The Rules of (Dis)Engagement:

Black Youth and their Strategies for Navigating Police Contact[1]

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ABSTRACT

Prior work on youth-police relations has examined young people's general perceptions of the police, their differential treatment by police officers, and officers' discretion in dealing with youth. Yet, researchers have largely neglected the question of how young people attempt to shape these encounters. I address this critical gap, while also incorporating the experiences of "on track" youth and young women—two groups that are not exempt from police contact but traditionally ignored in the youth-police literature. Drawing on semi-structured group and individual interviews with 19 black young people in New York City, I investigate the strategies they employ or subscribe to in navigating police contact. Three types of strategies emerged from my analysis: avoidance, management, and symbolic resistance. Avoidance strategies are marked by young people's attempts to preemptively steer clear of officers on the street. Management strategies are employed by young people during police encounters to limit risk or harm, while symbolic resistance is a subtle tactic used by some youth to preserve their dignity in these interactions. This study also considers the gender differences in respondents' approaches and offers new insights into how they assess their police interactions in an era of highly publicized incidents of police brutality.

KEY WORDS: youth; police; race; gender; qualitative methods.

I. INTRODUCTION

Highly publicized incidents of police brutality placed a national spotlight on the rifts between police and communities they serve (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015). Social scientists, however, have long been interested in the topic of citizen-police relations. While researchers have primarily focused on the adult population, there is a burgeoning literature on relations between youth and the police (Weitzer and Brunson 2009). This body of work largely focuses on young people's frequency of police contact, their perceptions of the police, and their treatment by officers.

A topic that has received considerably less attention in the youth-police relations literature is how young people attempt to manage their interactions with officers. While police-centered studies demonstrate that officers are more inclined to arrest those who defy their authority, researchers have largely neglected the question of how youth negotiate their encounters with officers (Black and Reiss 1970; Weisburd et al. 2000; Weitzer and Brunson 2009). Yet it is crucial to understand how both parties approach the social interaction if we are to fully understand the relational dynamics of youth-police encounters. This study sets out to examine how young people approach their interactions with law enforcement with an emphasis on black youth. I conducted semi-structured group and individual interviews with black 19 young people living in New York City and I rely on this rich qualitative data to uncover the strategies they use or subscribe to in navigating police interactions or avoiding them altogether.

This study is guided by three research questions: (1) What strategies do "on track" black youth employ or subscribe to for managing police contact? (2) How do they construct these strategies? (3) How might their strategies vary by gender? For the purposes of this study, "on track" refers to young people who express a commitment to mainstream middle-class aspirations

and are connected to school or the labor market (DeLuca et al. 2016). The narratives of these young people challenge the conventional wisdom that "respectable" black youth have better relations with the police compared to their more disadvantaged counterparts (Harris 2014; Brunson and Weitzer 2011). This study demonstrates that "on track" black youth experience a continuum of police contact ranging from violent to virtually nonexistent.

Study respondents describe three dominant types of strategies for navigating police contact: *avoidance*, *management*, and *symbolic resistance*. Avoidance strategies are marked by young people's attempts to preemptively steer clear of officers on the street. Management strategies are employed by young people during police encounters to limit risk or harm, while symbolic resistance is a subtle tactic used by some youth to maintain their dignity in these interactions. The young people in this study pull from various sources to construct these strategies, including parental advice, after school programs, and social media. In the black community, anecdotes concerning police contact and lessons on how one should interact with police officers abound (Brunson and Weitzer 2011). However, relatively few studies have examined how this knowledge translates into everyday practice. This study addresses this critical gap and also offers new insights into how black youth assess police contact in an era of highly publicized incidents of police brutality (McLaughlin 2015).

II. BACKGROUND

When asked about their general impressions of law enforcement, most Americans express positive views. For example, recent opinion polls suggest that about two-thirds of the public have warm feelings toward police and a little over half have confidence in the police (Fingerhut 2017; Norman 2017). However, these aggregate statistics mask significant racial differences. Existing research on this topic points to a racial hierarchy in citizens' perceptions of police, with whites

expressing the most favorable views followed by Latinos and blacks. (Fingerhut 2017; Morin and Stepler 2016; Norman 2017; Weitzer and Brunson 2015). In fact, research by Weitzer and Tuch (2006) shows that blacks are more inclined to perceive police bias against Latinos than Latinos are themselves to express this belief. A multitude of macro- and micro-level predictors can shape an individual's attitudes toward police. Macro-level predictors include "factors that transcend one's direct experiences," such as "mass media reporting on the police, neighborhood conditions, or city-level characteristics" (Weitzer and Tuch 2006: 17-8). Micro-level predictors include one's demographic characteristics and prior police contact (Weitzer and Tuch 2006).

Race is a consistent predictor of one's quality of police contact. Findings from a national survey of Americans who had a face-to-face police interaction in 2008 show that while white, black, and Latino drivers experienced a similar rate of traffic stops, blacks were two times more likely than Latinos and three times more likely than whites to be searched during a stop. Black drivers also were more likely to be arrested (Eith and Durose 2011). Many ethnographic studies document blacks' strained relations and discriminatory experiences with police across time and place (Anderson 1999; Boyles 2015; Chambliss 1994; Drake and Cayton 1962; Goffman 2014).

Youth Experiences by Race and Gender

Age is another important factor influencing individual attitudes toward and personal interactions with the police. Research shows that young people generally hold less positive views of the police compared to adults (Taylor et al. 2001). Solis and colleagues (2009) attribute this to their more "frequent, negative public encounters with officers" (p. 44). Data from the 2005 Youth Culture Survey indicate that a majority of young people between the ages of 15 to 25 have had an involuntary police encounter (Cohen 2005). Sixty-eight percent of white respondents, 61 percent of black respondents, and 59 percent of Latino respondents in this national survey

reported having been stopped at some point in their lives. However, black survey respondents were more likely to report unfair treatment by the police.

