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Police Misconduct, Media Coverage, and Public Perceptions of Racial Profiling: An Experiment

Lisa Graziano, Amie Schuck and Christine Martin

The purpose of this study was: (1) to assess the impact of an incident of racial profiling on residents’ attitudes about profiling; and (2) to examine the effects of exposure to a video clip of deliberation about the incident on residents’ beliefs about the causes of profiling. All residents, White and minority, were less likely to believe that Chicago police officers engaged in profiling after the incident. These findings suggest that attitudes about the prevalence of racial profiling are susceptible to the manner in which the media construct incidents of police misconduct. Exposure to the video clip was not related to differences in residents’ beliefs about the causes of profiling, but was related to differences in perceptions of the dangerousness of traffic stops. The findings highlight the need for more research on how media constructions of police misconduct influence attitudes about profiling and impact community-police relations.

Keywords attitudes about police; community policing; police misconduct; mass media

Research findings highlight the salience of race in predicting attitudes toward police, particularly that minorities tend to hold more negative views of police than Whites (Jacob, 1971; Scaglion & Condon, 1980; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Webb

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More recently, the debate surrounding race and policing has turned to the specific issue of racial profiling and whether police use race as a basis for stopping, questioning, and searching citizens (Harris, 2002). While the evidence available suggests that race and personal experiences are important in determining residents’ perceptions of the frequency with which police engage in racial profiling (Reitzel & Piquero, 2006; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002, 2005), much less is known about how highly publicized cases of alleged police misconduct impact residents’ perceptions. Studies in this area have generally focused on severe cases of misconduct, typically involving police brutality or the shooting of citizens (Jefferis, Kaminski, Holmes, & Hanley, 1997; Kaminski & Jefferis, 1998; Lasley, 1994; Sigelman, Welch, Bledsoe, & Combs, 1997; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Weitzer, 2002). Equally important, most studies have failed to consider how media constructions of these incidents influence public attitudes about racial profiling, particularly the manner in which the media and other claims makers, such as government officials and public leaders, shape public dialogue about the nature and meaning of such incidents.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of a high profile police-citizen encounter on attitudes about racial profiling from a random sample of Chicago residents. This study is unique in several ways. First, it examines the impact of a high profile incident of police misconduct that does not involve excessive use of force, but rather racial profiling. Second, it includes multiple points of short-term measurement, which facilitate the examination of changes in attitudes within the context of how competing constructions about the incident were being emphasized in the media. Third, it involves a second experiment that tests the impact of exposure to competing constructions of the incident. And fourth, this experiment was administered solely through the Internet and represents a new methodology for conducting experiments on important criminological topics.

**Theoretical Perspective**

**Media and the Social Construction**

From a social constructionist approach we assume that a “problem” is believed to be a problem because the public perceives it as such, not necessarily because the problem exists in objective reality. In other words, what qualifies as a problem to the American public at any given moment has more to do with what people are paying attention to, and how they perceive the issue, than with objective conditions. Within this context the media is a symbolic arena where various interest groups, institutions, and ideologies “struggle over the definition and construction of social reality” (Gurevitch & Levy, 1985, p. 19). Journalists manage the arena (Gans, 1979) and by “framing” the problem in a specific way they influence public perception of the underlying causes of the problem, the potential consequences of the problem, and they help establish criteria for
evaluating proposed solutions to the problem (Iyengar, 1991; Nelson & Kinder, 1996). The media frame is a symbolic construction of the issue that acts like a story line or plot providing coherence to discrete pieces of information (Gamson, 1992).

Media frames originate from both outside and within news organizations. Because journalists rely on outside sources for information, quotes, and analysis, individuals can use the media as a conduit for promoting a certain perspective and influencing the broader public (Gamson & Lasch, 1983). When an incident draws public attention, claims makers such as political leaders, law enforcement officials, professional experts, and activists can be seen to offer competing constructions about the nature of the problem (Best, 1991; Kasinsky, 1994). The media is positioned as mediating among these competing constructions, acting as a powerful filter which offers legitimacy to some claims while marginalizing others (Surette, 2007) and often favors claims made by politicians, criminal justice officials, and other noted authorities (Chermak, 1995; Sacco, 1995). Chermak (1997) argues that reliance on such officials as chief claims makers essentially serves to reaffirm the traditional practices these entities engage in and promote images that they have a vested interest in promoting. It has been noted that the media particularly relies on police as a quick credible source for information about crime, which often results in the promotion of police claims about crime and appropriate solutions (Ericson, 1989; Fishman, 1981).

Individual’s Response to News Frames

The literature on the impact of news framing is substantial and suggests that small differences in framing have significant effects on an individual’s perceptions and policy choices (Iyengar, 1991). Drawing on expectancy-value models of attitude formation (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), news frames are expected to influence an individual’s attitudes by placing different weights on pieces of information. By stressing certain facts, values, and beliefs the news frame suggests that certain considerations are more important than others. Through framing the news media places weights on pieces of information, and this weight system is believed to correspond to individuals’ perception of the relevance, importance, and reliability of the information (Anderson & Zalinski, 1991).

