
“Can We All Get Along?” Blacks’ Historical and Contemporary (In) Justice With Law Enforcement

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Abstract

From the time that he endured a brutal beating by Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers on March 3, 1991, Rodney Glen King instantly became the face of police brutality in America. Given his recent death (April 2, 1965 – June 17, 2012), we are aware of no studies that have critically examined his words and placed them within a broader social context. The primary goal of this study was to examine the public quotes made Rodney King, as well as what these quotes revealed about the world paradigm of King, as well as how he perceived himself and his place in the world. This qualitative study used Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as tools to meet this goal. We examined 20 quotes that were offered by King from the Search Quotes (2012) website. Given King’s notoriety in directly influencing how the public generally perceive the police, the following question was foundational to this study: What do Rodney King’s words reveal about his world view, especially as it relates to the police, himself, and others? Implications regarding the words that King used to describe his feelings and world view will be discussed.

“I just want to say -- can we all get along? Can we get along?” – Rodney King (1992)

When the late Rodney King (April 2, 1965 – June 17, 2012) endured a brutal beating by four members of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) on March 3, 1991, he immediately became the face of police brutality in America, a reality that was generally accepted by most Blacks that resided within and outside of the inner-city (Armour, 1997; Bell, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2009; King, 2011; Plant & Peruche, 2005; Tonry, 2011). Essentially, when King uttered the aforementioned words to the residents of Los Angeles two decades ago in the wake of the worst multicultural riot in U.S. his-

tory, he instantaneously and simultaneously became a catalyst for hope and change against a law enforcement system that has been historically harsh to Black males.

This qualitative study had one primary goal, and we will use Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as tools to meet this goal. The chief goal of this study was to examine the public quotes made by Rodney King, what these quotes revealed about the world paradigm of King, as well as how he perceived the police, himself and his place in the world. To answer this question, we examined 20 quotes that were offered by King from the Search Quotes (2012) website. Given King’s notoriety in directly influencing



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how the public generally perceive the police, the following question was foundational to this study: What do Rodney King's words reveal about his world view, especially as it relates to the police, himself, and others?

There are four reasons why this topic is important. First, police brutality against people of color, primarily African Americans, remains an ever present and persistent problem (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Gabbidon & Greene, 2013; Police Brutality Statistics, 2011; Robertson, 2014; Staples, 2011). A report on the extrajudicial killings of Black people by police, security guards, or self-appointed law enforcers by the Malcolm X grassroots organization presents some revealing findings. From January 1 – June 30, 2012, one Black person was killed by law enforcement or someone acting in such a capacity every 36 hours, representing a total of 120 persons. Furthermore, 69% of those who lost their lives were between the ages of 13 and 31, which in essence, are killing off a generation of potential revolutionaries. Moreover, while five percent of the Blacks killed were women, the bulk of those killed have been Black men like Rodney King. Perhaps more alarming is that 46% of those killed were unarmed (just like King) and 36% were alleged to have weapons by police, including a cane, a toy gun, and a bb gun ("Report on the extrajudicial," 2012). Unfortunately, the aforementioned data provided by the Malcolm X grassroots organization possesses methodological issues as there is no generalizable, national, database on police killings of Blacks. Specifically, the data were collected from news reports posted on the internet during the last ten days of June and the first twelve days of July 2012 ("Report on the extrajudicial," 2012). With that said, the conditions by which a large number of Black men women and children are losing their lives speaks to the injustice experienced by members of this particular racial group.

Second, police departments have increasingly become objects of government scrutiny though it remains to be seen whether this entity can be effective policing the activities of other government entities (Gabbidon & Greene, 2013). The DOJ (Department of Justice) has investigated over 17 police departments across the country and has monitored five settlements involving four police agencies since 2010 (Gabbidon & Greene, 2013). To add, the City of Houston's Police Department (HPD) is currently being investigated by the justice department for an excessive number of recent shootings of unarmed citizens, most of whom were persons of color (Desmond-Harris, 2012; Lozano, 2012). Specifically, in Houston, the justice department is looking into six cases over the last two years in which the HPD killed or alleg-

edly used excessive force against unarmed individuals (Lozano, 2012). Two of the cases that are part of this ongoing investigation are particularly alarming. One case in September 2012 involved Brian Claunch, a forty-five year old, one-armed, and one-legged mentally-ill man killed by the HPD for allegedly threatening them with a ballpoint pen (Aguilar, 2012). The second case, in July 2012, involved Rufino Lara who was shot dead by HPD even though several witnesses stated that he was unarmed and was holding his hands in the air (Aguilar, 2012). Another account of the Lara killing posited that police believed he was trying to remove a weapon from his waist area, when in actuality, he only possessed a can of beer (Lozano, 2012).

Third, as though the Rodney King videotaped beating were not a tragic enough lesson for police departments across the country, police beatings and killings of African Americans and other people of color, continue almost unabated since the Rodney King incident. The police murders of unarmed African Americans such as Sean Bell (who was shot at fifty times), Timothy Thomas, Amadou Diallo (shot at forty times), Devin Brown (thirteen years old), Adolf Grimes (shot twelve times in the back), Oscar Grant, and Robert Mitchell, by Oakland, Detroit, New York, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Cleveland police departments respectively, represent the state of police community relations post Rodney King (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Gabbidon & Greene, 2013; Karenga, 2010, Leonard, 2010, Staples, 2011; Tonry, 2011). Further, the police beatings of Abner Louima, Gregory Lee-Bey, and Chad Holley elucidate the point that very little has changed when it comes to police killings and beatings of people of color (Aguilar, 2012; Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Desmond-Harris, 2012; Robertson, 2014; Staples, 2011).

