

Spring 2017

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Bailey-Curry, Tonya, "Parenting a black child in America: Fears and Experiences" (2017). *Thinking Matters Symposium Archive*. 66.
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Parenting a black child in America: Fears and Experiences

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Abstract

Black children are at higher risk of death and injury at hands of law enforcement, which has amplified concerns and exacerbated the racial divide. Parents of black children live with significant fear for their children's safety (Fine, et al., 2003). In 2016, 258 black people lost their lives at the hands of law enforcement (Craven, 2017). The danger black children face can cause ongoing fear and anger, which manifests in a variety of ways that are detrimental to well-being.

Introduction

Racially motivated incidents, often exposed due to social media, can cause parents of black children to become hypervigilant and struggle to offer guidance and strategies that increase their child's safety. There is a scant amount of research that investigates the experiences of parenting a black child. This phenomenological study seeks to gain deeper understanding of the fears and experiences of parents of black children. This study will contribute to the knowledge base and offer possible strategies for parents and children who face this daily fear of encounters with police and other racially hostile agents.

Question/Objective

This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of parents with black children by asking the following questions:

- How do you think your experiences of parenting a black child differs from parents of non-black children?
- What would you estimate are the differences between parenting a black male child and a black female child?
- How do you educate your children about engaging with law enforcement?
- What are your fears in parenting at this time?
- How is your experience of parenting different than they way which you were raised?

Methods

Method of Analysis: Phenomenology

- Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology used when the goal is to understand the meaning of human experiences while deepening insights into social phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory (CRT)

- Critical race theory in reference to this study provides a lens to understand the intensity created by socially constructed racial and ethnic categorization (Ford, 2010).
- CRT helps to identify the position within the social hierarchy parents of black children view the world.

Interview Participants:

- Fifteen parents with black children were invited to participate.
- Twelve parents accepted invitation and completed interview.
- All participants identified as having one or more black children.
- 4 participants self-identified as white.
- 8 participants self-identified as a non-white parent.

“I learned how to ride a bike with no hands, my son is learning how to ride a bike while keeping both of his hands in plain sight at all times....he is 7”

