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# ”Am I next?”<sup>1</sup>

A narrative analysis of African Americans’ public responses to the deadly shooting of Michael Brown

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MRSG31dk3

Fall term 2014

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<sup>1</sup> Altman, Alex, “Ferguson Cops Tell Their Side of the Story”, *Time*, 2014-08-15, “Am I next?” [picture], accessed 2015-01-09



# Abstract

Cases of deadly use of police force against young colored men have historically been, and are still common in the American context. The public reactions by the social group of African Americans to such incidents aim to draw attention to how racism and racist stereotypes is affecting policing in the United States. This study examines African Americans' public responses to the deadly shooting of the unarmed teenager Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014. African Americans' narratives were spread worldwide via social media which made it possible for this study to examine the social group's central understanding of the case. The narratives expressed in articles and on protest signs as well as documented visually at demonstrations in Ferguson were examined from a perspective linking the themes of narrative identity, social action and oppression. African Americans' social responses to Brown's death were found to be motivated by a longing to challenge the dominant discourse that perceives the police as the protector of the citizens while stereotyping young African American men as criminals. Furthermore, this study found that the narratives were expressions of African Americans' shared experience of Michael Brown's death being a symbol for their whole social group's subjectivity to oppression in the United States.

## *Keywords*

African American, oppression, police violence, group identity, social justice, Michael Brown, United States, narratives, blackness, racial stereotypes

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# 1. Introduction

Deadly use of force by police officers is nothing unique for the American context. It is however significant to examine this oppressive violence in this specific context since the ones falling victim to it are predominantly members of ethnic or racial minorities, especially young African American men. The historical context of slavery and institutionalized racism in the United States is contributing to the enormous outrage among mostly African Americans that follows in the aftermath of such incidents. The recent deaths of several young colored men caused by on-duty police officers<sup>2</sup> have revived public discussions about African Americans still having to witness oppression of their social group in contemporary American society. This study examines the public reactions among African Americans to the case of colored 18-year old Michael Brown who got shot to death by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri on August the 9<sup>th</sup> 2014.<sup>3</sup>

This case revived public criticism about daily oppression of African Americans in the United States and how racism affects policing in neighborhoods like Ferguson. Ferguson is a city in which racial tensions have been said to be a result of the police and leader positions in the city almost exclusively being obtained by white people even though the population in Ferguson is predominately African American.<sup>4</sup> Peaceful demonstrations and rather violent lootings and riots were responses to the shooting of Michael Brown documented by major news agencies worldwide. Videos of the happenings in Ferguson and pictures of protesters holding up signs with for instance the statements “I’m Michael Brown”<sup>5</sup> and “Am I next?”<sup>6</sup> were extensively spread on social networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram reaching out to a wide public.

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Associated Press in Little Rock, Arkansas, “Chavis Carter death ruled as suicide as investigators prove handcuff theory”, *The Guardian*, 2012-08-20; McLaughlin, Michael, “Ex- Transit Officer who killed Oscar Grant, Unarmed Black Man, Wins Lawsuit”, *Huffington Post*, 2014-02-07; Swaine, Jon, “Ohio Walmart video reveals moments before officer killed John Crawford”, *The Guardian*, 2014-09-25; BBC, “Tamir Rice: US police kill boy, 12, carrying replica gun”, *BBC*, 2014-11-24

<sup>3</sup> “Ferguson protests: National Guard sent to Missouri unrest”, *BBC*, 2014-08-14, <bbc.com>, accessed 2015-01-10

<sup>4</sup> Kesling, Ben & Peters, Mark, “Ferguson Has Long Been Challenged by Racial Tensions”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2014-08-14, <wsj.com>, accessed 2015-01-10

<sup>5</sup> “Michael Brown shooting: Ferguson residents react”, *BBC*, 2014-08-18, <bbc.com>, “I’m Michael Brown” [picture]

<sup>6</sup> Altman, Alex, “Ferguson Cops Tell Their Side of the Story”, *Time*, 2014-08-15, <time.com>, “Am I next?” [picture]

