In contrast, the Mesa experiment appears to answer what is causing the change in the dynamics of the law enforcement contact.

In the Mesa experiment, Ready and Young (2015) looked at slightly different measures than Jennings et al. (2015) and Ariel et al. (2015). By randomly assigning some officers to wear body cameras while holding others as a control, their study found many new significant differences between the two groups that indicate

cameras were seriously impacting police officer behavior. First, officers wearing cameras were more likely to be proactive than officers who were not. This proactivity, however, came with a softer touch; despite doing more work, officers wearing cameras were less likely to stop and frisk and less likely to arrest. Despite the softer touch, the study also showed that the officers wearing cameras were significantly more likely to issue a citation for an infraction than exercise their discretion to not invoke the law.

The findings of Ready and Young (2015) strongly support the intuition expressed by Ariel et al. (2015) and Jennings et al. (2015) that officers who are wearing body cameras behave differently than those who are not. That is not to say that all the changes in police behavior that cameras cause are good; citizens have good cause to be wary of police technology that results in fewer arrests and more citations—more criminals on the streets and less discretion in favor of the public. However, the evidence of decreased complaints and use of force found by Ariel et al. (2015) and Jennings et al. (2015) suggests that the changes in police behavior may be desirable.

Counterintuitively, it is possible that the decrease in complaints and use of force found by Ariel et al. (2015) and Jennings et al. (2015) is undesirable. Some command staff have floated the idea that this decrease in complaints and the use of force may be a result of decreasing willingness—and increasing hesitance—by officers to do what is necessary and use appropriate force in a situation when they are on camera (Smykla, Crow, Crichlow, & Snyder, 2016). These concerns appear to not be shared by rank-and-file police officers; in a survey of Orlando, Florida, police officers, Jennings et al. (2014) found that officers were very receptive to body worn cameras and did not believe the presence of those cameras would impact their willingness to use force. Furthermore, the study found that officers believe the presence of cameras will improve their behavior, their coworkers' behavior, and the behavior of the public.

Given that Jennings et al. (2015) found little support in rank-and-file officers for the concerns voiced by command staff in Smykla et al.'s (2016) study, the previous studies on the impacts of cameras seem to make a strong argu-

ment for the presence of body cameras—more proactive police officers, who use less force and receive fewer complaints (Ariel et al., 2015). However, we were unable to find a single study that considers the possibility that body cameras may have adverse impacts beyond the willingness of officers to use force. We advance a possible adverse impact: Limitations to footage release notwithstanding, in some cases body cameras will allow the media and the media-consuming public to peer behind the thin blue line in a way we never have before, to see what once we could only read about. There is research to suggest this may change perceptions of an incident.

Medium of Presentation

Visually processing information is different than reading or hearing about it. For instance, in a study of jury decision making, Pezdek, Avila-Mora, and Sperry (2010) found that textually presented testimony was viewed by mock jurors as more useful and influential than identical testimony presented through video. While this difference did not significantly impact the ultimate decision reached by the jurors, it suggests a strong difference in perceptions between reading and viewing an event.

In a more directly applicable study, Culhane, Boman, and Schweitzer (2016) found that the medium by which members of the public were exposed to a police shooting impacted those subjects' perceptions of the justification of that shooting. Their story, however, is not so simple as medium of presentation matters; due to circumstances beyond their control, Culhane et al. (2016) were able to run their experiment both before and following the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the racially charged civil unrest that followed. Before the events in Ferguson, video and audio conditions led to higher levels of perceived justification than did a text-only condition. In a post-Ferguson retest, the video condition was greatly diminished in justification scores. Despite their primary finding being that the effect of medium of presentation was conditioned by societal context, their study strongly indicates that public availability of the video from body cameras may have serious consequences on the perceived legitimacy and justification of police actions.