However, news frames do not influence everyone in the same manner. Research suggests there is an interaction between social experience and media framing. For example, in a series of experiments Wanke, Schwarz, and Noelle-Neumann (1995) found that respondents’ perceptions of their luck in life differed depending on whether the target comparison was one’s self or another person. In other research on the link between news and fear of crime, findings suggest that “affinity” or sharing the characteristics of the individuals portrayed in the media stories influence an individual’s receptivity to news frames (Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997).
Background on Attitudes about Racial Profiling

Demographics and Experiences

Just as race has been shown to be a key predictor of attitudes about police (Jacob, 1971; Skogan, 2006; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997), it is also a predictor for attitudes about racial profiling. Although Whites and minorities alike tend to disapprove of racial profiling (Weitzer & Tuch, 2005), minorities are more likely than Whites to regard racial profiling as being widespread (Reitzel & Piquero, 2006; Tyler & Wakslak, 2004; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002). Minorities are also more likely than Whites to believe that minorities are treated worse by police and minority communities receive inferior police services (Henderson, Cullen, Cao, Browning, & Kopache, 1997; Weitzer & Tuch, 1999, 2005). Such disparity between White and minority perceptions appear to extend to more fundamental beliefs about race and the causes of racial profiling. Whites may acknowledge that police treat minorities differently than Whites, but, as Tyler and Wakslak report, “whites generally regard it as a byproduct of neutral crime fighting activities and not of prejudice. Minorities more widely regard it as an expression of prejudice” (2004, p. 275). Indeed, Weitzer (2000) found that Black residents tended to perceive profiling as a result of racism. White residents, however, explained differential treatment of Blacks by police as a justifiable result of Blacks’ greater involvement in street crime. In this manner, more fundamental beliefs about race would seem to form the basis from which explanations for the causes of racial profiling are constructed. Ultimately, this disparity in perceptions contributes to minorities having less confidence in and support for police (Tyler, 2005; Weitzer & Tuch, 2005).

There is also evidence to suggest neighborhood context and socioeconomic status influence views on racially biased policing. Blacks in neighborhoods with low crime rates and less police activity were more likely to feel they receive similar treatment by police as Whites versus Blacks living in higher crime neighborhoods (Weitzer, 2000; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002). Yet such an assessment of unfair treatment by police did not extend to perceptions of racial profiling; the same citizens were actually less likely to feel racial profiling was widespread and displayed more support for racial profiling. Such differences in perceptions would seem to also be a function of the socioeconomic status of the resident rather than simply the neighborhood context, with better educated and higher income citizens expressing more negative views of racial profiling (Reitzel & Piquero, 2006).

Personal experiences with the police, particularly those in which residents believe they have been the target of racial profiling, have also emerged as strong predictors of perceptions about profiling. Perhaps not so surprisingly, bad experiences with police have been found to negatively impact perceptions of police (Cheurprakobkit, 2000; Schuck & Rosenbaum, 2005), although negative attitudes toward police that exist prior to such encounters may be just as influential in shaping assessments of the encounter as the actual nature of the
experience itself (Rosenbaum, Schuck, Costello, Hawkins, & Ring, 2005). In general, residents reporting negative experiences with police are more likely to feel that racial profiling is widespread and that they have been profiled by the police (Reitzel & Piquero, 2006; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002). Racial disparities persist in that minorities are more likely to report being arrested, handcuffed, and searched by police during stops (Durose, Schmitt, & Langan, 2006; Langan, Greenfeld, Smith, Durose, & Levin, 2001), as well as report more negative experiences with police (Skogan, 2005; Son & Rome, 2004; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Extending findings about general perceptions of racial profiling to experiences with profiling, minorities are also more likely to feel that police did not have a legitimate reason to stop them (Engel, 2005; Lundman & Kaufman, 2003) and that they have been profiled by police (Weitzer & Tuch, 200, 2005).

A majority of police agencies have responded to public concerns about racial profiling by enacting written policies (Hickman & Reaves, 2006) and increasingly collecting data on traffic stops (Fridell, Lunney, Diamond, & Kubu, 2001; Schultz & Withrow, 2004). While police response to incidents of misconduct may help restore resident attitudes to pre-incident levels (Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Weitzer, 2002), it has yet to be determined if responses to racial profiling yield similar benefits and doubtful perceptions of racial profiling can be properly addressed without more meaningful police-community dialogues on police practices (Farrell, McDevitt, & Buerger, 2002).