Studies generally show that legal cynicism is most prevalent among black youth (Brunson and Weitzer 2009; Taylor et al. 2001). Research incorporating Latinos youth largely suggests that their views of the police are less favorable than those of whites, but more favorable than those of African Americans (Carr et al. 2007; Hagan et al. 2005; Taylor et al. 2001). In their interviews with young people across three Philadelphia neighborhoods, Carr and colleagues (2007) found that Latino study participants were more likely to say positive things about the police than their black counterparts.

Young minority men are more often the targets of aggressive policing (Fine et al. 2003). However, as Brunson and Miller (2006) demonstrate, young minority women are not immune from negative police contact. The young men in their study often described violent physical contact in their encounters with police, including "being pushed against walls or the ground, having pockets rifled through or mouths probed" (p. 546). While such aggression was typically at the extreme end of young women's police encounters, they reported receiving harsher treatment when in the presence of male peers and were more likely to be stopped for minor offenses, such as curfew violations (Brunson and Miller 2006). A recent study by Rengifo and McCallin (2017) found that although young women of color were less likely to experience involuntary police contact, they framed their interactions more negatively than their male counterparts. Their negative appraisals of police are often based on failed requests for police assistance and second-hand accounts of hostile encounters.

Youth Responses to Law Enforcement

Bringing their negative views of police officers into an encounter can be detrimental for young people, especially if these views influence their behavior towards officers. Prior studies on police behavior suggest that a citizen's demeanor during an interaction may be crucial for determining how officers use their discretion. For instance, studies indicate that officers are more inclined to arrest individuals whom they perceive as defying their authority (Black and Reiss 1970) or displaying a "bad attitude" (Weisburd et al. 2000:5). An officer's conduct can simultaneously shape how a young person reacts in an encounter. Research shows that youth may be more inclined to defy a police command or adopt an outwardly hostile demeanor when faced with what they perceive as unfair treatment (Gau and Brunson 2010). However, few studies address the question of how young people strategically attempt to manage police contact.

One paper that addresses this question is Weitzer and Brunson's (2009) qualitative study of three disadvantaged St. Louis neighborhoods. The authors examined the strategies of 45 black and white adolescent males who engaged in delinquent activities or were at risk of delinquency. They found that their respondents employed three main strategies, including overt resistance, lodging a formal complaint, and avoidance. Overt resistance entailed disregarding officer commands, while lodging a complaint involved filing a formal grievance of police misconduct. Systematic evasion was one form of avoidance that entailed ignoring officers unless contact was necessary. At its extreme, avoidance involved running from the police.

The present study responds to Weitzer and Brunson's (2009) call for further investigation of how adolescents from a variety of backgrounds manage their interactions with the police. This research extends beyond the traditional frame of marginalized, inner city young men—who are often the subjects of youth-police research—to focus on the experiences of urban, black youth of both genders who by many accounts fit the "decent" or "on track" orientation

(Anderson 1999; DeLuca et al. 2016). I predict that these young people are more likely to have been ingrained with respectability politics—a black middle-class ideology that extols the virtues of "self-care and self-correction" for social mobility and white acceptance (Harris 2014:33). As a result, they may be more inclined than their "street oriented" peers to stress self-presentation, compliance, and other behaviors in line with this philosophy (Anderson 1999).

III. SETTING AND METHODS

Local and National Context

The setting for this study is New York City (NYC). This city was recently home to a massive stop-and-frisk program. Over five million street stops were recorded by the New York City Police Department (NYPD) between 2003—the first year of publicly available data—and 2015 (NYPD 2016a). Based on my analysis of the NYPD Stop, Question, and Frisk (SQF) Database, 49 percent of the total stops recorded over the 2003-2015 period involved young people between the ages of 14 and 24—the vast majority of whom were black and Latino males. NYC youth come into direct contact with law enforcement not only on the street, but also in their schools. The city's public schools are patrolled by about 5,000 school safety agents and 200 uniformed police officers employed by the NYPD (Nolan 2011).

Beyond their local context, young people are increasingly exposed to vicarious incidents of police brutality across the nation through the news and social media. The participants in this study often invoked high-profile incidents of police violence involving black victims when discussing their views of the police and their strategies for negotiating police contact. The events they most often cited were the deaths of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile. Video footage of Garner, Sterling, and Castile's fatal police encounters went viral on social media and were aired repeatedly on television news. Participants also described

viewing a variety of other social media videos, ranging from those depicting police officers physically assaulting black youth in classrooms to officers treating black children to ice cream.

Participants and Recruitment

This study is based on data from both semi-structured group interviews and individual interviews with a total 19 self-identified black youth living in four NYC boroughs: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens. I did not seek a representative sample of all black youth in New York City. Rather, I selected a purposive sample of "on track" black youth of both genders. DeLuca and colleagues (2016) define "on track" youth as those who were either in school or working, and who expressed a commitment to mainstream goals (e.g., a college degree and a middle-class occupation). The narratives of this particular group of young people offer a new perspective on youth-police relations since the existing research on this topic tends to focus on marginalized young men (for exceptions, see Brunson and Miller 2006; Shedd 2015). As this study demonstrates, "on track" black youth are not shielded from personal and vicarious police contact, especially in the social media age.

As shown in Table 1, study participants included nine males and ten females. Their ages ranged from 17 to 23, with a mean age of 19. At the time of the interviews, all except one participant reported either being in high school or college, and a little more than half reported having a part-time or full-time job.

[Table 1 about here]

I employed three strategies to recruit study participants. First, I shared recruitment materials with my personal network of NYC-based adults who regularly work and volunteer with the study population, such as teachers and mentors. Some of these individuals put me in direct contact with young people who met my study requirements. Second, I shared recruitment materials with three

NYC-based organizations that I gained access to through my network: *Our Kids*, *Project Freedom*, and *Empowered*. These organizations provide after school programming for youth of color. *Our Kids* runs a program in partnership with the NYPD called Dialogue, which seeks to foster positive relations between urban youth and the police. *Project Freedom* trains youth in community activism and hosts regular workshops to educate participants about contemporary social problems, including police brutality. *Empowered* is an intimate mentoring program for high-school aged girls with college aspirations. To balance out the gender distribution, I carried out a third recruitment strategy to actively recruit more males, which involved tapping the friend networks of early participants and strategically distributing flyers in a community comprised largely of black residents. To protect respondents' confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for organizations and study participants.