Finally, although several scholars have examined the increasing rate of police brutality against Blacks (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Dottolo & Stewart, 2008; Elicker, 2008; Kane & White, 2009; Neuendorf, 2002; Smith & Holmes, 2003; Tomaskovic-Devey, Wright, Czaja, & Miller, 2006; Staples, 2011), no studies to date have critically examined the actual words of Rodney King, the man that was at the center of national interest and controversy. This focus is particularly relevant given the scholars that have specifically examined the contextuality of the Rodney King beating and the Los Angeles riots (Boyer, 2001; Savali, 2012), as well as publicized news outlets regarding King's life after his infamous beating by members of the LAPD. According to the June 17, 2012 edition of the New York Times, in the years after the beating, Rodney King was in and out

of jail and rehabilitation centers (mostly for drug and alcohol abuse), was arrested multiple times for driving under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs, and spent short periods in prison in the late 1990s for assaulting his former wife and daughter. In the years before his death, he appeared on the television shows “Celebrity Rehab” and “Sober House” on VH1 (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/18/us/rodney-king-whose-beating-led-to-la-riots-dead-at-47.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

In the section that follows, we place the goals of our study within the empirical literature. We begin by discussing historical realities of Blacks in the criminal (in)justice system, police brutality in America, contemporary realities of Blacks in the criminal (in)justice system, as well as scholarship related to Rodney King and the city of Los Angeles. After this, we discuss the relevance of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to our current discussion. Then, we present quotes by Rodney King. Lastly, we discuss the quotes provided by Rodney King within the context of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as well as Black’s experiences with law enforcement, more broadly.

Review of Literature

The historic and current template of law enforcement and the criminal justice system has demonstrated that interactions with these subsidiary entities is disproportionately race-based. For example, Blacks are more likely than Whites to be racially profiled (Staples, 2011), to be stopped by law enforcement for D.W.B., or “Driving While Black” (Tomaskovic-Devey, Wright, Czaja, & Miller, 2006), to receive harsher sentences for small amounts of crack possession than Whites for significantly larger amounts of cocaine (Smith & Hattery, 2010), and to be less likely than Whites to believe police brutality is warranted (Tonry, 2011). All in all, the penalization of Blacks by Whites in positions of power creates a climate in which the unjust treatment of Blacks is accepted, encouraged, and justified.

Historical Realities of Blacks in the Criminal In(Justice) System

The historicity of African-Americans in the criminal justice system has revealed this arrangement to be anything but just to Blacks. Even when the slaves were legally freed, their individual, familial, and communal status in society remained extremely tenuous (Donner, 2014; DuBois, 2004; Fields, 1990; Lazaridi, 2014). In

1865, Whites created The Black Codes, which were a body of laws, statutes, and rules that allowed members of this group to regain control over the freed slaves, maintain white supremacy, and ensure the continued supply of cheap labor (Katz-Fishman, Scott, & Gomes, 2014). Furthermore, the common practice of convict leasing served to “fill the labor void left by the abolition of the “peculiar institution” (i.e., slavery) (Sterling, 2013, p. 626). To satisfy the South’s acute labor need, the criminal justice system was “retooled to provide cheap forced labor to mines, farms, timber camps, turpentine makers, railroad builders and entrepreneurs large and small. Tens of thousands of men, the vast majority of them black, found themselves pulled back into slavery. A common arrangement might look like this: A business owner in need of labor might “ma[k]e up a list of some eighty negroes known to both [the sheriff and the business owner] as good husky fellows, capable of a fair day’s work,” give that list to the local sheriff, and promise the sheriff five dollars plus expenses for each man he arrested.’ Charges ranged from vagrancy, defined as not being able to prove employment, to more serious crimes. Terms ranged from a year and a day for burglary to life imprisonment for murder. ‘Black children were swept up in this “convict labor machine” as easily as black adults were (Sterling, 2001, p. 626), with some Black children as young as four years old being arrested (Sterling, 2001). So, although legally free, racist whites created laws to purposefully justify the unfair treatment of Blacks as well as greatly impede their individual and collective social standing in America.

Police Brutality in America

Police brutality is an area of study that has been widely examined by scholars (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Dottolo & Stewart, 2008; Elicker, 2008; Kane & White, 2009; Smith & Holmes, 2003; Tomaskovic-Devey, Wright, Czaja, & Miller, 2006; Staples, 2011). According to Walker (2011), police brutality is “the use of excessive physical force or verbal assault and psychological intimidation” (p. 579), which has been found to be detrimental to the victim, his family, and members of his community. This reality is particularly salient for Blacks as they are substantially more likely than Whites to report incidences of police brutality (Smith & Holmes, 2003) while Whites are rarely convicted of mistreating Blacks (Cush, 2013). Although one might surmise videotaped evidence of King’s beating 23 years ago would curtail the actions of nefarious members of law enforcement, in reality, the incidences of police

brutality have increased. In a recently published paper, my colleague and I examined the increasing number and nature of police brutality cases reported to the National Police Misconduct Statistics and Reporting Project (NPMSRP) which were compiled between the months of April 2009 and June 2010. Not surprisingly, the wanton abuse of power demonstrated by many policemen caused many individuals to have a general disdain for law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Further qualitative analysis of the comments provided on the NPMSRP site revealed individuals generally perceived members of law enforcement according to one of the following tropes: (a) contempt for law enforcement, (b) suspicion of law enforcement, (c) law enforcement as agents of brutality, and (d) respect for law enforcement. Not surprisingly, most people had contempt for, were suspicious of, and believed police officers unnecessarily intimidate, verbally abuse, hurt and kill those who are in no position to defend themselves (Chaney & Robertson, 2013).