Most of the police officers that have caused the deaths of African Americans are not getting indicted. Officer Darren Wilson who shot the unarmed Michael Brown got as well acquitted of any wrongdoing. This has been regarded as a great injustice by African Americans as well as other American citizens who condemned the acquittal in nationwide protests. That these demonstrations were responded to violently by the police led to more criticism against the American police's choice of using excessive force against unarmed individuals.<sup>7</sup> The police officer stopped the teenager and his friend Johnson, who is also African American, for walking on the street. Several witnesses have stated that the teenager put up his hands to surrender and still got shot by the officer. Wilson is contrariwise stating that he chose to shoot since he feared for his life. If Brown really was behaving aggressive towards the officer is not yet known. Especially the dominantly African American community in Ferguson criticized the handling of the case by both the police and the media for trying to make the action of the police officer comprehensible by portraying Michael Brown as a stereotyped criminal youth.<sup>8</sup>

Distinct discussions on the media have been fast to use the term oppression for the deadly use of police force in the Michael Brown case. It does however not appear to be very common in academic research to explicitly denounce police brutality as a form of oppression. This study aims thus to contribute with an examination of African Americans' responses to Michael Brown's death from a perspective regarding the social group's oppression through narrativity.

## 1.2 Purpose and issue

The main purpose of this study is to examine how African Americans' narratives express their experience of identity as an oppressed group and how these stories make their social action intelligible in the specific context of Michael Brown's shooting in Ferguson. Political theorist Iris Young's fivefold perspective of oppression<sup>9</sup> and social theorist Margaret R. Somers' perspective of narrative identity<sup>10</sup> are together used as the theoretical

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<sup>7</sup> Swaine, Jon, "Michael Brown protests in Ferguson met with rubber bullets and teargas", *The Guardian*, 2014-08-14, <theguardian.com>, accessed 2015-01-10

<sup>8</sup> Sandoval, Edgar, "Michael Brown's family speaks out against police video: 'They released it to make him look bad'", *Daily News*, 2014-08-24, <nydailynews.com>, accessed 2014-12-12

<sup>9</sup> Young, Iris Marion, "Justice and the Politics of Difference", Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990

<sup>10</sup> Somers, Margaret R., 1994. "The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach", *Theory and Society*, vol. 23, no. 5 (oct), s. 605-649

and methodical framework that guides the conduct of this study. The chosen framework is namely suitable to conduct an examination of the social group's central narratives triggered by the death of Michael Brown. Since the issue to be examined in this study has a highly specific context, I will, as Young has stated in her previous work "claim to speak neither for everyone, to everyone, nor about everything."<sup>11</sup>

The context of the Michael Brown case is in this study being regarded with a clear focus on the oppression and injustice African Americans are being subject to in contemporary American society. Therefore, the focus lies on examining narratives constructed by members of the social group about their personal and shared experiences of oppression. This study's purpose is to examine how these themes relate to numerous other aspects and themes that are making the reactions and responses to the death of Michael Brown comprehensible. Police brutality against African Americans and oppression of social groups are like narrativity highly complex themes. Therefore this study had to be delimited to a great extent which will be motivated for later in the paper. To clarify, the purpose of the study is to answer on the following questions.

How do African Americans construct their identity as an oppressed group through narratives as reactions to the shooting of Michael Brown? Which themes are the most recurring and central ones to which these distinct narratives relate to? How are African Americans' narratives making the group's public responses to the shooting of Michael Brown comprehensible as social action?