Interviews and Researcher Positionality

I conducted interviews with all 19 participants between November 2015 and September 2016. Twelve young people participated in group interviews that I arranged with the assistance of staff at *Our Kids* and *Empowered*. I held five separate group interviews with two to four young people in each group. All groups were single gender. The small size and gender composition of the groups were designed to encourage maximum participation and relatability among respondents (Morgan 1998). Each group interview lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes and was held in a private room at the headquarters of *Our Kids* and *Empowered*. The group interviews provided valuable external insight to my interpretation of participants' views and experiences (Frey and Fontana 1991). This process also aided respondents in recalling their own police encounters. After the group interviews, I conducted individual follow-up interviews with ten of the twelve group participants who were willing to meet with me a second time to delve

deeper into their individual experiences and perceptions, especially concerning sensitive topics that surfaced during the group interviews. Follow-up individual interviews with group participants lasted about forty-five minutes. For the remaining seven young people in this study who were not affiliated with *Our Kids* or *Empowered*, I conducted individual interviews only. The interviews with these seven participants lasted approximately sixty minutes and took place at a location that was most convenient for each interviewee, such as a coffee shop near their home. Table 1 lists the type of interview conducted with each participant.

I followed a semi-structured format for the interviews. This approach ensured that I covered similar topics with each interviewee, and it gave me the flexibility to probe more deeply into their responses and ask additional questions as needed. During the interviews, I asked a series of questions related to their school and neighborhood environments, general perceptions of the police, personal and vicarious experiences with police officers, strategies for negotiating police contact, and advice they have received from others regarding how to interact with police officers. Immediately following their first interview (whether group or individual) participants completed a brief survey about their personal background and received $15.00 for their time.

While engaging with participants, I was mindful of my position as both an insider and outsider to their social worlds. I was an insider in the sense that I shared their racial identification (black) and an outsider in terms of my age (early thirties). Insider status can help a researcher establish rapport, but it can also pose a specific challenge: an interviewee "may feel that he or she should not have to say certain things to familiar others because those others should already be 'in the know'" (Young 2004:194). With this challenge in mind, I occasionally juxtaposed my insider-outsider status to elicit more information during the interviews. For example, at the beginning of our interview, a respondent used a slang term that I was vaguely familiar with to

refer to the police—the "Twelve." I asked her to define this term and used our age difference as my excuse for needing clarification. Although this exchange made me appear as less of an insider, it led to her being more descriptive throughout the remainder of our interview, which made for richer and more insightful data.

Coding and Analysis

With the participants' permission, I audio-recorded the interviews and later transcribed them for analysis in ATLAS.ti. Immediately after parting ways with each participant, I voice recorded my initial impressions of the interview and later developed them into analytic memos (Miles et al. 2013). These memos were instrumental in helping me uncover emerging patterns. Before starting my analysis, I created an initial set of codes derived deductively from existing research on youth-police relations. During my analysis, I created a second set of codes derived inductively from my preliminary findings (Miles et al. 2013). I then assigned transcript excerpts to their related codes. To ensure coding quality, I reviewed each transcript at least twice and applied more precise codes during the second round of review (Oselin 2016). Additionally, I arranged interview transcripts into subgroups in ATLAS.ti to capture key variations by gender.

This study is based on data from three main coding categories: (1) the *Experiences* category, which includes codes that capture respondents' accounts of their personal experiences with police officers, their secondhand accounts of others close to them, and police-citizen interactions they have witnessed in the media; (2) the *Strategies* category, which includes codes that capture their strategies for negotiating police contact; and (3) the *Learn* category, which denotes where and from whom they have learned these strategies. Study findings are organized around the codes in the *Strategies* category, which are listed in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

The data presented in the next section are limited to the respondents' narratives. My analysis does not assume that the young people have provided full accounts of the events they describe. As Weitzer and Brunson (2009) aptly note, "[c]itizens may misconstrue police intentions and actions. But what matters for the present study is precisely how youth describe their experiences, observations, and views," because these factors play a large part in shaping their responses to the police (p. 239). To enhance data validity and reliability, I probed for detailed descriptions of their police encounters and inquired about their strategies for navigating police contact at multiple points during the interview (Weitzer and Brunson 2009). Study findings are presented thematically according to the most common strategies reported.

IV. FINDINGS

All except for two of the participants in this study—Deshaun and Summer—reported being stopped by the police at some point in their lives. The encounters they described range in severity. At the lower end of severity, Tyree described being briefly questioned by a police officer about his comings and goings while hauling a bag of laundry down the stairwell of his Brooklyn apartment building. This interaction was Tyree's first and only police stop. At the higher end of severity, Rich described being hit on the head and knocked unconscious by a police officer during a stop-and-frisk encounter in a desolate subway station. Rich stated that this interaction was one of about ten police stops he has experienced within the past two years.

The young people in this study have developed a range of responses to the police based largely on their personal experiences, the secondhand experiences of others, what they have witnessed in the media, and advice they have received from adults and peers. Their responses were also shaped by their keen sense of the criminal stereotypes ascribed to blackness (Eberhardt et al. 2004)—a sensation Du Bois (1903) aptly referred to as "double-consciousness." In this

section, I present three predominant types of strategies these young people employ to negotiate police contact: *avoidance*, *management*, and *symbolic resistance*. It is important to note that these strategies are not mutually exclusive. The young people in this study described employing various strategies from their "cultural toolkit" depending on the circumstances of the encounter (Brunson and Weitzer 2011; Swidler 1986). This analysis also highlights the gender differences in their approaches. As shown in Table 3, male respondents were more likely than female respondents to engage avoidance strategies. Management strategies and symbolic resistance were practiced at similar rates across gender, with some important distinctions. For example, male respondents expressed a heightened fear of physical harm in police encounters that in turn shaped their use of management strategies.