Officer Reaction and Remorse

In 2015, a Montana officer's reaction to shooting an unarmed suspect was captured on the dashboard camera (dashcam) of a different officer's patrol car (Ortiz, 2015). The officer involved in the shooting was inconsolable as he cried on the hood of the police cruiser. That reaction went viral with extensive media coverage, and he was eventually cleared in the shooting by a coroner's jury. The dashcam also captured the nonverbal body language of the officer (Ekman, 1957). Despite limited research directly examining this question, these events suggest that seeing such a reaction can humanize the police in the eyes of the public.

Prior research has shown that the expression of remorse by a criminal suspect matters. In a meta-analysis of remorse studies, Proeve and Tudor (2010) concluded "that expressed remorse leads to more positive judgements about an offender" and "leads to less severe punishment for an offender than no expression of remorse" (p. 83). While Proeve and Tudor's (2010) meta-analysis focused on criminal defendants, it is possible that their findings will carry over to other individuals, including those on the other side of the law. In more recent tests of remorse, Corwin, Cramer, Griffin, and Brodsky (2012) found additional support for Proeve and Tudor's (2010) findings, while Zhong et al. (2014) found more mixed results. Taken as a whole, it appears remorse plays some role in the judgment of mock jurors, but the role may be very contingent and contextual.

In addition to displaying remorse, police officers may exhibit a behavior that is unlike most anyone else who has committed a shooting: contacting their chapter of a police union in order to seek representation. Citizens and police officers have the right to counsel in all possible criminal legal proceedings, but a body-worn camera captures this moment like never before and could be perceived negatively. The immediate call placed to a union could be perceived as evidence of guilt, as police unions are vastly understudied and likely a mystery to the public (Walker, 2008). To our knowledge, this possibility has yet to be tested.

Current Research

For our purposes, we want to focus on two specific issues that body cameras bring to the fore. First, in a confirmatory retest of Culhane et al. (2016) using a different, more controversial incident, we tested whether seeing a use-of-deadly-force incident impacted perceptions of the justification of said use of force. Second, we want to know if the officer's immediate emotional response to that use-of-force incident—a response members of the public were not privy to before—changes the way members of the public think about that incident.

In order to answer these two questions and begin to understand the impact of the new window to police behavior that body cameras may open, we have constructed an experiment wherein members of the public were exposed to the same critical incident—a fast police shooting—through different mediums (text, audio, and video). In an attempt to understand the impact of seeing real-time reactions to critical incidents, we also manipulated the officer's immediate reaction (crying, talking, or calling his attorney) to the shooting in each of these mediums.

Method

Video and Pilot Data

As a first step, we found a police shooting video from Dallas, Texas. In that body-camera video, police arrive at a house and are met by the suspect's mother, who informs two officers that her son has a mental disorder and is causing problems. Next, appearing at the door is a large Black man holding an object in his hand that ultimately turns out to be a screwdriver. The police tell him to drop the object. Without dropping the object, the man lunges in the direction of one of the officers. Both officers shoot the man quickly. The camera continues to run, showing the perspective of one of the officers, for approximately 15 min following the shooting. This includes a significant amount of time waiting in the car. We reduced the video to approximately 7 min with the final 2 min serving as our manipulation of the officer's reaction.

With an edited video, we created three separate audio tracks for the final 2 min wherein the officer sits in the car waiting for orders follow-

ing the shooting—a view showing only the steering wheel. In one version, the “self-preservation” condition, upon getting into the vehicle the officer calls his union representative and explains the situation in a very professional manner. In the second version, the “relaxed” condition, the officer chats about random unrelated things with another officer and listens to music. In the third condition, the “crying” condition, one can distinctly hear the officer crying. This final audio track was spliced from a separate video.

From these three videos, two other mediums of presentation, text and audio, were created. For the audio conditions, we replaced the body-camera video with dashcam footage of an empty street, as though all of this were occurring simply out of view of the dashcam. For the text conditions, we prepared a single police report from the officer's perspective that explained a narrative of what occurred. We also produced three separate condition specific reports from the sergeant—who arrived shortly after the shooting—that explained that the officer called his union, remained relaxed in the car, or appeared to be crying.