### 1.3 The empirical material

The empirical material that has been chosen for this study consists of two news articles, one short documentary and several pictures in which African Americans are expressing opinions, feelings and attitudes about their oppression triggered by the happening in Ferguson. Both articles have been published on Aljazeera's detailed online coverage of the Michael Brown case called "Flashpoint Ferguson."<sup>12</sup> They both quote statements made by several highly educated African Americans. This is not of a great importance

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<sup>11</sup> Young, 1990, p.13

<sup>12</sup> "His death is not in vain": Mourners pay respect to Michael Brown", *Aljazeera America*, 25 August 2014, < america.aljazeera.com >, accessed 28-11-2014; Khan, Naureen, "After Ferguson, black activists hope for reckoning on race and policing", *Aljazeera America*, 26 August 2014, < america.aljazeera.com >, accessed 28 November 2014

but is however adding an interesting perspective to this study which foremost examines the narratives of demonstrators. The individuals quoted in the articles are thus obtaining a position that makes it more easily to spread their narratives and to be listened to by society compared to other members of the social group. The articles have as well been chosen since Aljazeera's homepage is a global platform that reaches out to a wide audience which makes their coverage of the case supposedly more critical compared to an American news agency.

The chosen short documentary “‘Am I Next?’”<sup>13</sup> is produced by the New York based production company Transient Pictures which aims to produce “socially-charged films.”<sup>14</sup> The documentary shows a demonstration that took place in Ferguson five days after the shooting of Michael Brown while following the 14-years old African American Shane Flowers. The video has frequently been shared on social media platforms and has been responded to very positively. What makes this documentary suitable to answer on the questions at issue is that it shows distinct opinions expressed by the teenager and several other African American demonstrators concerning Michael Brown's death. The statements made by the protesters are highly comprehensive since they are relating to many distinct themes which is an advantage for this study to avoid a one-sided analysis.

Additionally, distinct pictures showing African Americans holding up protest signs at demonstrations in Ferguson have been chosen of which 19 signs are being examined. To clarify, it is principally the statements written on the signs that are being examined. However, other aspects like the age and gender of the person holding the sign is being analyzed in the study when relevant to make the narrative more understandable in the given context. Demonstrations are generally held to draw attention to injustices or to challenge a dominant discourse which makes it highly relevant to regard the narratives expressed at the protests to examine African Americans' opposition to oppressive injustice. The signs might at first sight not appear as comprehensive like the narratives expressed in the documentary but they are however highly interesting for this study due to their relation to other events and to the historical context of slavery and racism in the

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<sup>13</sup> Levine, Jeremy, Truesdell, Jeff & Weissman, Nicholas, “‘Am I Next?’: Ferguson's Protests Through the Eyes of a Teenager”, [video]*Transient Pictures*, August 2014, <<http://vimeo.com/103678910>>, accessed 2014-11-29

<sup>14</sup> ‘Transient Pictures’, Vimeo [website], 2010, <<http://vimeo.com/transientpictures>>, accessed 06 January 2015

United States. The chosen pictures have been collected from very differing websites. Some photos have been collected from major news channels like BBC and from American news sites like U.S. News while others have been selected from rather unknown photography blogs. A lot of the statements were originally written without any commas or in capital letters. For style reasons these will be written in lowercase letters which however does not affect the meaning of the statement.

The empirical material might on the first sight appear as an incoherent choice but at a second regard it becomes evident that the similarities are many. All pictures, the articles and the documentary have been made public on social media and thus been made visible for a large and mixed audience. This aspect is an advantage for the study since it avoids sidedness that would appear when solely examining narratives spread by one single news agency or social network user. The stories in this study are often only fragments of narratives that are becoming narratives only through the influence of “historicity and relationality,”<sup>15</sup> two crucial theoretical tools that will be presented in a later chapter of this study. Another aspect that needs to be clarified is that what is being described as the most central narratives by the social group of African Americans is affected by what has been chosen to be spread by the distinct social actors like journalists and private internet users. This study does thus not claim to present a total of existing narratives expressed by African Americans triggered by Michael Brown’s death. But then again, as mentioned above, the choice of material can be regarded as sufficient to examine the questions at issue.

## 1.4 Delimitation

As mentioned earlier, this study had to be delimited in various aspects. During the process of this study, the police officer causing Brown’s death got acquitted from any wrongdoing which was followed by nationwide protests attended by people with different origins. These demonstrations will not be subject for this study since it would take the focus from the responses to Michael Brown’s death and rather add a focus on American citizen’s challenging problems of the justice system in the United States. What was special about the very first reactions to the shooting that are being examined in this study is namely that

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<sup>15</sup> Somers, 1994, p.617



it was mainly African Americans who went to the streets to protest. It would however be interesting for a later study to examine how the police officer's acquittal contributes to a further oppression of the social group.