[Table 3 about here]

Avoidance Strategies

Steering Clear

Most male respondents described feeling a wave of anxiety when passing a police officer on the street or spotting a police vehicle. They feared being viewed with suspicion and arbitrarily stopped. This fear loomed even when they were not guilty of any wrongdoing. To cope with this feeling and avoid unwelcome police contact, some of the participants practiced the strategy of steering clear of police officers that come into their line of sight. For the young men, this mainly entailed averting their gaze away from the direction of police officers. Jason describes an old habit he developed as a child where he pretends police officers are invisible in hopes they, too, will not notice him. Similarly, Chris reports that instead of looking at officers when he passes them, "I fixate on one thing with my eyes and don't look in [their] direction usually."

When I ask Deshuan how he feels when he sees a law enforcement officer nearby, he

talks about this "thing" he does where he looks straight ahead to avoid eye contact. He explains, "Even looking at a cop, oftentimes, I feel warrants some type of interaction…When I'm walking past a cop, even a group of cops—that makes it even worse—I keep my head forward." Deshaun also describes being on guard so that he can quickly and confidently respond if a police officer tries to get his attention: "I kind of clear my head because I don't want to be in my thoughts and then a cop says, 'Oh hey, you, come here!' When I'm walking by a cop, I kind of shut down. I kind of perk my ears up just in case a cop calls me over or something like that." Similarly, Rich describes how his mind goes "blank" and he becomes almost robotic when he passes police officers on the street: "I'm not thinking anything, just keep walking…I just feel like a robot, no emotion…My mind is really clear in that moment because I don't want to look suspicious."

While a few of the young women in this study reported feeling uneasy when in the presence of police officers, Ashley seemed to have the strongest reaction:

Interviewer: Do you behave differently if you see a police officer nearby?

Ashley: Yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me. What do you do?

Ashley: It depends. If I'm walking by, I'll probably clutch my bag and get tense as if somebody was about to rob me. I get really tense. Or I'll try and speed walk by. Or avoid going that way at all.

Ashley attributes this avoidance response to her school-based arrest and the violent interactions she has witnessed between police officers and people close to her, including her older brother who is two years her senior. "I seen my brother get arrested and I seen a couple of other people get arrested," Ashley says. "But it was like the way it happened . . . It's no reason why y'all need to hit him, throw him on the ground, black his eye and all of that to get him to the ground."

On the other hand, Candace describes admonishing her then high school friends for practicing the avoidance strategy described by Ashley. When Candace and her friends once spotted a police officers on their way home from school, her friends suggested changing their route to avoid "deal[ing] with them." Although Candace admits that she would "just go with [her friends] or turn the block or whatever," she adds that she would let her friends know in a "positive way" that they "did not have to do that." With the exception of being stopped for suspected truancy while in her junior year in high school, Candace reports having positive encounters with police. As an example, she mentions the time an officer came to her aid when her brother fainted on a sidewalk in their Brooklyn neighborhood.

Diamond and Chanel also describe the role their peers have played in encouraging them to steer clear of police officers. Diamond fondly remembers saying hello to her neighborhood patrolmen as a child. "My mom always told me to say 'hi' to the police officers when I was younger…I loved policeman, they were really cool," Diamond explains. Sometime during her early middle school years, Diamond was chided by her friends for greeting officers: "They respond to you negatively so that kind of shifted my way of interacting with [police officers] for a long period of time." Similarly, Chanel's male friends say "a lot of bad things" about cops and "they always tell me, like, 'Oh, don't talk to cops' and so on and so on.'" Although Chanel does not heed this advice from her friends, she certainly understands its source:

> Most of my male friends are from the part [of my neighborhood] where they have constant interaction with the cops. A lot of them, their families have been affected by cops…I'm not saying they're right and I'm not saying they're wrong, I'm just saying I feel like it comes with where you're from and what you've experienced.

> Even in their efforts to steer clear of police officers, study participants did not describe

running from officers as a strategy. In fact, Adam was the only respondent who mentioned running and he reported doing so unintentionally. According to Adam, he was ambushed by undercover officers late one night in front of his Brooklyn home as he was taking out the trash. He mistook them for burglars and made the split-second decision to run back into the house.

Minding the Body

The second avoidance strategy—minding the body—entails fashioning one's outward appearance to limit the negative attention drawn to one's self. Since the purpose of this strategy is to prevent unwelcome police contact altogether, it is typically activated the moment a black youth decides how to style his or her hair and what to wear in public. As Wes's remarks demonstrate, minding the body also involves being conscious of one's public demeanor. When I ask Wes to describe the advice he has given to family members or friends about how to interact with cops, he states the following:

> Yeah, …don't be a target. A lot of people say that's kind of taboo like, "Oh what is a target?" Homie, bro, bro, don't walk past the precinct with your pants sagging and a hoodie on…no, you look stupid. And on top of that, now you look like a target. But, yeah, and just don't be too loud. A lot of times, especially these days, I guess after school kids want to be cool or whatever, but you just draw attention to yourselves.

Later in the interview, he acknowledges that most black youth, given their skin tone and other immutable physical features, cannot control whether they are a police target. Yet, Wes stands by his strategy of conforming one's dress to avoid becoming a "bigger target" and during the interview, he draws attention to his own attire—brown leather loafers, pressed jeans, and a well-fitting t-shirt—to illustrate his point. Wes continues, "I don't even think I've ever been profiled per se, 'cause…I never really dressed like the typical… 'fit the description kind of guy.'"

This strategy can also be performed unconsciously as suggested by my conversation with Tyree. He is convinced that his status as a high school lacrosse player living in a high-crime Brooklyn neighborhood helps to ward off police suspicion. Tyree tells me that he has never been stopped by a cop on the street and offers the following response when I ask him why he thinks this may be the case:

> I used to play lacrosse up until this year. So, I was just like a kid—like think about it—I was an African American kid living in this crazy neighborhood or whatever and then I'm walking around with a lacrosse stick. I don't think the police are looking for a kid who's walking around with a lacrosse stick, you know what I'm saying?