The Impact of High Profile Incidents of Police Misconduct

A small body of research suggests that exposure to incidents involving police use of excessive force negatively impacts attitudes toward police. In the weeks and months following widely publicized cases of police brutality, citizens are more likely to believe that police do not fairly enforce the law (Lasley, 1994) and use excessive force (Jefferis et al., 1997; Weitzer, 2002). They also express less support for the use of force as an appropriate police tactic (Sigelman et al., 1997). Kaminski and Jefferis (1998) found that although beliefs specifically related to police use of force worsened following publicized cases of police brutality, beliefs about police courtesy, quality of protection, responsiveness to neighborhood concerns, and response times were not adversely affected. They argue that more diffuse support for police is not affected by a single incident of police misconduct. Other research, however, suggests that not only does support for police significantly decline in the aftermath of a well-publicized incident of police misconduct, but it may also require several years for levels of public support to return to pre-incident levels (Weitzer, 2002). As with most of the above studies, the general trend of more negative views being held by minorities than Whites prior to the incident remains, and, in many cases, minority attitudes are more deeply affected post-incident than those of Whites (Tuch & Weitzer, 1997).

Perceptions of racial profiling and discrimination by police appear to be heightened by exposure to incidents of excessive use of force, which typically
involve minority victims, leading to increased beliefs that police would respond more quickly to calls for service from Whites than Blacks (Sigelman et al., 1997), harbor racist sentiments, and engage in brutality against Blacks (Weitzer, 2002). The frequency of exposure to media reports about any kind of police misconduct may also contribute to increased perceptions of the police engaging in misconduct (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004), particularly for minorities. As exposure to such reports increase, citizens are more likely to perceive officers as prejudiced, engaging in racial profiling, and discriminating against minorities and minority neighborhoods (Weitzer & Tuch, 2005).

Ultimately, studies of the impact of high profile policing incidents on residents’ attitudes have primarily focused on examining cases involving excessive use of force, either single incidents of brutality against citizens resulting in severe injuries (Jefferis et al., 1997; Kaminski & Jefferis, 1998; Lasley, 1994) or multiple incidents concerning both injury and death of citizens as a result of police actions (Sigelman et al., 1997; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Weitzer, 2002). In this regard, the impact of other types of high profile incidents of police misconduct on residents’ perceptions has yet to be fully explored. For example, research suggests that having a household member who experienced racial profiling or discrimination increases perceptions of the prevalence of racial profiling (Weitzer & Tuch, 2005); but what is the impact of other types of vicarious experiences, such as exposure to highly publicized cases of racial profiling?

Data

The data for this paper came from a larger study that was designed to: (1) test the feasibility of a new measurement system using Web-based community surveys; and (2) determine whether this system could strengthen community engagement, joint citizen-police problem solving, and community-police relations. The project involved nine waves of data collection that occurred between January 2005 and November 2005 in 51 police beats in Chicago. Participants were asked a wide range of questions including attitudes about the police, perceptions of public safety, participation and engagement in informal and formal social control, and assessments about their community. The data for this paper comes from four of the waves of Internet surveys.

The sampling strategy for the original study involved multiple steps. First, all 280 police beats in the city of Chicago were stratified by racial/ethnic composition (predominately White, Black, Latino, and no dominant racial or ethnic group). Second, to increase the likelihood of selecting beats with a high percentage of residents with Internet access, within each of the four racial/ethnic strata the beats were sorted using Year 2000 Census data by the percentage of residents with annual incomes of $40,000 or above. The first 21 beats were selected from the White and Black strata and the first 9 beats were selected from Latino strata. In the racially and ethnically heterogeneous stratum, groups of beats based on the largest racial or ethnic group represented were selected.
Three beats were selected that had a significant Black population; three beats were selected that had a significant Latino population; and three beats were selected that did not have a clear majority of any racial or ethnic group.

Using the geographic boundaries of the beats and the reverse telephone directory, sampling frames of residential telephone numbers were compiled for all 60 study beats. The Northern Illinois University survey lab used a telephone survey to recruit residents into the study. Because of time and resource issues, nine beats (three White, Black, and Latino each) were dropped from the study during the telephone recruitment phase of the project. Residents were excluded from the study if they were not 18 years or older, they did not have Internet access, or if they regularly attended Chicago Police Department CAPS meetings. The final number of completed interviews was collected from 1,976 residents from 51 beats. Using standard formulas established by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (1998), the pre-experiment telephone survey outcomes can be described in these terms: 11% response rate, 24% cooperation rate, 34% refusal rate, and 57% contact rate.

The 1,976 residents were asked to fill out monthly Web-based surveys over a seven month time period. The response rates for the four waves used in the current study are as follows: 37.2% for Time 1 (pre-incident), 33.6% for Time 2 (concurrent with incident), 31.7% for Time 3 (post-incident), and 22.1% for Time 4 (post-incident). These response rates are consistent with other studies that utilize a similar design (see Couper, 2000).