Tonry (2011) delineated interesting findings from the 2001 Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Survey which may help explain why the larger society tolerates police misconduct when it comes to Black males. The survey, which involved approximately 978 non-Hispanic Whites and 1,010 Blacks, revealed Blacks and Whites had very different attitudes about the criminal justice system (Tonry, 2011). For instance, 38 % of Whites and 89 % of Blacks believed the criminal justice system was biased against Blacks (Tonry, 2011). Additionally, 8 % of Blacks and 56 % of Whites believed the criminal justice system treated Blacks fairly (Tonry, 2011). Furthermore, 68 % of Whites and only 18 % of Blacks expressed confidence in law enforcement (Tonry, 2011). Thus, for many Blacks in America, the Rodney King beating is a constant reminder of the animus that members of law enforcement generally have for Blacks in general, and Black males, in particular.

Contemporary Realities of Blacks in the Criminal In(Justice) System

The criminal justice system has systematically determined its decisions based on race and class, and poor Blacks are substantially more likely to be sentenced than poor Whites. Even though Blacks only make up 13% of the nation's population, they comprise 40% of its prison inmates (Cush, 2013). A report by the U.S. Department of Justice on sentencing in state courts found that 33% of convicted White defendants received a prison sentence whereas 51 % of African American

defendants received prison sentences (Duróse & Langan, 2001). This injustice suggests that the crimes of the "majority" (e.g., financially-affluent whites), which are substantially more costly, are less egregious than those of the "minority" (e.g., poor Blacks). We concur with Staples (2010) who wrote: "What is unfair is that the criminal justice system does not imprison the people who represent the greatest threat to the society; it jails primarily the poor and the powerless. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the seriousness of a crime is not the most crucial element in predicting who goes to prison and who does not. White collar criminals are far less likely to go to jail than blue collar criminals, and the difference is more than the category of crime. It is the race and class of the criminal" (p. 34).

Although Blacks primarily comprise the nation's jails and prisons, this has not always been the case. As noted by Smith and Hattery (2010):

Since 1989 and for the first time in national history, African Americans make up a majority of those entering prison each year. Indeed, in four short decades, the ethnic composition of the U.S. inmate population has reversed, turning over from 70 percent White at mid-century to nearly 70 percent African American and Latino today, although ethnic patterns of criminal activity have not fundamentally changed during that period. As a result of this racial transformation, today, 50% of all incarcerated Americans are African American men. In total, more than 1.2 million African American men are currently incarcerated, and their lifetime rate of incarceration is significantly greater than any other demographic group. In fact, one out of three African American men (compared to one in ten White men) will serve time in prison during his lifetime (p. 392).

Sadly, members of law enforcement, judges, and jurors find it difficult to empathize with Black defendants and usually believe that members of this group 'get what they deserve' (i.e., imprisonment) (Williams, 2013). The lack of empathy exhibited by the aforementioned is not surprising, especially when one considers how Black defendants are generally perceived. Case in point: Johnson, Simmons, Jordan, Maclean, Taddei, Thomas, and Reed (2002) invited white university students to participate in a study to investigate the impact of defendant race and empathetic induction on a subsequent juror decision-making task. The participants read a passage involving a Black or a White defendant in a criminal case and were subsequently induced to feel no empathy, low empathy, or high empathy for the de-

fendant. When compared to participants in the low- and control empathy conditions, those, in the high-empathy condition reported greater target empathy, made attributions that were more situational, and assigned more lenient punishments. Specially, when compared to the participants in the Black defendant condition, those in the White defendant condition reported greater target empathy, made attributions that were more situational, and assigned more lenient punishments (Johnson et al 2002). In other words, white jurors were generally more empathetic toward White defendants than Black defendants.

However, biased views by students in an empirical study is one thing, while bias by whites in positions of power (i.e., judges) can have deleterious consequences for the Black defendant. As Cush (2013) noted: "When a judge looks at an African-American defendant in his courtroom, his judgment is informed by a panoply of political and social conditioning, compelling him to sentence black defendants to long terms in prison" (Cush, 2013, p. 73). Such racially-biased reasoning was no doubt the motivation behind the "monsterization" of the late unarmed teen Trayvon Martin by the media and lawyers and the public acclaim and legal exoneration of the armed George Zimmerman (Williams, 2013).