Another limitation made in this study is that no signs held up by the white population are being examined. Such signs were seen in St. Louise and they were predominantly expressing support for Darren Wilson and the American police.<sup>16</sup> Contrasting these statements and narratives with the responses by the African American population would however be an interesting theme to examine in a later study. Furthermore, despite the case above all concerning young black men, this study will not make any profound analysis of the significance of intersectionality since the study's purpose focuses on examining responses by African Americans due to their overarching social group identification regardless of age, gender, religion, and other attributes.

At times in the analysis, the intersectionality of a certain member of the social group will be discussed when it is significant for the understanding of the narrative. It should also be mentioned that one can identify as a member of several other groups<sup>17</sup> but it would deviate too much from the questions at issue if this study would analyze the significance of African Americans' other group identities. The above named limitations and the delimitation of the theoretical and methodical framework explained in the following chapter have been chosen to make it possible to conduct this study with coherency and clarity.

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<sup>16</sup> Swaine, Jon, "Ferguson Police Officer was 'doing his job', say supporters", *The Guardian*, 2014-08-18, <[theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com)>; Walsh, Joan, "Ferguson's booming white grievance industry: Fox News, Darren Wilson and friends", *Salon*, 2014-08-25, <[salon.com](http://salon.com)>; Keena, Maria, "Fundraising Campaigns for Ferguson Officer Darren Wilson Halt Donations", *CBS St. Louise*, 2014-09-02, <[stlouis.cbslocal.com](http://stlouis.cbslocal.com)>

<sup>17</sup> Young, p.48

## 2.Theory and Method

This chapter gives firstly a presentation of the central understanding and background of Iris Young's theory of oppression followed by Margaret R. Somers' perspective of narrativity. These two overviews are then followed by a more detailed explanation of the exact theoretical and methodical tools that have been chosen for the analysis of the empirical material. These tools are moreover interwoven into a framework characterized by both Somers' focus on narrative identity and social action as well as Young's focus on group affinity and social action. The presentation of this theoretical and methodical framework aims thus to give a clear explanation of how the study will be conducted.

### 2.2 Young's "five faces of oppression"<sup>18</sup>

Racism is according to Iris Marion Young one of the "major forms of oppression"<sup>19</sup> in American society which makes it highly relevant to use her perspective of oppression in this study. Her perspective can thus be used to examine how deadly use of police force triggered by racial stereotypes results in and constitutes a form of oppression. Young's perspective is furthermore a very utile approach to examine in which distinct aspects the social group of African Americans is being oppressed. What is advantageous about Young's perspective is that it does not claim to construct one overarching and unilateral theory of oppression for every thinkable social group. The differences in how profound the oppression of distinct groups is and the problematic of the existing lack of unity among the term in public dialogue is the motivation for her fivefold perspective. Young defines oppression as one of the most fitting expressions of injustice.<sup>20</sup> Her perspective focuses on the similarity of all oppressed groups suffering "some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings."<sup>21</sup>

This understanding of what it means to belong to an oppressed group is as well used in this study. Young calls this perspective the "five faces of oppression."<sup>22</sup> A more detailed explication of these five conditions follows later in this chapter. As long as one

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<sup>18</sup> Young, 1990, p.39ff.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.192

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.39f.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.40

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.39ff.

is suffering from at least one of these faces of oppression that Young defines as “exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence,”<sup>23</sup> one is oppressed. When social theorists “construct oppression as a unified phenomenon” when regarding diverse social groups, important factors contributing to the oppression can easily be ignored.<sup>24</sup> Young’s theory makes it possible for this study to avoid this problematic and can use the five criteria in order to regard distinct aspects as contributing to African American’s oppression in the United States.