Experiment 1: A Natural Experiment

The Meeks Incident

On July 13, 2005, James Meeks, an African American state Senator and Minister at one of the largest Black churches in Illinois, was pulled over by a White Chicago police sergeant. Meeks was traveling with his wife, his son, a security guard and his driver. According to Meeks, after he exited the car and identified himself, the officer shouted: “Get back in the fucking car” (Ihejirika, 2005, p. 11). After he repeated his identity, Meeks alleged that the officer pulled his gun, stuck it in his face and said, “I know who you are ... Get back in the fucking car” (Ihejirika, 2005, p. 11). Black officials and community leaders expressed outrage over the incident and Mayor Daley ordered Chicago Police Superintendent Philip Cline to launch an investigation.

The media coverage of the incident started on July 14, 2005, the day after the incident. Coverage and responses to the incident waxed and waned, with the most coverage occurring during the end of July, August and the

1. Residents who regularly participated in Chicago’s community police program meetings (CAPS) were excluded from this sample because they were recruited to participate in a different component of the larger study. While it is possible that different effects may have been observed for these residents, less than 1% of residents in any given beat of Chicago attend CAPS meetings.
beginning of September 2005. The discussion of the media coverage for this paper is restricted to July 13 through September 30, 2005, which is the time period of data collection for this study. Over this period, 53 news articles appeared in major Chicago papers. Over 33,000 words were written and several stories appeared on the front page of the metro section of the Chicago Tribune and Sun-Times papers. The story was carried on all three of the major television networks and was discussed on several local media outlets including public television and radio.

The police department’s response to the incident was swift. On July 17, 2005, Superintendent Cline visited Meeks’ church and addressed the 5,000 member congregation stating "we recognize that there are officers who fail to treat all residents with dignity and respect …” and "[This is] an opportunity to more closely examine the relationship that exists between the police and the people we serve” (McNeil, 2005, p. 1). Cline went on to say, “We do not accept … any form of biased-based policing” (Associated Press, 2005, p. 4). Cline also informed the congregation that the police department’s Office of Professional Standard was conducting an “expedited” review of the traffic stop.

Over the course of the next few months, more details came out about the incident. On August 23, 2005, the Chicago Sun-Times reported that Meeks’ driver was found guilty of failing to stop at a stop sign, driving left of the center lane, failing to wear a seat belt, and operating an uninsured vehicle. The driver was ordered to pay a $190 fine (Esposito & Main, 2005).

On September 2, 2005, papers reported the details of the police department’s internal review. The investigation by the Office of Professional Standards found that the officer was justified in pointing his gun at Meeks because Meeks repeatedly refused the officer’s orders to get back into the car. Superintendent Cline reprimanded the officer for using profanity to gain control of the situation, but otherwise believed the officer acted appropriately.

Participants

The participants were restricted to those that had valid responses for the Web-based racial profiling scale at all four time periods (N = 306). Seventy-one percent of the sample was White, 23% Black, and 6% other. The other racial category was primarily composed of Latinos; however, there were also a number of individuals of Asian descent. There were more females (64.4%) than males and the average age was 47.9 (SD = 13.7). The sample was well educated with a majority of participants reporting having at least a bachelor’s degree.

Measures

The dependent variable is a racial profiling scale based on five items. The participants were asked how often they thought that Chicago Police officers considered
race when deciding which cars to stop, which people to stop, who to search, who to arrest and take to jail, and how quickly to respond to calls for help. Responses were coded on a five-point scale ranging from never which was coded "1," to all the time which was coded as "5". Table 1 presents question wording and the descriptive statistics for the racial profiling items measured at Time 1.

Because the dependent variable is a scale, factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted to determine whether the items represented a unidimensional construct. For the Time 1 measures, all five items loaded on one factor with factor loading for each of the items greater than .70. The factor explained 75% of the variance. The process was repeated for the items at each of the time points and similar results were obtained. The racial profiling scale was created by summing all five items. The internal reliability of the scale was high (Time 1 $\alpha = .91$; Time 2 $\alpha = .93$; Time 3 $\alpha = .92$; Time 4 $\alpha = .91$). Higher values on the scale indicate stronger beliefs about the use of racial profiling.

### Results

To test for changes in the residents’ attitudes we used a full-factorial repeated measures analysis of variance with the racial profiling scale as the repeated factor and the resident’s race as the between-subjects factor (see Table 2 and Figure 1). The findings indicate that there was a significant decrease in residents’ perceptions about profiling from Time 1 to Time 2 and from Time 1 to Time 4. The change from Time 1 to Time 4 was not as large as the change from...
Time 1 to Time 2. The residents’ attitudes toward profiling at Time 3 were very similar to their original attitudes reported at Time 1.2

In terms of the time-race interaction, the results indicate that there were significant racial differences in the initial decreases in perceptions of racial profiling (see Figure 2). Respondents in the other non-White group experienced a much larger drop than either Whites or Blacks. There were, however, no racial differences in the overall downward trend in attitudes about profiling.3

Discussion

Our analyses indicate two key findings. First, Blacks and other non-Whites expressed beliefs of more widespread use of race as a basis for decision

2. In the sixth wave of the Internet surveys, respondents were asked if they had heard about the incident involving the Chicago Police Department and State Senator Reverend Meeks. Out of the 306 respondents, a majority (79.4%) reported having heard about the incident. Eight percent reported having read about it in the newspaper, 21% reported having heard about it on the TV or radio news, and about 50.5% reported having read about it in the newspaper and heard about it in the news (TV or radio).