Tyree emphasizes that toting a lacrosse stick between home and school was not an intentional strategy for avoiding the police, but he feels fortunate that it worked to his benefit.

Compared to young men in this study, the young women were less likely to emphasize minding the body as a strategy for avoiding unwelcome police contact. Some of the young women, however, detailed how they played a part in encouraging their brothers into being mindful of their appearance. When Lindsay and I move into a discussion about the conversations she has had with her 11-year-old brother about the police, she says, "I've told him actually that most cops think you're a suspect, or you've done something wrong, or you've done a crime." Lindsay continues, "anytime I see his pants down [I'll say], 'Pull your pants up. Make sure you look presentable so that they won't think you're one of the thugs walking around on the block or something.'"

Similarly, Candace tells me how her parents forced her college-going stepbrother to cut his new "urban, hipster" hair-style and beard for fear that the police and strangers would perceive him as threatening. While she appreciated her brother's newly filled in beard and faded haircut,

she understood her parents' rationale. While reflecting on the incident, Candace says,

"Police officers will want to stop you for no reason. Just because you don't look as clean cut and shaven as they would want you to be. I understood that." Yet, Candace also feels that the need for black youth to mind their bodies is inherently unfair:

> But, I feel like that oppresses our expressive selves. We cannot be ourselves through style or through music or whatever the case may be because of the fact that it will send out the wrong message. That's not fair because [police officers] send out the wrong messages all the time with the way they walk, the way they speak…and we have to just accept it… So, they have to accept the fact that's who we are as young people.

A few of the young women in this study described their bodies as innate assets for limiting police contact. When I ask Candace whether she has ever felt targeted by the police, she tells me that the perceived vulnerability of her female body gives her an advantage over the young men in her neighborhood:

> Interviewer: Have you ever felt like a police officer targeted you because of the neighborhood that you live in?
>
> Candace: If I switch that to relate to myself, I think they target me as a victim.
>
> Interviewer: Okay.
>
> Candace: I feel like when they see me and they see that I'm a female and I'm African American, they immediately look at me just to make sure that nobody is around me. It's like they automatically think that they need to protect me, especially around my neighborhood. So, targeted in that sense, yes.

When I pose the same question to Diamond during our interview she emphasizes that police officers are "definitely more protective of the females who live in my community…I've

personally never felt like I was targeted, except for when they're targeting me to protect me."

Although Diamond finds overprotective police to be bothersome at times, she is appreciative of

this extra attention when she is walking in the city alone after dark. Diamond's appreciation is

not unfounded since research suggests that spending evenings away from home is a risk factor

for violent victimization among black women (Like-Haislip and Miofsky 2011). These young

women's assessments also speak to gender dynamics in poor, urban neighborhoods that may lead

officers to assume that young woman are potential victims of violence—specifically, the

physical aggression of "street oriented" young men who have few other avenues to demonstrate

their masculinity in these settings (Anderson 1999; Collins 2004).

Management Strategies

Practicing Deference

Management strategies come into play when young people are in the midst of a police

encounter. Practicing deference toward police officers is the management strategy most often

implemented by study participants of both genders as a way to ensure that the encounter goes as

smoothly as possible. Advice that Lindsay has received from her mother to "just do what the

police officers says" and "don't argue with them" is emblematic of this strategy. Lindsay tells me

of a time she put this advice to use. While swiping her student fare pass at a subway station after

school, Lindsay says she was stopped by an officer who questioned her status as a high school

student and her right to use a school issued fare card. As Lindsay explains:

> There was one time I was coming out from school and I clearly had my uniform pants on.
>
> I swiped [my student fare card]…and [the police officer] was like, "Excuse me, come
>
> here please…How old are you?" I was like, "17." He said, "Let me see your ID." I pulled
>
> out my ID and I gave it to him…I wasn't going to say nothing. You could do what you

want, don't say I was resisting, I gave you everything you wanted.

Jasmine recounts similar advice she has received from her mother. Jasmine acknowledges that she is normally outspoken. However, Jasmine's mother urged her to soften her approach if she comes into contact with a police officer.

Interviewer: Have you ever received advice from family members or friends about how to interact with the police if you ever come into contact with them?

Jasmine: Well, you know, my mother is very paranoid. My mother loves me. She's always like really nervous or worried. She's always like, "If you get in contact with a police officer"—I'm very outspoken on what I say—she's like, "don't do that."

Police officers…if they feel like you're threatening them or you're trying to test their authority…they would take advantage. They would try to arrest you or check you or search you. They can do anything.

Some of the young men have also received explicit advice to be deferential to police officers. For example, Tyree, who got his driver's license shortly before our interview, recounts a lecture his mother gave him about how he should behave if he is ever pulled over. According to Tyree:

[My mother] told me, if I ever get pulled over by the police, to take both of my hands and place them on the steering wheel. Then, do whatever the officer asks me. Don't try to have an attitude or anything like that. If they ask me to get something, tell them where I'm going to get it before I get it.

One piece of advice Adam's family gave him was to always be "forthright and straightforward" with officers and "don't question" their authority. According to Adam, doing anything to the contrary could "make the situation much . . . worse than it is" and possibly put his life at risk,

since the officer has a gun and the option to use deadly force. Rich echoes a similar sentiment about practicing deference out of fear of bodily harm or death. Rather than asserting his rights in police encounters, Rich prefers to "bite his tongue" and do whatever he is told by officers. When I ask Rich to explain why he takes this approach, he responds, "I just don't want to die." Referring to police officers, he continues, "When you give people power…they could just lose it because they have the power and I don't want to test that, especially if my life could be hanging in the balance."

Asserting One's Rights

A less prevalent strategy for managing police interactions is what I call asserting one's rights. This strategy entails acting on one's rights during an encounter (e.g., remaining silent) or verbally reminding a police officer of those rights when necessary. Therefore, it requires a young person to have a basic understanding of what is and is not fair treatment by the police.