Young challenges the dominant opinion that American society cannot be described as oppressive which depends on a dominant opinion of oppression being “the evil perpetrated by the Others.”<sup>25</sup> Inspired by social movements from the 1960s, Young states that social groups suffer oppression not like traditional notions indict, by “a tyrannical power”, but are rather oppressed in a structural way due to reproduced practices and structures that form daily societal life.<sup>26</sup> However, Young states that acts performed by individual perpetrators can be oppressive as well.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, focus in this study lies not on Darren Wilson as an individual oppressor but it will be examined how African Americans in the aftermath of the case are blaming the structures of policing in the United States. Young’s concept of a social group and the significance of group identity for people’s social action are also crucial parts in this study and they are furthermore partly linked to Margaret R. Somers’ perspective. A presentation of these theoretical tools follow after the next section.

## 2.3 Somers’ concept of narrative analysis

Numerous distinct theorists have been constructing diverse concepts of narrative analysis and have thus contributed to narrativity becoming an extensive field of study. The social theorist Margaret R. Somers’ concept of narrative analysis is the one that has been chosen for this study due to its potential to be interwoven with Young’s perspective presented above. It is namely both perspectives’ focus on group identity and social action that makes them suitable to combine in order to fulfill the purpose of the study. The most utile aspect

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.40

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.63

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.41

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.42

for this study is that Somers' perspective is highly influenced by social ontology. It is namely this "theory of *being*"<sup>28</sup> that adds the crucial aspect to her perspective that "it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world."<sup>29</sup> This aspect indicates that the narratives examined in this study are expressions of African Americans that aim to express the social group's perception of what the case of Michael Brown's death is about and what it relates to.

This perspective of narrativity is furthermore advantageous since it avoids the problematic of identity categories. Somers' includes namely the changeable factors that she calls "*time, space and relationality*"<sup>30</sup> in her concept of narrative analysis which complicates to maintain static categorizations.<sup>31</sup> African American's group identity is therefore not to be regarded as a static category in this study. The distinct members' feeling of group affinity is rather to be regarded as an expression of their identity construction in the specific context of 21<sup>st</sup> century American society through the process of incorporating life experiences into stories.<sup>32</sup> The motivation for Somers' theoretical contribution to the field of study of narrativity is her conviction of "identity politics", "social construction of identity" and a "reconfigured approach to the concept of narrative"<sup>33</sup> being highly relatable even though it might not appear so at first sight. This understanding of narrativity is important since the combination of these distinct aspects is exactly what makes individuals' and groups' social action comprehensible.<sup>34</sup> Beneath follows a more detailed presentation of the theoretical and methodical framework for the study in which it will further be explained how the above introduced aspects of this perspective and Young's theory will be used in the study.

## 2.2 The theoretical and methodical framework

As mentioned earlier, the focus on social groups and their identity construction is central for the chosen framework. Young's "concept of a social group"<sup>35</sup> is a crucial element in

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<sup>28</sup> Somers, 1994, p. 615

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 606

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 606

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Somers, 1994, p. 613f.

<sup>33</sup> All quotations from Somers, 1994, p.605

<sup>34</sup> Somers, 1994, p.629

<sup>35</sup> Young, 1990, p.40

this study since she foremost regards oppression as “a condition of groups.”<sup>36</sup> While Young focuses on distinct oppressed groups to give a variety of examples of how oppression is perceived due to different group affiliation, this study will solely examine the social group of African Americans. To further be able to keep the study’s focus on African American’s racial identity as a group, the two crucial tools of narrativity that Somers names “emplotment”<sup>37</sup> and “*evaluative criteria*”<sup>38</sup> are being applied in the analysis of the empirical material. The former proceeds ““events” into *episodes*”<sup>39</sup> and the latter demonstrates how priority and meaning is given to distinct happenings in ones’ life.<sup>40</sup> These tools will thus be used in this study in order to examine imprinting events in African American’s contemporary history concerning the group’s oppression. Young’s perspective will as well frame the conduct of the study through an examination of how distinct narratives relate to her five conditions of oppression. The given definitions of these criteria are providing the foundation for how they are to be understood in this study. However, certain aspects of Young’s five conditions will be modified so explicitly the characterizations of the terms that are relevant for the question at issue will be used to produce a more independent study.