With institutional review board (IRB) approval, we conducted a manipulation check of the materials to ensure the primary emotion, remorse, was recognized by participants. We recruited participants via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M-Turk; $N = 83$), and after informing them that they would be participating in a study of public perceptions of police shootings and may be exposed to disturbing content, we collected informed consent and subjected participants to one of the conditions. After presenting participants to one condition, we then asked them to rate the degree, on a Likert-type scale, to which they agreed with the statement that “after the shooting, the officer seemed remorseful.” Participants were paid \$0.35 for their participation. Using a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), we found that perceptions of remorse varied significantly based on the officer's reaction: $F(2, 74) = 14.57, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .28$. Specifically, the post hoc test revealed that the “crying” condition was judged to be significantly more remorseful than the other two conditions. Medium of presentation approached, but did not significantly impact, perceptions of remorse, $F(2, 74) = 3.03, p = .054$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$, and no significant interaction

of medium of presentation and officer reaction was found, $F(4, 74) = 1.10$, $p = .36$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. After confirming that perceptions of remorse did not significantly vary based on medium of presentation, but only on the officer's reaction, we turned our attention to the larger study.

Participants

After receiving IRB approval, 252 adults were recruited from M-Turk based on a G*power analysis for medium effect sizes, with a power of .80 and a Type I error rate of .05 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). Participants were told that they would be participating in a study of public perceptions of a police shooting and may be exposed to disturbing content. After informed consent, respondents were randomly assigned to a condition: For example, someone may view a video in which the officer calls his union representative (video; self-preservation), someone else may read about that same reaction (text; self-preservation), and someone else may listen to audio of that same reaction (audio; self-preservation). Participants were then asked several attention check questions and their time to complete the project was checked to ensure they had taken adequate time to complete all phases of the experiment. Seventy participants were struck from the data for failure to meet one of these two criteria, leaving 182 valid responses. This sample included 110 men and 72 women. All participants were restricted to a U.S. location. The majority ($n = 156$) self-identified themselves as White, with 18 African Americans, and the rest identifying themselves as another race. Their average age was 39.85 ($SD = 12.66$) with a range from 19 to 76. The participants were paid \$0.35 for their assistance.

Materials

The 3 (medium of presentation: video, audio, text) $\times$ 3 (officer reaction: relaxed, self-preserving, crying) experimental design necessitated nine possible randomly assigned conditions. A demographics questionnaire (age, race, gender) and attention check questions were developed for the study (available upon request). The primary dependent variable was a Likert-type question (1 to 8 range) about the degree to which participants agreed with the notion that

the officer was justified in the shooting. Other questions were about perceptions of the officer's reaction (e.g., remorseful), also on a Likert-type scale.

Procedure

M-Turk participants were recruited, and upon agreement to participate, directed to a Survey-Gizmo page. First, participants completed the demographic questions and location data was verified based on IP address. They were then presented one of the nine experimental variations, asked the series of attention checks, and a series of questions, composed mostly of Likert-type questions, asking about the reaction of the officer and the justification of the officer's actions.

Results

A second manipulation check of the materials was conducted. Similar to the pilot data, medium of presentation did not significantly differ for the participant's perception of officer remorse, $F(2, 173) = 2.43$, $p = .09$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. The reaction of the officer was found to be significantly different for the three officer reaction conditions, $F(2, 173) = 14.31$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$. Tukey's B post hoc analysis revealed that the three conditions all significantly differed from each other. The relaxed condition ($M = 2.98$) had the lowest rating of remorse, followed by the self-preservation ($M = 3.70$) and crying conditions ($M = 4.43$). Finally, no significant interaction of medium of presentation and reaction was found, $F(4, 173) = 0.89$, $p = .47$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. We took the manipulation check one step further by running individual one-way ANOVAs on each medium of presentation condition. Results showed that all three conditions were significant at the .07 p value, smallest $F(2, 67) = 2.78$, $p = .069$, and two of the three were significant at the .05 level. In every medium of presentation condition, the pattern of lowest perceived remorse to highest perceived remorse was relaxed, self-preservation, crying.