3. Because the data came from a larger study on attitudes toward the police that included an experimental component, we tested whether there were statistically significant differences between the groups in the larger study on the racial profiling scale. Results from the difference of means tests suggested that there were no significant differences on the racial profiling scale between groups as categorized by the experimental conditions in the larger study.
making by police than Whites, which supports prior research regarding race as a key predictor of beliefs about the extent to which police engage in racial profiling (Reitzel & Piquero, 2006; Tyler & Wakslak, 2004; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002). Second, contrary to previous findings, beliefs about the prevalence of profiling decreased in the months following the incident. Such a change occurred for all racial groups, but was most pronounced for the other non-White residents.

Figure 1 Mean scores for racial profiling scale.
The second finding is most striking because it is counter to prior research. One reason for the inconsistent findings may be the nature of the police misconduct in question, which involved verbal rather than physical force; while the sergeant who initiated the traffic stop drew a gun on Meeks, at no time did responding officers use physical force against him. In this regard, the ability to
draw direct comparisons between incidents of physical force and verbal force may be limited, especially given the greater importance residents generally attach to misconduct involving physical force. However, this does not necessarily account for why our findings indicate perceptions of racial profiling ultimately decreased after the incident, particularly when the misconduct in question involved allegations of racial profiling.

To understand the observed effects, it is necessary to place them within the context of how public dialogue about the Meeks incident was constructed by the three primary claims makers: the Chicago Police Department (CPD), local government officials, and Reverend Meeks. The collection of data at Time 2, the first point at which resident attitudes about racial profiling declined, occurred concurrently with initial coverage of the incident. Meeks was first to offer a construction of the incident, positioning it as one of racial profiling. Implicit within this construction was that the actions of the sergeant were based on Meeks’ race, as evidenced by Meeks’ initial comments to the media: “That’s the moment that you realize that you are black. No matter what you have achieved or accomplished, you are still black” (Ihejirika, 2005, p. 11). Yet the dialogue about racial profiling was immediately countered by a competing construction offered by the Chief of Patrol that positioned the incident within the context that traffic stops posed a threat to officer safety. The Chicago Police Sergeants Association echoed this sentiment as justification for requiring citizens to remain in their car during such stops. When the police Superintendent spoke at Meeks’ church, pledging an expedited investigation of the incident and stating unprofessional behavior, including profiling, was unacceptable, the media emphasized the racial profiling construction (e.g., “Top cop attends Meeks’ church, blasts profiling”, Konkol, 2005). The police construction about traffic stop behavior began to gain acceptance as evidenced by Meeks himself calling for a code of conduct to be established for police and citizens during traffic stops.

The police deflected attention from their behavior and racial profiling by constructing an explanation about the incident that focused on Meeks’ behavior during the stop. Arguably, the initial decrease in residents’ perceptions of racial profiling reflects acceptance of the police construction about the incident within the media, one that marginalized discourse on racial profiling as a social problem. While the racial profiling construction was still to be found in media accounts, it was subject to a great deal of criticism which also may have contributed to residents’ rejection of the idea that racial profiling was prevalent.

At Time 3, residents’ attitudes about racial profiling increased. While this increase was not significant, it nevertheless appears at a point when the public discourse had returned to racial profiling. Just prior to the Time 3 data collection, Chicago’s city council launched hearings on racial profiling in which dozens of Blacks spoke about their personal experiences with racial profiling. Where the Meeks incident itself may have seemed too ambiguous to qualify as racial profiling, it is possible that reintroducing the issue as a social problem served to
heighten attitudes about racial profiling. Here, the racial profiling construction was propagated by dozens of individuals rather than a single person. Yet, such an impact was slight and ultimately not sustained, with the attempt to start a dialogue about racial profiling as a social problem again marginalized as details of the official investigation were leaked.

By Time 4, residents’ attitudes had not only decreased once more, but were significantly lower than they had been at Time 1. Again, we see the police construction of the Meeks incident with its focus on resident behavior during traffic stops supersede the racial profiling claim. By Time 4, not only had Meeks’ driver been fined for the traffic violations, the CPD had completed its investigation and reprimanded the sergeant involved for using profanity. The use of a gun in the incident was ruled justified because Meeks allegedly refused orders by the sergeant to return to the car before the gun was drawn. This was followed several weeks later by the announcement that cameras would be placed in patrol cars to “enhance accountability for officers and citizens during traffic stops” (Wang, 2005, p. 1), indirectly reinforcing the police construction of citizen responsibility for proper behavior at traffic stops. During this time, the racial profiling construction had all but disappeared from the public dialogue.