The condition of powerlessness is used by Young to show that predominantly African Americans and other racial groups obtain the lowest positions in the labor market in the United States. This aspect is being used in this study with focus on how African Americans are experiencing powerlessness in form of “disrespectful treatment.”<sup>41</sup> This form of oppression is similar to cultural imperialism because of the experience of being disrespected by society due to one’s group identity as African American. Inspired by Lugones and Spelman<sup>42</sup>, Young uses the term cultural imperialism to define the paradoxical process in which a supposedly universal discourse makes groups like African Americans’ experiences invisible while as well contrasting that group into a stereotyped “Other”.<sup>43</sup> When being subject to exploitation, people are being discredited in a similar

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Somers, 1994, p. 616

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 617

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1994, p.616

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 1994, p.616

<sup>41</sup> Young, 1990, p.58

<sup>42</sup> See Lugones, Maria C. & Spelman, Elizabeth V., 1983, ”Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for ‘the Woman’s Voice.’ ” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 6:573-81

<sup>43</sup> Young, 1990, p.58f.

way which in this study is used to examine how African Americans are being exploited due to the white norm in the United States being “*privileged*.”<sup>44</sup>

The most relevant aspect of the form of oppression called marginalization for this study is that a person or a group is “legitimately subject to the often arbitrary and invasive authority of social service providers and other public and private administrators.”<sup>45</sup> Being subject to other’s exercise of power and control is clearly a central aspect in this study when regarding police violence. Violence is according to Young “a social practice”<sup>46</sup> since it more often than not is targeting victims “explicitly due to their group affinity.”<sup>47</sup> This is important when examining what significance police violence and racial profiling is given in the distinct narratives triggered by Michael Brown’s death. Using these five conditions might appear to contribute to a rather descriptive analysis of the empirical material. Nonetheless, this problematic will be countered by an interaction with certain of Somers’ theoretical tools to add a more evaluative structure to this study.

A crucial aspect used in this study is explained in the following quote by Somers. “To make something understandable in the context of a narrative is to give it historicity and relationality.”<sup>48</sup> This means that this study will relate the distinct statements made by African Americans to their shared history as a social group and to significant events they see as linked to the happenings in Ferguson. It is furthermore important to give a short understanding of the four distinct “dimensions of narrative- ontological, public, conceptual, and metanarrativities”<sup>49</sup> that Somers states. Most important for this study is what Somers defines as ontological narratives, namely narratives that are expressions for how individuals process life experiences and accordingly take action.<sup>50</sup> Public narratives go beyond the stories of a single individual as for instance a family’s or a whole nation’s narratives.<sup>51</sup> These two forms of narratives make it possible to analyze narratives expressed by individual African Americans as well as the predominant narratives of the whole social group. Metanarratives can according to Somers “be the epic dramas of our

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.42

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.54

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.61

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Somers, 1994, p.617

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.617

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.617f.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.619

time”<sup>52</sup> which is suitable for this study’s analysis of the overarching narrative about African Americans’ contemporary struggle in the United States. The only one of these dimensions that is not included in the theoretical and methodical framework of this study is the one of conceptual narratives. This choice has been made since conceptual narrativity concerns a production of a vocabulary suitable to understand certain aspects of a narrative.<sup>53</sup> This study does not aim to create such a vocabulary. It aims exclusively to analyze African Americans’ narratives and to make them understandable as reactions to the deadly shooting of Michael Brown.