Ashley's experiences shed light on this strategy. Throughout our interview, I got the sense that she has had some negative encounters with police officers. One event that she describes in detail is a school-based arrest in the eleventh grade resulting from her alleged bullying of a female classmate. At the time of her arrest, Ashley recalled her mother once saying that police officers could not question her without parental consent:

> Interviewer: So, can you tell me about your most memorable experience with a police officer?
>
> Ashley: Most memorable is when I was in high school and they [the police] tried to arrest me, but they had no probable cause. My mother wasn't there. And somebody was pressing charges against me that they said I was bullying them and all of this. But, it was no evidence there. So, they put me in handcuffs. And I remember asking to call my

mother. Because…I remember my mom telling me, "If something happens, call me, because they can't question you or anything without my permission."

Ashley goes on to recount how she turned that knowledge into action:

So, I remember them taking me [to the precinct headquarters] and they were yelling at me, cursing at me…They were telling me if I don't talk it could be worse for me. And it was just like, well, "I know I'm not allowed to talk without my mom here. And even if I do talk, you can't use any of that because I'm a minor."

In New York City, officers should have parental permission before questioning a young person in a school-based arrest. However, having a parent present is not required in all circumstances (New York Civil Liberties Union 2011). Although Ashley was not fully aware of the legal intricacies that applied to her situation, activating this strategy likely demonstrated that she was aware of her rights and it may have even prevented her from incriminating herself while alone with the officers.

While Jasmine has not had any police encounters that have required her to assert her rights, she describes learning a great deal about this strategy through her participation in *Project Freedom*, especially as it relates to searches and consent:

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit more about the things you learned from *Project Freedom*. Have you been taught anything through that program [about] how you should behave if a police officer approaches you or how to protect yourself?

Jasmine: There was one important [session] where [the facilitator] said you can yell out, "I don't consent to this search!" If they don't have a search warrant or there's no probable cause for them trying to search you, they're not supposed to try to search you.

Jasmine has also learned that she has the right to record police interactions on her smartphone, as

well as request officers' names and badge numbers.

Jason is one of two male respondents who describes asserting his rights and is the only male participant who reports regularly questioning authority figures. He explains, "Over time, I've gotten into tricky situations with people in authority, whether it's police or teachers or anything like that, or school safety officers, I'm always the questioner." Yet, he admits that this approach can agitate adults and sometimes get him into "trouble." He provides the example of a time when two police officers told him and a group of classmates to disperse from a bodega storefront one morning. He emphasizes that the bodega, which was across the street from his high school, was a popular breakfast destination for students and long lines spilling onto the sidewalk were common. He recalls that one of the officers was particularly antagonistic that morning, yet this did not prevent him from questioning the officers:

> The way he approached us was very hostile and he was like "Yo, yo, yo! Why are y'all in front of the store? Y'all need to go!" Like screaming and it's early in the morning and I was totally confused because I had been [at the school] for like three years already. I think this was my junior year, so I always saw students doing this. This was like a regular thing and I've never seen a police officer tell us to move from in front of the store before, so why they were doing it now I don't know. So, the other cop who was with him, he seems like he's trying to calm the situation down. He approaches us and starts asking us for our ID's and stuff…so I'm getting my ID and I'm like, "I don't understand, why are we being asked to move? We're always standing out here." I'm asking questions because I want to know what's going on.

Deshaun, on the other hand, believes that asserting one's rights can be risky and possibly fatal for people of color compared to whites. Our discussion about what he has seen on social

media pertaining to police officers highlights his stance on the matter:

> Deshaun: I know you've probably seen those Facebook videos of, "Oh hey,
>
> as a black person…here's how you would interact with the cops. Here's
>
> the rights that you have." Oftentimes, you see people verbally tell cops their rights, and
>
> you see the cops all stunned. I guess the things I've always seen, I've always smiled at
>
> that. I feel like even oftentimes stuff like that can still be unpredictable.
>
> Interviewer: So, using or asserting your rights can be unpredictable?
>
> Deshaun: Right. Especially as a person of color. No doubt.
>
> Interviewer: Is it risky, in a way?
>
> Deshaun: Oh, hell yes.

Deshuan offers the example of Philando Castile to illustrate his point. Castile, an African-American man, was fatally shot during a July 2016 traffic stop in Minnesota despite following officer commands and admitting to lawfully carrying a firearm. Regarding the incident, Deshaun says, "Everything was done right there, and still [Castile] was gunned down. That's white privilege for you. [Whites] can shout all the rights that they have and not have this cloud of, 'Oh, what if this happens to me?' hang over them. It's sickening, man. It hurts. It really does."

Symbolic Resistance Strategies

Unlike the respondents in Weitzer and Brunson's (2009) article, the young people in this study never described resisting police officers' commands, even when they felt disrespected. However, some engaged in acts of what I call symbolic resistance, which do not overtly challenge the authority of police officers. Rather, symbolic resistance is a covert way for black youth to maintain their dignity in situations where they may feel powerless.

Physical gestures of disapproval are one form of this symbolic resistance. For example,

Lindsay admits to rolling her eyes at officers, even when she is not directly interacting with them. As Lindsay and I discuss how often she sees the police in her daily life, she responds, "Sometimes I see police officers. But when I see them…I don't want to say I don't like [them], but I don't like what they can do. So, when I see them I just give them the eye like [she demonstrates an eye rolling gesture]."

Two of the young people in this study also described using sarcasm to subtly resist officers. Diamond tells me that she was constantly stopped by officers while using her student subway pass in high school. Typically, officers would stop her for looking older than a high school student, and she was often asked to provide her age and hand over her state ID. About being stopped, Diamond says, "It was annoying. It was really annoying and sometimes I felt like they were doing it on purpose." In response to officers, Diamond occasionally used sarcasm:

> My facial expression is like, 'Okay, are you gonna do this every single time I go through the turnstile?'…Sometimes, I'm sarcastic. But, I know that I can't be so sarcastic to the point where I'm being rude or disrespectful, 'cause I know [police officers are] crazy. Like, they'll do something crazy for no reason at all.