Our findings suggest that residents’ perceptions of racial profiling are more malleable than prior studies suggested and can be shaped by a confluence of factors. Not only has exposure to media coverage of police misconduct been shown to affect attitudes on racial profiling (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004, 2005), but also there was reason to believe that actions undertaken by the police in the aftermath of high profile incidents of misconduct contribute to restoring resident attitudes to their pre-incident levels (Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Weitzer, 2002). To this end, we would argue that media construction of misconduct incidents and the role of relevant claims makers should be taken into consideration when examining the impact of such incidents.

As noted by other researchers, the media has a unique relationship with police as primary claims makers about crime problems because of their accessibility as a credible source for crime information (Ericson, 1989; Fishman, 1981) and is more likely to promote constructions that maintain traditional practices of government entities (Chermak, 1995, 1997; Sacco, 1995). Our examination of the media coverage of the Meeks incident would seem to offer support for such a relationship.

Because effects on attitudes were observed across all three racial groups, our findings also suggest Blacks and other minorities are just as susceptible as Whites to the influences of media constructions about incidents of police misconduct. That minorities in the other racial/ethnic group, which consists primarily of Latinos and Asians, exhibited the greatest decline in attitudes suggests that they were particularly influenced by the media constructions. Latinos tend to hold more intermediate views about profiling than Blacks or Whites (Tyler, 2005; Weitzer & Tuch, 2005), so it is possible that their beliefs about profiling are less firmly held, and thus more susceptible to
external influences. Because similar data are not available for Asians, this remains a matter for speculation and indicates the need for further research. An important limitation of this study is that we did not track the timing of resident awareness of media coverage and cannot directly link changes in the media construction of the Meeks incident with changes in resident attitudes. Yet our findings are highly suggestive of such a relationship and support the relevance of examining the manner in which various claims makers attempt to secure the dominant construction about police misconduct incidents and the relationship between changing constructions and resident attitudes.

Experiment 2: The Video

Methodology

Participants

The participants for Experiment 2 included all respondents that participated in the last wave of the Chicago Internet Project (N = 437). Sixty-seven percent of the participants were White, 24% Black, and 9% other non-White. The average age was 48 years old (SD = 13.7), there were more females (61.8%) than males, and the average education level was a bachelor's degree.

Procedures

In the original study, each of the racial/ethnic strata beats were matched in groups of three based on income, education, homeownership, and the robbery rate. For Experiment 2, all residents from a match beat grouping (all residents from three beats) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions—control or experiment. As part of the seventh and final Internet survey, participants in the experimental condition were asked to watch a short video taken from a public television discussion about the Meeks incident that originally aired on July 19, 2005. The video lasted approximately two minutes and shows an exchange between the show's host and a Chicago reporter regarding the two primary constructions about the Meeks incident that were offered by claims makers. The issue of validity of the police construction that traffic stops are dangerous for police officers is raised at the beginning of the exchange. Its legitimacy as a claim is then refuted with the competing construction of racial profiling as a social problem which included two main messages: (1) racial profiling is something "prominent state leaders" acknowledge as a "pervasive phenomenon"; and (2) a need for discussion about the Meeks incident to examine the broader implications of police strategy that sends more officers into
minority communities. The respondents in the control group were not shown the video.  

**Measures**

For the second experiment there were six dependent variables. The first dependent variable consisted of a racial profiling question about how often police officers in Chicago use race when deciding who to stop for traffic violations (the same as described earlier). This question was asked twice in the same on-line survey (pre-test $M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.11$; post-test $M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.09$). Two other dependent variables were tied specifically to statements made in the video and consisted of asking the respondents how strongly they agreed with the following statements: (1) traffic stops are very dangerous for police officers (Range = 1–4, $M = 3.11$, $SD = .77$), and (2) racial profiling by police is wrong, but unavoidable (Range = 1–4, $M = 2.31$, $SD = .92$). Higher scores indicate stronger agreement with the statements. For the last three dependent variables the participants were asked a series of questions about racial profiling that started with the statement "Racial profiling occurs because". Respondents were then required to choose between one of two options to complete the statement. One option reflected structural causes of racial profiling while the other option reflected individual causes (see Table 4 for question wording and descriptive statistics).

**Results**

To test the effects of viewing the video we used a full-factorial repeated measures analysis of variance with the item as the repeated factor and the respondents’ race and experimental condition as the between-subjects factor (see Table 3 and Figure 3). Based on this analysis, on average, all participants reported higher levels of beliefs about the influence of race in traffic stops the second time the question was asked (pre-test $M = 3.23$, $SD = .11$; post-test $M = 3.45$, $SD = .08$): $F(1, 419) = 14.04$, $p = <.001$. There were no significant pre–post differences between the control and experimental groups.  