Due to Somers’ concept being highly comprehensive, the decision has been made to exclusively use the above named tools in order to avoid losing clarity in the analysis. However, this is not to be regarded as a disadvantage for the study since the chosen tools make it possible to explicate instead for taking for granted individuals’ or groups’ narratives.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the framework for this study consists of Somers’ perspective concerning identity construction and social action being intelligible and constituted through narrativity together with Young’s perspective that acknowledges the significance of group affinity and the distinct forms of oppression social groups can suffer from.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.619

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.620

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.630

### 3.Previous research

There are numerous previous studies concerning the themes of police brutality, attitudes toward the police and African Americans' experiences of policing in the United States. One previous conducted study about "blacks' response to violence" is relevant to regard for this study. It examines namely the responses by the African American community in Harlem to police brutality in the specific context of the United States "during the 1920s."<sup>55</sup> The community's choice to defend themselves against the violence in Harlem was made because police misconduct was being regarded "as a legitimate issue for black protest."<sup>56</sup> Their reaction to mobilize has made and still makes it possible for their social group to publicly challenge certain societal structures in the United States that are contributing to the oppression of the group. The studies thus recognize the significance of African Americans mobilization for making public claims for justice while regarding two distinct periods of time and places. In the previous study, it became evident that colored peoples' way to defend their community was "shaping a larger political process" in which for instance the reactions affected policing in Harlem.<sup>57</sup> In this regard, this study will differ from the previous research since the focus here does not lie on the narratives' effects for the community in Ferguson but rather how the distinct narratives are expressing the motivation for the group's choice of social action triggered by the death of Michael Brown.

Chaney and Robertson's analysis of quotes made by the famous victim of police brutality Rodney Glen King is also highly relevant for what the study conducted in this paper aims to do. Chaney and Robertson examined King's public statements in order to illustrate how they were expressions of his individual perception of the world and which role he saw himself living.<sup>58</sup> This has relevance for the conduction of this study since it aims to examine how African Americans' public statements made in the aftermath of Michael Browns killing are expressions of how the social group experiences society in

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<sup>55</sup> King S, "Ready to shoot and do shoot": Black working-class self-defense and community politics in Harlem, New York, during the 1920s., *Journal of Urban History [serial online]*, 01-11-2011, Available from Scopus, accessed 15-11-2014, p.757

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.757

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.759

<sup>58</sup>Chaney, Cassandra, & Robertson, Ray V., 2014, "Can we all get along?" Blacks' Historical and Contemporary (In) Justice With Law Enforcement", *Western Journal Of Black Studies* 38, no. 2: 108-122. *Academic Search Complete*, p.108



the United States as oppressive. It was after his beating by several police officers from the Los Angeles Police Department in 1991 that King has been said be “the face of police brutality in America.”<sup>59</sup> That his case became so extensively covered by media and later on as well widely referred to in academic research is foremost because a video documenting the violent attack was sent to television by an eyewitness.

This visual form of witnessing about police brutality has recently been a popular topic in academic papers that aim to examine the consequences such documentation of police misconduct has in the United States. It has become increasingly common that ordinary citizens who happen to witness a case of police brutality choose to capture the happening on their phones and make them public on the internet. This fairly new possibility of challenging police power in social media<sup>60</sup> has been found to not only result in the police reforming their conduct in specific situations but it has also become a felony to film an on-duty police without authorization in some states.<sup>61</sup> The latter aspect is being criticized by for instance McCullough who is claiming the importance of implementing “*policies protecting the right of the public and press to document on-duty police.*”<sup>62</sup>

The death of Michael Brown has not been documented on film, but footage from the teenager being left dead on the street during several hours has been made public which has resulted in further condemnation of the police’s handling of the case. It might appear that studies about this kind of witnessing are not very relevant for the examination of reactions in Ferguson. However, one crucial similarity exists in the regard that both the Ferguson demonstrations and the spreading of videos documenting police misconduct are public expressions of discontent with a certain situation or happening in order to sensitize as many people as possible. The narratives examined in this paper are partly expressions for the social group’s attitude towards the American police. Elicker<sup>63</sup>, Walker<sup>64</sup>, and Gül,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> See Linneman, Travis & Wall, Tyler, “Staring Down the State: Police Power, Visual Economies, and the “War on Cameras””, *Crime Media Culture* 2014 10: 133, 2014-04-29

<sup>61</sup> Schaefer, Zachary A., “Secretly Recording the Police: The Confluence of Communication, Culture, and Technology in the Public Sphere, 2012, p.119

<sup>62</sup> McCullough, Kimberly, “Changing the Culture of Unconstitutional Interference: A Proposal for Nationwide Implementation of a Model Policy and Training Procedures Protecting the Right to Photograph and Record on-duty Police”, June 2014, p. 543

<sup>63</sup> Elicker, M. K. (2008). “Unlawful justice: An opinion study on police use of force and how views change based on race and occupation.” *Sociological Viewpoints*, 24(1), 33-49.