Scholarship Related to Rodney King and Los Angeles

Extant scholarship related to Rodney King has examined the legalities of the Rodney King case (Alexander, 2010; Alper et al, 2005), media coverage (i.e., mainstream newspaper coverage) of the Rodney King case (Jacobs, 1996; Mullen & Skitka, 2006), as well as the substantial reduction of taxable sales following the Los Angeles riots (e.g., cumulative loss of at least \$3.8 billion in taxable sales and over \$125 million in direct sales tax revenue losses) (Matheson & Baade, 2004). In addition, other scholars have studied how major cities in the United States, particularly the city of Los Angeles have been depicted in the movie and television world since January 2006 (Beck, 2006), how a collective consciousness is formed upon experiencing violence and trauma (Kim, 2012), the various meanings that individuals attribute to the Rodney King beating (which are based on social, cultural, historical, political factors) (Gerrie, 2006; Jacobs, 1996; Sidanius & Liu, 1992; Swendsen & Norman, 1998) as well as how a grassroots organization have generated video evidence to be used in lawsuits against the Los Angeles Police

Department (LAPD) (Stuart, 2011). All in all, this body of academic work has highlighted external factors that have shaped the lives of Blacks in America without giving due attention to the words of Rodney King, the man who became the face of racial injustice.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is frequently utilized by scholars who desire to understand the underlying racial dynamics associated with social phenomena that often go unnoticed by scholars, laypersons, and the larger society as a whole (Closson, 2010). Emerging in the mid-1970s, critical race theory was birthed out of a milieu in which legal scholars examined the persistence of racism during the post-civil rights era, an era which was expected to be free of racial antagonisms (Ladson-Billings et al., 1995). The late legal scholar, social activist, and father of CRT, Derrick Bell wrote in his classic polemic *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992) that "oppressors are neither neatly divorceable from one another nor amenable to strict categorization" (p. 145). Embedded within the aforementioned statement is an acknowledgment that there is no "one-size fits all" archetype of racial oppression and that scholars must be diligent in their analysis to recognize its myriad manifestations.

According to Solórzano et al. (2000), Yosso et al. (2009), and Crenshaw (2011), a critical race approach is open to intense scrutiny of the experiences of subordinated groups because of its reliance on five areas of focus. The tenets of critical race theory are: (1) the primacy of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination; (2) a questioning of the dominant belief system/status quo; (3) a commitment to social justice; (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (5) a multidisciplinary perspective. Moreover, Critical Race Theory will be used as a lens to assess and present the narrative accounts of Rodney King

CRT will be a useful construct in our study because it will serve as a liberatory and transformative lens, which is its hallmark (Crenshaw, 2011; Solórzano et al., 2000). In particular, CRT will allow for an examination of the words and phrases used by Rodney King, contextualizing and critically deconstructing them. The reader understood that Rodney King was an oppressed person who spoke of his oppression within a nuanced space carved out for him by his oppressors, i.e., the larger American, society, the police, media, legal system, etc. Thus, he was "oppressed" in the manner that he was

allowed to articulate his “oppression.”

Critical Discourse Analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach that studies written and spoken texts to determine how structures of power, inequality, and bias underscore the true meaning of discourse (Van Dijk, 2006). In other words, CDA reveals the “true” meaning and motivation behind written and spoken words that might appear opaque and benign to the layperson (Fairclough, 1993). In his seminal work, *Language and Power*, Fairclough (1989) delineated the emergence of critical discourse as facilitated by major shortcomings in the area of sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics is concerned with how society impacts language (Fasold, 1984; Wardhaugh, 1998). More specifically, sociolinguists find primacy in how society, and its concomitant aspects, i.e., cultural norms and expectations, impact the meaning and use of language (Fasold, 1984). However, for the most part, sociolinguists were guilty of not emphasizing how groups with varying degrees of power (e.g., ruling class as opposed to the working-class) communicate contrarily. The importance of the aforementioned, i.e., power relationships as determinants of language formations, is noted in Fairclough’s (2000) focus on critical discourse analysis as a part of a broadly conceived sociolinguistics. Specifically, the importance of power differentials is entrenched in his explanation of how all social practices, of which discourse is one, involve the construction of social identities. Embedded within these identities is what Fairclough (2000) characterizes as different performances depending upon one social class, gender, or ethnicity. In essence, he suggests “people never simply act, their representations of their actions and domains of action are an inherent part of action, action is reflexive. Different representations tend to be produced from different positions” (Fairclough, 2000, p. 168).

To properly understand an individual’s discourse it is necessary to critically understand their position within the social hierarchy because language is a social practice through which the world is reified and can be used to exercise power, domination, resistance, and subordination (Fairclough, 1989, Van Dijk, 2006). Thus, consistent with the aims of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study will focus on the thematic content of the 20 most popular quotes provided by the late Rodney King, and will place his words within a broader societal context.

Methodology

The methodology utilized in this study involved two steps. The first step involved examining the 20 quotes by Rodney King that were presented on the Search Quotes (2012) website, whose goal is to deliver “amazing quotes to bring inspiration, personal growth, love and happiness” to the everyday lives of those who visit the site. In particular, this step involved examining the 20 quotes provided by King and revealed the similarities and differences between the responses. As was done with the previous step, the first author identified similarities and differences between the themes, presented these to the second author, and through discussions of the rationale for the themes identified, through consensus, agreed on the themes.