4. To ensure that respondents from the control group would not see the video, two Internet surveys with different Web addresses were created—one addressed to the control group, the other addressed to the experimental group. Survey questions were identical for both groups and presented in the same order. The only exception was that respondents assigned to the experimental group were presented a two-minute video and respondents from the control group were not. To keep the surveys as similar as possible for both groups, the questions about racial profiling and the video for the experimental group were in the last section of the survey.

5. In the sixth wave of the Internet surveys, respondents were asked if they had heard about the incident involving the Chicago Police Department and State Senator Reverend Meeks. Out of the 437 respondents, a majority of them (80.1%) reported having heard about the incident. Seven percent reported having read about it in the newspaper, 22.6% reported having heard about it on the TV or radio news, and about 50.4% reported having read about it in the newspaper and heard about it in the news (TV or radio).
Regarding the post-test only questions about the dangerousness of traffic stops and general attitudes about racial profiling, the participants in the experimental group ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .75$) had a higher level of agreement to the statement that traffic stops are very dangerous for police officers than the participants who were assigned to the control group ($M = 3.02$, $SD = .79$): $F(1, 434) = 4.15$, $p = .04$. There was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of the level of agreement to the statement that racial profiling by police is wrong, but unavoidable (control group $M = 2.30$, $SD = .95$; experimental group $M = 2.32$, $SD = .92$): $F(1, 427) = .07$, $p = .78$.

Regarding the results for the two option statements, slightly more respondents chose that racial profiling occurs because police strategy sends officers to minority communities (Option A) vs. some police officers are prejudiced against certain groups (Option B). Fifty-two percent chose Option A and 48% chose Option B. For the second statement, many more respondents chose racial profiling occurs because police strategies focus on minority community vs. more minorities commit crimes than Whites (74.1% Option A vs. 25.9% Option B). For the final statement, racial profiling can best be understood as … , the majority of respondents chose that it is a broader social issue vs. a problem with particular officers (78.0% Option A vs. 22.0% Option B).

There were significant differences in the option selected by the race/ethnicity of the respondent (see Table 4). Blacks and others were much more likely than Whites to believe that racial profiling is a product of prejudice than police strategy. Although the majority of Blacks believe that racial profiling could best be understood as a broader social problem, more Blacks than Whites or other non-Whites felt that it could be best understood as a problem with particular officers. In terms of the experiment, there were no significant differences between the respondents from the control group and

Table 3 Analysis of variance results for pre-post Experiment 2 (video) question referring to the prevalence in which race is used to determine which cars to stop for possible traffic violations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$\eta$</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Between subjects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>50.11</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race $\times$ Condition</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>(1.79)$^1$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Within subjects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-post</td>
<td>14.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-post $\times$ Race</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-post $\times$ Condition</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-post $\times$ Race $\times$ Condition</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-post error</td>
<td>419 (.21)$^1$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^1$Values in parentheses represent mean square errors.
Figure 3  Mean scores for the question regarding how often Chicago police officers use race in deciding who to stop for traffic violations by condition.
the respondents from the experimental group for any of the option statement items.

Discussion

To explore the manner in which perceptions of racial profiling may be influenced by media constructions of incidents, a second set of analyses were conducted that examined the impact of viewing a two-minute clip from a local television program. In the video, the police construction, which positions the incident within the context of the danger of traffic stops, is directly challenged by the racial profiling construction, which positions the incident as resulting from a larger social problem. While residents’ beliefs about the prevalence, inevitability, and causes for racial profiling were not impacted by viewing the video, their perception of traffic stops as being dangerous for officers was heightened.

Respondents in both groups were evenly divided between the two beliefs about the cause of racial profiling—one belief assigning responsibility to police prejudice, and the other assigning responsibility to the police strategy of sending more officers to minority communities. However, a majority of respondents, regardless of group conditions, rejected the notion that racial profiling occurs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Results for Experiment 2 (video) post-test only questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial profiling occurs because:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option A: Some police officers are prejudiced against certain groups</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option B: Police strategy sends officers to minority communities</td>
<td>62.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial profiling occurs because:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option A: Police strategies focus on minority communities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option B: More minorities commit crimes than whites</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial profiling can best be understood as:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option A: A broader social issue</td>
<td>80.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option B: A problem with particular officers</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p < .001.
because of greater minority criminality or problems with individual officers and supported the belief that it was a byproduct of police strategy and best understood as a broader social issue. Differences in beliefs by racial categories ultimately support previous findings that Whites are more likely to feel racial profiling occurs because of strategies that send more police into minority communities as a result of greater involvement of minorities in crime while minorities attribute profiling to racism (Tyler & Wakslak, 2004; Weitzer, 2000).