Besides being an annoying, Diamond's experience of having police officers overestimate her age speaks to the larger problem of the "adultification" of black youth. Research has shown that adults view black youth as less childlike and more culpable than their same aged white peers (Goff et al. 2014).

Like Diamond, Rich tells me of a time when he used sarcasm in an exchange with a police officer. However, he only had the courage to do so because he was in a populated public park and accompanied by a group of his friends:

> While [the officer] was stopping us, he was like "What are you guys doing here?"…Then

he was like, "Let me see your ID." I gave him my ID and the picture was faded and I

said, "Yeah, the picture is faded, but we're not faded," which is [a reference] to us being

high. It was a joke.

Rich continues:

In that moment, maybe because I'm in a public place and I have my friends around me,

nothing was able to stop my impulses. 'Cause when I do get stopped by cops I do have an

impulse to say something. But when I'm by myself it's like my brain thinks more and it

stops my impulse.

As Rich's incident suggests, it may be easier for young people to subtly challenge the authority

of police officers in the presence of others, especially culturally aware peers who understand the

meaning of their resistance act (Hollander and Einwohner 2004).

V. DISCUSSION

The question of how young people navigate their encounters with law enforcement has

not received much attention in the social science literature. Rather, the research on youth-police

relations "has centered on how officers treat young people but has neglected the latter's

repertoire of responses" (Weitzer and Brunson 2009:251). This study advances our

understanding of this topic and extends beyond the research frame of marginalized young men

by addressing the experiences of "on track" black youth of both genders. My analysis reveals a

variety of strategies these young people employ for engaging the police and it suggests some

important gender differences.

The first set of strategies, which are devised to avoid the police altogether, include

steering clear and minding the body. Steering clear is a strategy most often practiced by the

young men in this study. They described avoiding eye contact with officers, staying clearheaded,

and trying their best not to look suspicious. While most of the young women did not feel an urge to steer clear of police officers, some described feeling pressured by friends to do so.

Minding the body, also a strategy largely practiced by young men, draws on what Goffman (1956) refers to as "impression management." By eschewing stereotypically "black" self-presentation (e.g., sagging pants), these young men attempt to convey their decency to police officers in hopes of preventing involuntary police encounters. Although none of the female study participants reported using this strategy personally, they described encouraging their male family members to mind their bodies as a way to avoid police contact. Additionally, as the experiences of Candace and Diamond suggest, some young women possess innate bodily capital that may render them as vulnerable and in need of protection in the eyes of officers (Monk forthcoming). However, this "chivalrous coddling" by officers was not extended to all female respondents or in all situations (Hagan and Peterson 1995).

The second set of strategies, geared toward managing police encounters, include practicing deference and asserting one's rights. Practicing deference involves a young person behaving in a courteous or submissive manner when approached by a police officer. This strategy involves a great deal of "emotional labor," especially from young people like Jasmine who are typically outspoken. According to Hochschild (2012), emotional labor "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (p. 7). While both male and female respondents valued their ability to practice deference in police encounters, most male respondents viewed this strategy as a necessary tactic for self-preservation.

Asserting one's rights, a less prevalent management strategy, involves a young person acting on his or her rights during a police encounter or urging an officer to observe those rights.

Asserting one's rights can mean staying silent to prevent self-incrimination or, in Ashley's case, requesting the presence of a parent during an officer's questioning. Outspokenness is often required of this strategy. By asserting their rights, young people can make officers think twice about mistreating them. However, some respondents recognized that this strategy could backfire if officers perceive it as an act of defiance.

The final strategy, symbolic resistance, is less about limiting risk or harm during a police encounter than it is about young people attempting to preserve their dignity in situations where otherwise they feel powerless. Subtle physical gestures of disapproval, such as eye rolling, and sarcasm were their main symbols of resistance. However, even in their acts of resistance, the young people in this study took care not to directly challenge the authority of police officers out of fear of retaliation. This strategy mirrors the "everyday forms of peasant resistance" Scott (1985) identifies in his study of Malaysian rice farmers. Acts such as "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, [and] pilfering…" were some of the ways these farmers covertly resisted the capitalist class (p. 29). As Groves and Chang (1999) emphasize, everyday resistance is designed to undermine—rather than overthrow—oppressive power relations. Like everyday resistance, the symbolic resistance practiced by the young people in this study is intentionally subversive, but subtle enough to go "unnoticed (and, therefore, unpunished)" by police officers (Hollander and Einwohner 2004).

As this study demonstrates, the gender differences in these strategies are more or less pronounced depending on the strategy at hand and a few of these differences are worth reemphasizing. First, with regard to avoidance strategies, male respondents were more inclined to steer clear of officers and mind their bodies, which likely stems from their higher probability of involuntary police contact. Data from the NYPD SQF database show that males comprised 90

percent of stops between 2003-2015. Second, although respondents of both genders reported using deference as a strategy at near similar rates, the young men expressed a dire motivation for relying on this strategy that was not described by the young women—their imminent fear of bodily harm or death. This fear is warranted in light of a recent study showing that men die in police interactions at a dramatically higher rate than women and that the black men have triple the risk of being killed by police relative to white men (Edwards et al. 2018). Third, asserting one's rights and symbolic resistance were uncommon strategies for both male and female respondents. This finding is expected given what we know about "the talk"—a set of instructions traditionally passed down from black parent to child regarding how one should behave in the presence of police officers (Stuart 2016). The talk tends to discourage defiance of any form and it is likely that most respondents are heeding this message.