Research Design

To identify the themes that were presented in this paper, all quotes were content analyzed using an open-coding process (Holsti, 1969; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), and themes were identified from the quotes. In order to clearly abstract themes from the quotes, words and phrases were the units of analysis. Specifically, coding involved examining all quotes, keeping track of emerging themes, and examining how the quotes presented were specifically related to Rodney King’s world view, particularly as it related to his past, present, and future. To assess the reliability of the themes that was determined by the first author, a list of all quotes, themes, and operational definitions for those themes was given to the second author. After a 99% coding reliability rate was established between the first and second author, it was determined that a working coding system had been established. In order to sufficiently control for reliability, an undergraduate research assistant (trained in qualitative methodology by the first author) was selected to code and analyze the quotes after the initial coding reliability had been established. The reliability established between the first author and the outside coder was 98%.

Presentation of the Findings

Research Question: What do Rodney King’s words reveal about his world view, especially as it relates to the police, himself, and others?

A content analysis of Rodney King’s 20 most famous quotes revealed they primarily focused on

the following four themes: (a) Appreciation for the Struggles of Former Civil Rights Activists (2 quotes); (b) Appreciation for the Legal System (3 quotes); (c) Personal Feelings Related to Police Brutality, The Riots, and Today's Experiences (11 quotes); and (d) Desire for Non-Violence as a Catalyst for Positive Change and Optimism (4 quotes). The "*Appreciation for the Struggles of Former Civil Rights Activists*" theme represented Rodney King's appreciation for individuals that actively fought for Civil Rights. The "*Appreciation for the Legal System*" theme represented Rodney King's appreciation for the legal system. The "*Personal Feelings Regarding Police Brutality, The*

Riots, and Current Experiences" theme represented Rodney King's personal assessments and/or feelings regarding the police brutality that he experienced, the subsequent riots, and today's experiences for Blacks in America. The "*Desire for Non-Violence as a Catalyst for Positive Change and Optimism*" theme was related to Rodney King's desire to use non-violence to resolve conflict, become a catalyst for positive change, and have an optimistic future. [See Table 1 for Themes, Definitions, and Supporting Commentary]

Table 1

Theme, Definition, and Supporting Commentary

Theme	Definition	Supporting Commentary
<i>Appreciation for the Struggles of Former Civil Rights Activists</i>	Words and/or phrases that represent Rodney King's appreciation for individuals that actively fought for Civil Rights.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You know, my mom, she's a little older than me. Her history in watching, you know, police violence and violence, period, over the years haven't been a pleasant one and so she thought that maybe I'd get shot or beat to death out there on the podium, you know. But, you know, I'm from a new generation from hers, and her generation set the footwork." • "All the civil rights leaders and people who died, black and white, you know, Mexican, Chinese, black, you name it, all the ones who died for me and for civil rights in this country, you know, I owe that to them, you know, after thinking about it now. And so it was a good thing for me to get out there and put some water on the fire instead of throwing gasoline in it."
<i>Appreciation for the Legal System</i>	Words and/or phrases that represent Rodney King's appreciation for the legal system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "What went through my mind was I felt like I was in the '40s or the '50s. I was just so hurt and disappointed. But I was also relieved to know that the president had, he had sent down prosecutors to prosecute the guys since they had got away in the first trial." • "The justice system worked for me. You know, it's a slow system, but it works. It worked in my case and, you know, you've got to look back 30 years, look back 50 years. I sure wouldn't want to be living back in them days." • "The justice system is a slow process; it has its own way of working things out."

*Personal Feelings
Regarding Police
Brutality, The
Riots, and Current
Experiences*

Words and/or phrases related to Rodney King's personal assessments and/or feelings regarding the police brutality that he experienced, the subsequent riots, and today's experiences for Blacks in America.

- "So my attorney, he told me that, you know, he said if it wasn't a guilty verdict, that there could be looting and rioting."
- "I saw my hometown burning that day."
- "It's not one day that goes by that I don't think about the incident."
- "Every day is a fight...it's not easy."
- "I get these headaches...When I sniff, my sinuses start burning."
- "You know, as time goes on, you know, it gets a lot easier. It was very hard for me to watch the video and it still is to this day. You know, it all depends on what kind of mood I'm in."
- "For a long time, blacks and especially young black males have been getting bullied by the police, especially, and we've been treated real bad in the past. You know, we've always wanted to help and be a part of at least, for the most of I speak for myself, now always wanted to be a part of my house, which is America, you know, go to work and do my job good and feel a part of something. You know, you do it and you try to be good, and you get pulled over and you get treated like crap by the cops, you know, and somebody else see, or they hear about the cops treating you bad."
- "When I came here almost nine years ago our economy was troubled and our nation was divided."
- "**It's** happening right now... it's just not on film, it's not being recorded."
- "Nothing has changed in our country, so I am still feeling that same pain and anger."

<i>Desire for Non-Violence as a Catalyst for Positive Change and Optimism</i>	Words and/or phrases related to Rodney King's desire to use non-violence to resolve conflict, become a catalyst for positive change, and have an optimistic future.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I want to be remembered by: Can't we all just get along? You know? And like I say, I know I shouldn't have been drinking and driving, but two wrongs don't make a right." • "I've always in my heart and soul, you know, I'll always tried to say something or do something to make it a lot more pleasant for the next generation behind us. When you speak and say something, if you can't say something pleasant and make somebody's day easier, just keep it shut. That's how my mom and my pop raised me, you know, and that's how things get better." • "Can we all get along?" • "You don't need to threaten the city to get your point across. That's the way I felt. That's not the way I was raised." • "I'm hanging in there, I'm Rodney King now. Things are looking up."
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Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to examine the public quotes made by Rodney King, as well as what these quotes reveal about the world paradigm of King, as well as how he perceived himself and his place in the world. Fundamentally, King appreciated the struggles of former Civil Rights activists, appreciated the legal system, was deeply impacted by the police brutality that he experienced, the ensuing riots, and current experiences of Blacks in America, saw an optimistic future for himself, advocated non-violence, and wanted to be a catalyst for positive change. In the pages that follow, we make King's words center stage. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarly work related to Rodney King by critically examining 20 of his most famous quotes and placing these within a larger societal context. Essentially, by focusing on the words provided by King, we simultaneously validate his experiences and highlight his cognitive view as he navigated in the world. However, before responding to each of the research questions, the limitations of this study should be noted.