We ran a two-way ANOVA on the participants' perceptions of the incident being a justified police response and found that medium of presentation had a significant impact on their responses: $F(2, 173) = 5.187$, $p = .006$, partial

$\eta^2 = .057$. In order to tease out what was happening within the medium of presentation and understand which mediums were having an influence on perceived justification, we conducted planned comparisons of the three conditions.

As one can see in the Table 1, the video condition varied significantly from both other conditions, with significantly lower levels of perceived justification, than both the textual ($p = .001$) and audio conditions ($p = .018$). Also, the audio and textual conditions did not significantly vary ($p = .538$) from each other.

We found that the officer's reaction did not significantly influence perceptions of justification for the shooting, $F(2, 173) = .967, p = .38$ partial $\eta^2 = .011$. This finding was despite the fact that the officer in the crying condition was notably perceived as being more remorseful. Likewise, the interaction of the medium of presentation and officer reaction was not significant: $F(4, 173) = .549, p = .70$, partial $\eta^2 = .013$.

Participants were also questioned about whether or not the officer should face charges for the shooting. They were provided the options of yes, no, and not sure. A chi-square independence test examined the relationship between medium of presentation and beliefs about whether the officer should face charges. The relationship between these variables was significant $\chi^2(4, N = 182) = 20.899, p < .001, \phi = .339$. Most people who saw the video responded "yes" (35.7%) or "not sure" (32.9%) while that rate was much less for both text ($yes = 12.1\%$, $not\ sure = 18.2\%$) and audio ($yes = 21.7\%$, $not\ sure = 23.9\%$).

A second chi-square independence test examined the relationship between officer reaction and beliefs about whether the officer should

face charges. The relationship between these variables was surprising given our results from the ANOVA tests: significant $\chi^2(4, N = 182) = 11.421, p = .022, \phi = .251$. However, there was little variation in the *yes* category ($relaxed = 19.6\%$, $self-preserving = 23.4\%$, and $crying = 26.4\%$) across officer reactions; the difference appears to be in the *no* ($relaxed = 39.1\%$, $self-preserving = 62.5\%$, and $crying = 48.6\%$) and *not sure* ($relaxed = 41.3\%$, $self-preserving = 14.1\%$, and $crying = 25.0\%$) responses.

Discussion

The medium of presentation (text, video, audio) in which a controversial police shooting was presented significantly impacted respondents' perceptions of the officer's justification for deadly force. Specifically, respondents who viewed the video condition were significantly less likely than those who simply read about or heard the same event to view the shooting as justified. Across medium of presentation conditions, displays of remorse did not increase respondents' perceptions of the justification of that shooting. Likewise, the common practice of contacting a union representative was not detrimental to the officer.

Our finding that the medium of presentation was significant is not particularly surprising given the prior evidence found by Culhane et al. (2016). Our findings echo Culhane et al.'s (2016) post-Ferguson findings: Video is harmful to public perceptions of the officer's actions, at least in the post-Ferguson era. As our experiment was conducted in the post-Ferguson era, this makes sense. However, it is worth considering that the effect of Ferguson found by Culhane et al. (2016) may fade with time, and may have already faded. Unfortunately, because we used a different video with different circumstances than they did, it is impossible for us to tell whether the similarity is a result of a post-Ferguson effect or is a result of the circumstances in our video.

While both the shooting in this experiment and the shooting in the Culhane et al. (2016) experiment used videos with many similarities, their findings support the idea that video of such an incident can be both detrimental and exculpating for the officer, depending on circumstances in society. Our research indicates that

Table 1
Comparison of Mean Scores Across Medium of Presentation

Medium comparison	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	Difference	<i>p</i>
Video to	4.09	.25		
Audio	5.00	.28	0.91	.018
Text	5.23	.24	1.14	.001
Audio to				
Text			0.23	.538

Note. *T* tests. Additional data are provided in the text.

that effect may not be influenced by officer reaction. In any event, our findings and Culhane et al.'s (2016) suggest that placing body cameras on police officers may result in significant changes to public perceptions of police activity. Those changes may, in some cases, be propolice and, in some cases, may be antipolice. Body cameras will, in short, change our perceptions for the better, for the worse, or for both.