Figure 1. Father of 7 year old son

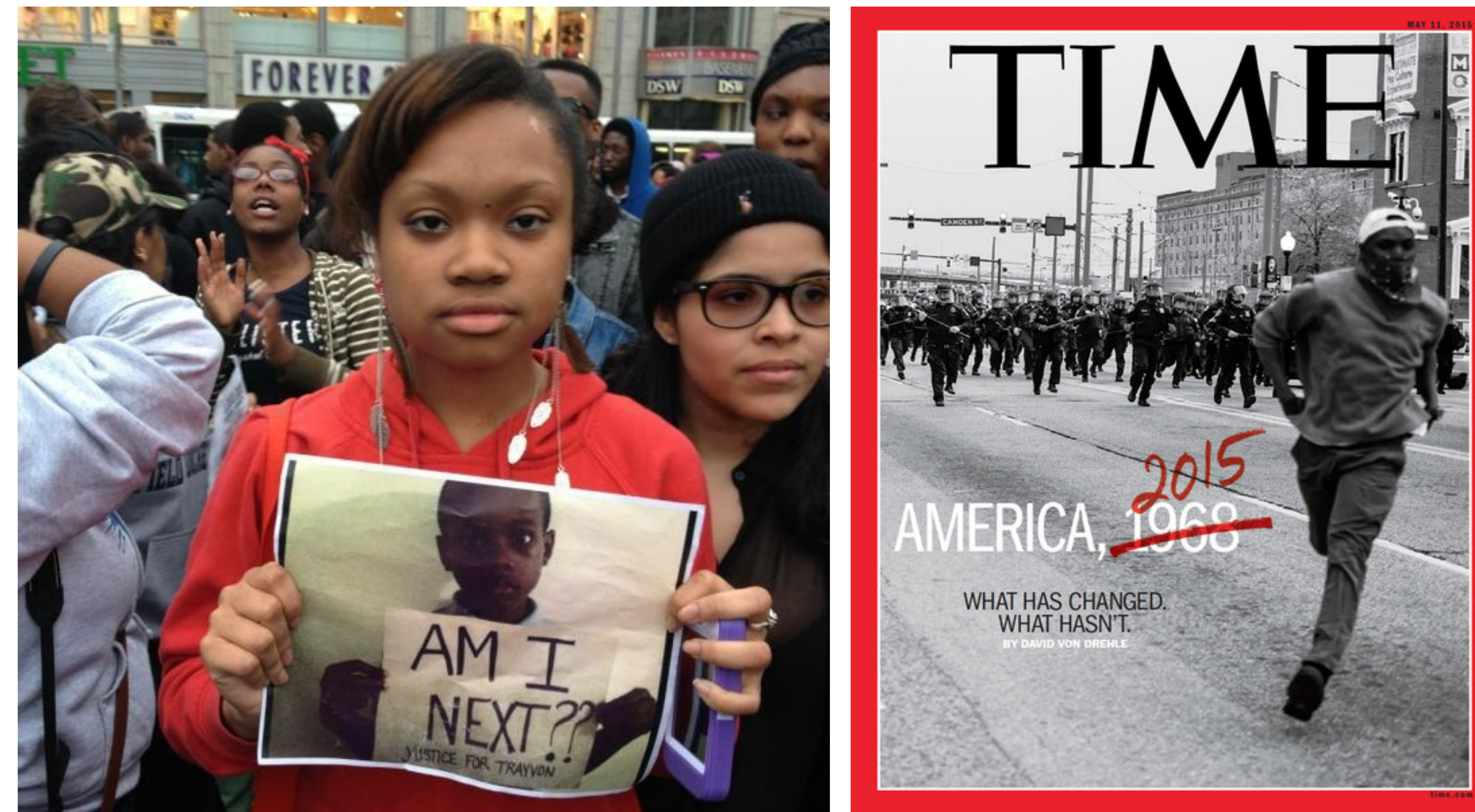


Figure 2. Google Images

“I remember my grandparents telling us stories about growing up down south during Jim Crow and I couldn't believe what I heard. Now I sit with my son and look at videos online of people being sprayed with hoses and police dogs being used to control the crowd. It is history repeating itself or maybe it never changed.”

Figure 3. Mother of 16 year old son

Results

Emerging Themes:

- **Loss of Innocence: Figure 1. Participant 3**
- **Inferiority complex:** “ I want her to see herself the way I do but the world doesn't”. Participant 7
- **Being white doesn't protect my kids:** “My experience growing up was really different because I have white skin and I didn't live in fear like I do now, I fear for my kids all the time”. Participant 11
- **Fear of safety with 4 subthemes:**
 - **Law enforcement:** “Your job when interacting with law enforcement is to stay alive, that's it”. Participant 8
 - **Gender-who has it worse:** “ Turn on your television, black males and females are being hunted, none of them are safe”. Participant 9
 - **Outside world: Figure 3, Participant 12**
 - **Hypervigilance:** “ I feel like my generation grew up in a time where some of this racial divide was put on pause, the pause button my children is no longer an option if I want to keep them safe”. Participant 5

Discussion

- The fear known to parents of black children is not new, rather it is a painful reminder of the fears parents of black children had during the Jim Crow era. The significant change experienced today is the constant reminder of bias, discrimination, and race-related violence made instantly available through social media outlets. Historical events, such as the lynching of 14 year old Emmet Till in 1955 were known to African American communities through word of mouth, however, people all over the globe witnessed the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014 (Somashekhar, 2015). Witnessing such events complicate the role of the parent with a black child as they serve as a threat to one of our most basic needs, safety (Neblett, et al., 2008). This study provides a deepened understanding of the lived experiences of the parent of a black child which represents a gap in current and historical research.
- The parents interviewed in this study came from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds but shared the commonality of living in fear for their children's safety and well-being. Participant 6 said “ No matter how where I live, how well I educate my children, or how careful they are, I still live in fear every time they leave the house”. These parents often feel isolated in their fear and some have limited resources adding an additional layer of complexity.
- This phenomenological study documented a small portion of the large number of parents of black children that are navigating through such a difficult journey.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my social work cohort for the wonderful experience of working alongside each of you through this difficult, yet rewarding journey. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. Gerstenblatt for the unwavering support and encouragement through each step of this journey, I am truly grateful.

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