Although Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical

Discourse Analysis (CDA) compliment the novel aims of this research, we did not emphasize the volume, tone, or non-verbal behavior that King demonstrated when he made these utterances. In spite of this limitation, by focusing on the words of Rodney King, we validate his experiences, understand the underlying racial dynamics associated with social phenomena (Closson, 2010) and reveal how structures of power, inequality, and bias underscore the true meaning of discourse (Van Dijk, 2006). Thus, our reliance on CRT and CDA as methodological frameworks represents a major strength of the current study.

The Worldview of Rodney King

Appreciation for the Struggles of Former Civil Rights Activists. Through his words, Rodney King provided considerable insight into how he perceived himself and others as he navigated the world. For one, King was born in 1965, which saw the end of the Jim Crow laws (1876-1965) which sanctioned the segregation of public schools, public places, public

transportation, public restrooms, public restaurants, and public drinking fountains for Whites and Blacks. Furthermore, although King was not born when state-sponsored school segregation was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of the United States in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education*, or the overturn of the remaining Jim Crow laws overruled by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, he appreciated the struggles made by many who “set the footwork” by fighting for racial equality. Undoubtedly, King read about these experiences in his school textbooks or learned about them firsthand from the men and women who were part of that racial struggle for years. Second, King’s appreciation for the struggles of former Civil Rights activists acknowledged his gratitude for his current position in society. But more important, he was thankful for the men and women that courageously paved the way, many of whom with their lives, which made his current position as a Black man to publicly speak about the injustices of police brutality in America, possible. In other words, by publicly acknowledging the sacrifices made by people of various races (“black and white,” “*Mexican, Chinese, Black, you name it*”), King believed the best way to honor his multi-ethnic ancestors and forerunners was to actively diffuse negativity rather than exasperate it.

The quotes by King are evidence of his appreciation for the struggles of civil rights activists, were instructive yet must be viewed critically. In particular, his statements hint to the complex relationship that involved Blacks during the 1950s and 1960s battling for rights which were supposedly guaranteed them in the 13th and 15th amendments (Feagin, 2010). Further, and rightfully so, King paid homage to those who made immense sacrifices to bring about needed structural changes in America. However, critical discourse analysis necessitates that we critically analyze King’s acknowledgement. Although King thanked civil rights leaders of all colors “who paved the way” via their participation in the civil rights movement, one must recognize that positions of power and subordination are embedded in discourse (Richmond, 2013). Contemporarily, many marginalized whites have sought and obtained greater social power and acceptance for their causes (i.e., same-sex rights, women’s rights, veteran’s rights) because myriads of Blacks were lynched, sprayed with firehouses, beaten, and lost their livelihood and lives in the fight for social justice and equality (Feagin, 2010). Given this reality, why didn’t King primarily acknowledge the Blacks who suffered far greater individual and collective losses (e.g., loss of employment, loss of livelihood, loss of life) than

the multiracial groups “who paved the way” for civil rights (Karenga, 2010)? Perhaps as a member of a subordinate group, King minimized the salience of the Black role in the civil rights movement because he was consciously (or unconsciously) seeking the tacit approval of whites. In essence, by validating the contributions of racial others and minimizing the collective pain shared by members of his own racial group, King’s position of powerlessness becomes more obvious (Feagin, 2010; Gee, 2004). Thus, when a member of a marginalized group (King) downplays the accomplishments of other marginalized members (Blacks who fought during the Civil Rights movement), it erases much of the historical struggle and pain which made the increased rights of non-marginalized members possible.

Oliha (2011) used CRT to highlight how the infusion of Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s words into the 2008 presidential race illustrated the power of Whiteness ideology. Specifically, Oliha (2011) delineated that modes of communication between powerful and powerless groups substantially differ. The aforementioned can be used to contextualize King’s conciliatory comments regarding a legal system that has been less than fair to African Americans. Moreover, despite the civil settlement King received from the city of Los Angeles, the same justice system found the police officers who savagely beat him not guilty even though the entire beating was captured on videotape. Conversely, we are not aware of any instances in which Whites who believed they were wronged by the legal system (in a high profile case involving a Black perpetrator) simultaneously publicly conveyed indebtedness to the same legal system. Finally, the same legal system that King thanked, during his lifetime, and currently, warehouses Black men disproportionately for profit, and during the lynching period (approximately 1880-1930), allowed over 3,500 Black men to be lynched without any punishment for the perpetrators (Loewen, 2007; Ward, 2012).