Given what appears to be the dynamic impact body cameras play on public perceptions, officers and departments should be aware that, while a camera may help them prove their actions were justified, it may also simultaneously turn public opinion against their actions. While losing in the court of public opinion is likely not a concern of officers who (a) are threatened with a weapon, or (b) find that cameras help them in court, or at least in the review of their actions by the department, it could potentially be a concern for the police legitimacy and the legitimacy of prosecutorial decisions of justified homicide. This is, of course, not something that should be taken lightly.

Managing for the possibility of an erosion of legitimacy in an era of ever-present video recording is a problem the policing profession appears to be encountering already. The incidents in Ferguson, for example, show us that the perceived illegitimacy of the use of force has potentially explosive impacts on society. Among what good they may do, body cameras have the potential of exacerbating this already contentious issue by allowing the citizenry to see even more.

Finding that medium of presentation mattered was not our only finding; we also found that, in all mediums, the officer's reaction to the shooting had no significant effect on respondents' perceptions of the justification of that shooting. This finding suggests that seeing the officer's immediate reaction following a use-of-force incident is unlikely to sway public perceptions, and that the availability of that footage will not impact society in such a way as a remorseful or blasé attitude will be rewarded or punished. While this finding may be viewed as positive—officers cannot game the system and fake remorse in order to pursue more leniency—it also suggests that even if remorse is considered in a courtroom, it may not be important in the court of public opinion.

Limitations

This study has several important limitations worth considering before concluding. First and foremost, it is important to consider our timing. The data for this article were collected in the post-Ferguson era, and as Culhane et al. (2016) pointed out, perceptions of the justification of police use of force have shifted following the string of unjustified or questionably justified police shootings in the last several years. We cannot measure how much the timing of this study impacted our results, so further study may be necessary once policing finds itself in a better place relative to public perceptions.

As a practical matter, we chose to recruit our study participants from Amazon's M-Turk. This choice, while providing us with a geographically diverse population to sample at low cost, is not without downsides. While we utilized attention and timing checks to try to control for inattentive survey respondents, we were in no way able to duplicate the controls of a lab. It is certainly possible people were doing other things while the video played, or skimmed the text they were provided. Still, research has been supportive of using M-Turk as a participant pool (see Mason & Suri, 2012).

Finally, there are two important limitations of this study that open the door to further research. First, the composition of our sample in terms of gender and race is far from perfect. White men are overrepresented in our sample, but our racial breakdown for each of our nine conditions was too small to allow for statistical correction. We encourage anyone who does follow-up research on this to design their study so as to provide for racial analysis. Second, this study fails to take into account cues to the officer's level of remorse that are nonverbal—body language, facial expression, and so forth—and their consistency with verbalized remorse. Prior research suggests that such nonverbal cues of remorse, or lack thereof, shown by a dashcam or other camera could impact the perceived justification of that officer's use of force—especially if there is a difference between verbalized remorse and nonverbal cues (Ekman, 1957; Ekman & Keltner, 1997). While such an effect falls outside of the scope of this study, we believe follow-up on this issue is worthwhile.

Conclusion

We find that the medium through which a police shooting is presented to members of the public (text, video, audio) matters. Respondents who viewed the shooting were significantly more likely to perceive the shooting to be unjustified than people who read about or heard about the same incident. Additionally, we find that displayed remorse does not significantly impact, in any condition, the degree to which respondents believed the shooting was justified. These findings suggest that the wide-scale adoption of body cameras into police forces, and the release of footage from those cameras, may impact public perceptions of the behavior of police officers and that impact may be detrimental in the current context in which policing finds itself.

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- To be selected, it is critical to be a regular reader of the five to six empirical journals that are most central to the area or journal for which you would like to review. Current knowledge of recently published research provides a reviewer with the knowledge base to evaluate a new submission within the context of existing research.
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- Reviewing a manuscript takes time (1–4 hours per manuscript reviewed). If you are selected to review a manuscript, be prepared to invest the necessary time to evaluate the manuscript thoroughly.

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