The fact that all of the residents reported stronger beliefs about the use of race as a context for traffic stops the second time they were asked suggests the presence of testing effects, with residents becoming sensitized by the previous use of this item. As with the previous experiment, residents in the other category, primarily Latinos and Asians, appeared particularly susceptible to the testing effects, suggesting again that their views may be more transient and easily influenced by dialogue about racial profiling or other external influences. The subject of racial profiling would appear to be prone to the same problems of measurement as other phenomena, particularly the difficulty of overcoming testing effects when the interval between pre- and post-tests is not very great (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

Residents who viewed the video expressed stronger beliefs regarding the danger officers faced during traffic stops than those residents who did not view the video. This suggests that resident beliefs about the nature of certain police practices can be influenced by media constructions about those practices. As we argued with Experiment 1, police construction of the Meeks incident as being explained within the context of the danger that traffic stops posed for officers succeeded as the accepted construction by the media and possibly influenced the decrease in resident perceptions of racial profiling. The findings of Experiment 2 seem to further indicate that media constructions can influence public attitudes about police practices. Because this experiment was conducted at a later stage in the media coverage of the Meeks incident when the police construction had largely been accepted as the primary explanation for the event, it is possible that the mere mention of the danger of traffic stops in the video served to reemphasize popular acceptance of this particular construction.

Resident beliefs about the causes of racial profiling were not impacted by viewing the video. This suggests that the video may have been too limited an intervention to exert influence over resident attitudes on the causes of racial profiling, although this does not account for the observed effect on beliefs about traffic stops. It seems more likely that the observed effects have more to do with the different nature of the beliefs that were targeted in this study. While residents may have had personal experiences with traffic stops by police, it is unlikely they held firm beliefs about how dangerous traffic stops were for police. In this regard, their attitudes about traffic stops may have been more easily influenced by viewing the video. Attitudes about race and racism are likely to reflect underlying beliefs about society and how individuals behave; as such, these beliefs are highly resistant to change.
We would argue that the primary value of this study is that it highlights the need for making a distinction between the different types of beliefs when examining factors influencing perceptions of racial profiling. While the findings of the natural experiment previously presented in this paper indicate attitudes about the prevalence of racial profiling and that these attitudes were susceptible to media constructions of incidents of misconduct, the current experiment supports the idea that attitudes about the causes of racial profiling are not so transient nor easily influenced by deliberate shifts in the public dialogue such as the one provided when the video was shown to residents. Some attitudes about racial profiling, such as those concerning prevalence, may be far more transient than the underlying belief systems which support them.

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that it is important to examine the manner in which media constructions of police misconduct influence public attitudes. To understand why public perceptions of racial profiling decreased after a well-publicized incident of alleged racial profiling, it was necessary to examine how the incident was constructed by the primary claims makers and which construction emerged as the dominant explanation. Without this examination, the decreasing attitudes about racial profiling would have made little sense. We believe that media construction of high profile incidents of police misconduct is integral to broader understanding of how attitudes are influenced by external factors. Further, while attitudes about the prevalence of racial profiling appear susceptible to media constructions, beliefs about the causes of profiling do not seem as easily influenced.

Although the current study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on media effects, it is not without limitations. First, the data were collected from one large urban city with a well-established community policing orientation, and while the response rates are comparable to studies with similar designs, they are still rather low. Further, the participating respondents were substantially more educated and affluent than the general population. All of these factors limit the generalizability of the findings. There is some research that suggests that socio-demographics may moderate media effects. For example, Chiricos et al. (1997) found that the positive relationship between fear and television news existed only for White middle-aged women. Research also suggests that education and social class may influence what types of media residents use (Newton, 1999), as well as their ability to recall information about news stories (Price & Zaller, 1993). More affluent and educated residents may be more likely to read in-depth newspaper stories vs. watch TV news, and may be more susceptible to news framing than less affluent and less educated residents. Second, the research was conducted with a sample of residents who agreed to participate in a longitudinal study of policing via the Internet.
Because of this, the respondents may be more interested in policing and/or sensitive to policing issues than other residents in Chicago. The generalizability of these findings needs to be confirmed with research using more heterogeneous samples and in different city contexts.

The use of Internet surveys represents a new methodology for the collection of valid and reliable data and does not appear to differ greatly from traditional methods (e.g., paper and telephone surveys) in terms of issues such as measurement or participation. Survey software has advanced to a degree where few technological problems were experienced in the administration and completion of surveys. To this end, researchers should continue to explore the use of Internet surveys for its utility in conducting experiments, especially for studies requiring systematic, long-term data collection. There also remains a need for further research in several areas. Examination of the impact of high profile incidents should expand to explore a broad range of police actions such as racial profiling or other controversial police actions that may be ambiguous as to whether police have engaged in misconduct but which nonetheless may impact public support for police. Such research should be conducted within the context of media coverage and how incidents are constructed, including multiple points of measurement to assess how constructions impact both short- and long-term changes in citizen attitudes. This is particularly true in relation to the need to further determine the extent to which media constructions shape or otherwise impact beliefs about racial profiling.

References