Study participants created their strategies using information they gather from multiple sources, including parental advice, after school programs, and social media. Social media loomed large in many of the interviews, especially what many respondents felt was a constant barrage of videos and images of police violence against black citizens. These observations made some participants extremely cautious regarding the strategies they chose to employ. The strategies they relied on most—minding the body and practicing deference—are steeped in respectability politics. These two strategies underscore the delicate performance blacks are often required to engage in for social acceptance. According to Anderson (2015), "before experiencing decent treatment or trusting relations with others, [black people] must first demonstrate that the ghetto stereotype does not apply to them" (p. 14). The "on track" youth in this study are no exception and this pressure to perform respectability can be a stinging reminder of their racial marginalization.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, "on track" black youth are not insulated from involuntary police contact. Despite their "respectable" comportment, several respondents still found themselves in hostile encounters with police. While these young people have the cultural capital to activate tactics that may help them sway officers in their use of discretion or avoid involuntary contact altogether, these strategies offer no guarantees. Given their state-sanctioned authority, police officers can ultimately determine the terms and outcome of an encounter (Weitzer and Brunson 2009). There is also the possibility that police officers could misread these strategies. For example, a few of the young men in this study describe avoiding eye contact with officers as a protective tactic. However, the police officer responsible for the shooting death of Philando Castile testified that Castile's lack of direct eye contact contributed to his decision to pull the trigger (Berman 2017).

The findings presented here build on a larger conversation about the various strategies black youth adopt in hopes of successfully traversing the terrains of an urbanized and racialized life. Prior research on this topic has examined their approaches to peer relations on the street to authority relations in school. Richardson and St. Vil (2016) document "rolling dolo" as a strategy young black men in Central Harlem employ as a way to avoid delinquent peer groups and the violence associated with those relationships. Likewise, Edin and coauthors (2015) describe "I do me" as a strategy implemented by young black men in Baltimore seeking to resist the pull of the street. In her study on the schooling experiences of black and Latino youth in Yonkers, Carter (2005) identifies "cultural straddling"— a strategy that entails codeswitching between dominant and nondominant cultural capital to gain the favor of educators, while remaining connected one's co-ethnic peers. The present study explores yet another domain of the social world where black

youth must be deliberate about their strategies in order to limit their exposure to physical harm and the broader structural violence of inequality (Galtung 1969).

The study makes several contributions to the existing literature on youth-police relations. First, it centers the experiences of "on track" youth and young women—two groups that are not exempt from police contact but traditionally ignored in the literature. Second, it examines how "the talk" translates into everyday strategies for black youth. Third, it provides insight into how black youth people assess police contact in an era of highly publicized events of police brutality. Nonetheless, this study is limited by a small, non-random sample of 19 "on track" black young people in one U.S. city. Additionally, several respondents were drawn from afterschool programs—two of which offer specific programming on the topic of policing. Therefore, care should be taken not to generalize these strategies to the broader population of "on track" black youth. Although one could imagine similar relations between black youth and police officers across other major U.S. cities, there may be unique city-level characteristics that influence how young people interact with officers in NYC. Replicating this study in other cities would help determine the prevalence of these strategies and the salience of the gender differences. An additional limitation of this study is that it did not strategically sample respondents on their neighborhoods of residence. This should be done is future work to tease out how community-level factors, such as the levels of crime or police surveillance, shape young people's strategies for engaging law enforcement. Future research should also examine how police officers respond to the various strategies described in this study and prior studies related to this topic.

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Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender [a]	Age	Interview [b]	School Status	Work Status	Neighborhood	Borough
Jasmine	Female	17	I	Public High School	Part-time	Central Harlem	Manhattan
Ashley	Female	18	I	2-Year College	-	Parkchester	Bronx
Lindsay	Female	18	G, I	Charter High School	-	Bedford-Stuyvesant	Brooklyn
Michelle	Female	18	G, I	Charter High School	-	Flatbush	Brooklyn
Chanel	Female	18	G, I	4-Year College	Full-time	Edenwald	Bronx
Summer	Female	19	G, I	4-Year College	-	South Ozone Park	Queens
Candace	Female	20	I	4-Year College	Part-time	East New York	Brooklyn
Diamond	Female	20	G, I	4-Year College	-	Far Rockaway	Queens
Sheena	Female	20	G	2-Year College	Part-time	Claremont Village	Bronx
Tiana	Female	21	G, I	2-Year College	Full-time	Jamaica Center	Queens
Rich	Male	17	G, I	Charter High School	-	Bushwick	Brooklyn
Bryan	Male	17	G	Public High School	Part-time	Central Harlem	Manhattan
Tyree	Male	17	G, I	Public High School	-	Brownsville	Brooklyn
Chris	Male	18	I	4-Year College	-	Rochdale	Queens
Wes	Male	19	G, I	4-Year College	Part-time	South Jamaica	Queens
Jason	Male	19	G, I	4-Year College	Part-time	Hunts Point	Bronx
Adam	Male	22	I	4-Year College Grad	Part-time	Canarsie	Brooklyn
Deshaun	Male	23	I	4-Year College	Part-time	Central Harlem	Manhattan
Omar	Male	23	I	Some 2-Year College	Part-time	East Harlem	Manhattan

[a] Gender is based on self-identification
[b] "G" indicates participation in a group interview only, "I" indicates participation in an individual interview only, and "G, I" indicates participation in both a group and individual interview.

Table 2. Coding Categories

Coding Categories	Associated Codes
Experiences	Personal experiences, secondhand stories, media accounts.
Strategies	Steering clear, minding the body, practicing deference, asserting one's rights, symbolic resistance.
Learn	Family member, other adult, peer, after-school program, media.

<div align="center">**Table 3.** Frequency of Strategies Reported</div>

Strategies	Respondents (N=19)		
	Females	Males	Total
Avoidance			
Steering Clear			
Use	1	5	6
Recommend	-	-	-
Minding the Body			
Use	-	3	3
Recommend	2	2	4
Management			
Practicing Deference			
Use	5	5	10
Recommend	3	2	5
Asserting One's Rights			
Use	2	2	4
Recommend	-	-	-
Symbolic Resistance			
Use	2	2	4
Recommend	-	-	-

Notes: "Use" refers to when respondents report using a strategy personally and "recommend" refers to when respondents report recommending a strategy to others (e.g., family and friends). Respondents who reported using and recommending a strategy are counted in both categories.