Appreciation for the Legal System. It is interesting that although King was born in 1965, his negative experience with the LAPD psychologically transformed him to a time when de facto racial-segregation was at its height (“I felt like he was in the [19]40’s or [19]50’s”). Thus, although King realized that Jim Crow no longer existed, in reality, his current experiences with law enforcement were not that far removed from those of his ancestors, who suffered gross injustices at the hands of corrupt law enforcement. Even when he was “hurt and disappointed,” King publicly expressed tremendous faith in and appreciation for the legal system, a feeling that was no doubt restored by the president’s decision to

prosecute the men that battered him. Thus, it seems that rather than concentrate on inherent inequalities within the legal justice system, which would have invariably deepened his feelings of 'hurt and disappointment,' King chose to focus on, or rather publicly comment on the experiences of former generations ("You've got to look back 30 years, look back 50 years"). Consequently, channeling emotionally-difficult experiences in this way may have made it possible for King to convince himself (and possibly other Blacks) that the legal system of today, although "a slow process" is a more fair system than it was in decades past. While this view may sound good in theory, in reality, historically-established and maintained systems of power, privilege, inequality, and bias, which are largely predicated on race, gender, and class, has allowed educated and wealthy White males to create, enforce, and penalize minority offenders, whose crimes are substantially less costly than theirs (Cush, 2013; Wise, 2013). Thus, viewed from a critical perspective, Blacks like King may consciously "look back 30 years, look back 50 years" in order to make better sense of their emotionally-painful and current realities. So, by constantly "looking back" a Black man in America with little or no economic or social power can numb his current psychological, emotional, and spiritual pain.

According to King, "The justice system is a slow process; it has its own way of working things out," but is this accurate? We guess that that would largely depend on how one defines "working things out." In the case of King, he successfully sued the city of Los Angeles in a federal civil rights case and the court jury awarded King \$3.8 million and awarded King's attorneys an additional \$1.7 million in statutory attorney's fees, yet rarely have Blacks historically or contemporaneously been awarded such hefty financial judgments (Bell, 1992; Donner, 2014). Earlier we mentioned that Blacks are substantially more likely than Whites to report incidences of police brutality (Smith & Holmes, 2003) while Whites are rarely convicted of mistreating or even murdering Blacks (Cush, 2013). Recent media examples such as the late Trayvon Martin (an unarmed Black teen killed by the armed Hispanic George Zimmerman) and Jordan Davis (an unarmed Black teen killed by the armed White Michael Dunn), provide resounding evidence that judicial discrepancies in the legal system primarily favor Whites and dismiss the individual and collective pain of Blacks (Bryson, 1998; Cush, 2013; Tonry, 2011; Williams, 2013). So, although King's utterances hint the justice system is a 'slow yet steady process,' in reality, Blacks are substantially more likely

to be arrested, charged, spend time in prison (Chaney, 2011; Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Robertson, 2014), and are substantially less likely to receive the financial judgment that King received.

Personal Feelings Regarding Police Brutality, the Riots, and Current Experiences. The overwhelming majority of quotes provided by King were related to his personal feelings regarding police brutality, the riots, and his current life experiences. As a Black man in America, King was very aware that unjust conditions could potentially lead to civil unrest, a reality of which his attorney reminded him before the initial verdicts were rendered. It was interesting that King's attorney and the world at large expected "looting and rioting" if a "guilty verdict" were not rendered without acknowledging the lack of social and economic power that historically motivate individuals to rely on this form of expressive rage and indignation in the first place (Feagin, 2010). In addition, King's words reminded us that South Central Los Angeles was more than just houses and buildings; it was the permanent residence of King and others. Quite simply, it was home for millions of poor Blacks and other persons of color. Thus, King's use of the phrase "*I saw my hometown burning that day*" reminded the world that, although economically and socially disadvantaged, his community welcomed children, watched those children become adults and establish families of their own, yet visibly and quickly disappeared from their eyes. Even deeper, the phrase "burning" suggests a physical and metaphorical collapse of King's hometown. Stated another way, this "burning" may refer to the actual fires responsible for the collapse of King's "hometown" as well as the metaphorical frustrations ("burning") experienced by Blacks in the inner-city who knew firsthand the fear, frustration, and rage of law enforcement on Black bodies and the in(justice) inflicted on those bodies via mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010; Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Robertson, 2014). In addition to the aforementioned, King's candid disclosure of the police beating reinforces that trauma generally has long-term, deleterious effects on the physical ("*I get these headaches*"), psychological ("*It's not one day that goes by that I don't think about the incident*"), mental ("*Every day is a fight...it's not easy*"), and emotional ("*It was very hard for me to watch the video and it still is to this day*") well-being of its victims. It is particularly noteworthy that King did not say "some days are a fight" but rather "every day is a fight." This indicates that a non-normative stressor such as a police beating can have immediate, insidious, and long-term damaging effects on the

physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of Black men and women. Case in point: Years after the beating, King complained of “headaches” and “burning sinuses.” Therefore, these negative physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual experiences can make the already stressful lives of marginalized victims “a fight,” in that they must navigate in the world, while carrying intense feelings of anger, frustration, discouragement, and powerlessness (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Wise, 2013). These feelings may be especially difficult to bear when King and others like him contemplate the many Black men that are currently being “bullied” by the police, that “it’s [police brutality] happening right now,” as well as how their position in society renders them powerless to change this reality. In essence, King’s desire to live peacefully in America, or what he symbolically refers to as “his house,” reinforces the desire for Blacks in America, and Black men in particular, to “feel a part of something.” However, how can Black men feel comfortable living in a “house” that chronically makes them feel unwelcome, unwanted, and undeserving? Since King and many like him believe “nothing has changed in our country” this suggests the experience of many Blacks in America is marked by “cultural trauma” (Kim, 2012) and chronic “pain and anger” rather than life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Desire for Non-Violence as a Catalyst for Positive Change and Optimism. King’s desire for non-violence as a catalyst for positive change is historically reminiscent of the non-violent stance prominently advocated by the late Martin Luther King, the late Mother Theresa, and the Dalai Lama. However, more than merely uttering these words, King believed it was his personal responsibility to consistently speak and conduct himself in a way that would make life easier for subsequent generations (“*I’ve always in my heart and soul, you know, I’ll always tried to say something or do something to make it a lot more pleasant for the next generation behind us.*”), a responsibility he encouraged others to assume. In fact, King’s desire that members of society be catalysts for positive change was so strong that he urged individuals who could or would not wholeheartedly commit to social uplift through words and actions to refrain from harmful speech and actions (“*When you speak and say something, if you can’t say something pleasant and make somebody’s day easier, just keep it shut. That’s how my mom and my pop raised me, you know, and that’s how things get better.*”). Therefore, rather than become a lightning rod for racial divisiveness (“*You don’t need to threaten the city to get your point across. That’s the way I felt. That’s not the way*

I was raised”), King’s child-like plea “*Can we all get along?*” was a simple reminder that it is possible for racially-diverse individuals to co-exist in peace, love, and harmony, if they so desired. All in all, in spite of the trials that afflicted him before the infamous beating that brought him fame, as well as those that affected him afterwards, King was optimistic that his life would get better (“*I’m hanging in there, I’m Rodney King now. Things are looking up*”). Clearly, King knew the world was aware of his public mistakes and challenges, yet he publicly (and perhaps privately) reminded himself of the need to be strong (“*I’m hanging in there*”), to accept who he was at that particular point in time (“*I’m Rodney King now*”), and to be confident that his life would improve (“*Things are looking up*”).

King’s words of non-violence as a catalyst for change must be juxtaposed against the reality that all large-scale social movements (e.g., civil rights, Black power movements) that produced substantive improvements to American society involved some degree of violence (Karenga, 2010). Even if violence was not acted out by those who attempted to bring about change it was part of the resistance strategy used by those who were trying to protect power advantages and the prevailing racial social order (i.e., southern Whites) during the civil rights movement. Moreover, when examined via a critical discourse analysis perspective, the King utterances “*Can we all get along?*” or “*You do not need to threaten the city to get your point across*” could be active performances of an oppressed individual to appease his oppressors (Fairclough, 2000). As previously mentioned, CRT recognizes experiential knowledge influences the attitudes and behaviors of individuals who are members of oppressed groups (Crenshaw, 2011). Thus, as a Black male who was reared in a blighted urban area with a torrid history of police brutality, King undoubtedly knew that when whites generally feel threatened by Blacks, police habitually become more brutal (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Walker, Spohn, & Delone, 2004). Thus, by arguing against non-violence one could surmise that King tried to minimize the likelihood that he and others like him (e.g., Black men) would be targets of police violence as well as lobby against the very action that produces change. So, King’s statements must be viewed within a matrix of domination (i.e., intersectionality) which acknowledge his statements emerge from a social and historical milieu of two identities----the physically assaulted Black man who expresses anger with the conditions that foster and perpetuate institutional racism and the marginalized Black man in America, who actively encourages meaningful social change (e.g.,

equity and justice) although he lacks the social power to effect this change (Halley, Eshleman, & Vijaya, 2011).

Conclusion

What do the aforementioned 20 quotes tell us about the late Rodney Glen King (April 2, 1965 – June 17, 2012)? While these quotes acknowledge King's appreciation for the struggles of former Civil Rights activists, they also recognize his frustrations with the current legal system, the plight of millions of Black men in America who are being assaulted by the police, social stagnation that allows the status quo to endure, as well as the ways that Blacks are not allowed to reach their individual and collective potential in America. As a member of a marginalized group who lacked social power, we must recognize that King was a reminder, dare we say, a living symbol of what America was historically and what America could be in the years to come. When the late Rodney King grabbed the attention of the world over two decades ago in 1991, it was not because of his intellectual power, accomplishments, or social standing, but rather because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. At that moment, King became

an unwitting recipient of the LADP's general animus against Black men, of which he was the target-du-jour. In spite of that traumatic experience, King desperately wanted "to be a part of" America and publicly encouraged racial harmony. Sadly, the increasing number of assaults on Black men and women by the police provide resounding evidence that King's desire for everyone "to get along" are not being generally honored by everyone, most notably white members of law enforcement against Black bodies (Armour, 1997; Bell, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Chaney & Robertson, 2013; King, 2011; Plant & Peruche, 2005; Police Brutality Statistics, 2011; Tonry, 2011). Since King was optimistic that 'things are looking up,' it is in the spirit of his life, that we express gratitude to the men and women who have historically and contemporaneously remained committed to social justice, members of the legal system who actively work for racial equity and justice, as well as members of law enforcement who do not participate in or condone racial profiling or police brutality. For us, when Blacks and other racial minorities receive the same rights and privileges as those automatically afforded to members of the general population will all persons in America truly "get along."

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