<sup>64</sup> Walker, A. (2011). Racial profiling separate and unequal keeping the minorities in line-the role of law enforcement in America. *St. Thomas Law Review*, 23, 576-619.

Hekim and Terkesli<sup>65</sup> are some researchers that previously have conducted distinct studies about attitudes toward the police in the United States and are thus of interest to regard. While Elicker's study contributes to this field of study with the conclusion "that there is a relationship between race, occupation, and attitudes toward police use of force",<sup>66</sup> the latter two do not only examine the problematic but they analyze how the problematic of police brutality could be opposed.<sup>67</sup> Scholars have also found that cases of deadly police force against unarmed citizens in the United States results not only into negative attitudes and mistrust of the police but can as well find expression in form of violent riots.<sup>68</sup> This could as well be seen in Ferguson where one of the responses to the shooting of Michael Brown was violent looting.

Furthermore, Dottolo and Stewart's research<sup>69</sup> about perceptions of racial identity in the United States and about the significance of intersectionality are contributing with its findings to this study. Dottolo and Stewart interviewed middle-aged African Americans and white people that had graduated from the same High School. The results showed a clear pattern in that the interviewed Black men were more prone to see their racial identity as the factor, or at least one factor, for harassment by the police.<sup>70</sup> The white interviewees confirmed as well that racial profiling is not an uncommon procedure used by American police officers. The interviewees acknowledged that there is a "discourse that constructs and stereotypes criminals as occupying social positions defined by race, class and gender."<sup>71</sup> This is an important aspect for this paper too, since the death of Michael Brown has been followed by a reopening of the discussion about racial profiling and Black men being demonized.<sup>72</sup> What has been called demonization is by

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<sup>65</sup> Gül, Z., Hekim, H., & Terkesli, R. (2013). Controlling police (excessive) force: The American case. *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 10(2), 285-304.

<sup>66</sup> Elicker, 2008, p.33

<sup>67</sup> See Walker, 2011; Gül, Hekim & Terkesli, 2013

<sup>68</sup> See Fyfe, J. J. (1988). "Police Use of Deadly Force: Research and Reform". *Justice Quarterly*: 5(2) 165-205; Gül, Z., Hekim, H., & Terkesli, R. (2013). Controlling police (excessive) force: The American case. *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 10(2), 285-304. p.286

<sup>69</sup> Dottolo, Andrea L. & Stewart, Abigail J. (2008). "Don't ever forget now, you're a black man in America:" Intersections of race, class and gender in encounters with the police. *Sex Roles*, 59(5/6), 350-364

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.353

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.350

<sup>72</sup> Khan, Naureen, "After Ferguson, black activists hope for reckoning on race and policing", *Aljazeera America*, 2014-08-26, <america.aljazeera.com >, accessed 2014-11-28

other previous research called ‘threat hypothesis,’<sup>73</sup> which implies that “certain individuals are perceived as more dangerous and are thus in greater need of control by the police than are others.”<sup>74</sup> Research has found that the police tends to use different levels of force depending on which neighborhoods they are in. Apart of the threat hypothesis, the fact that the police is more frequently called to poorer neighborhoods dominantly populated by minority groups<sup>75</sup> is as well of importance. One characteristic which has been found to be highly relevant for neighborhoods being more targeted by the police than others is for instance race.<sup>76</sup> This is a crucial aspect to keep in mind since this paper concerns the context of the suburb Ferguson which has a predominantly African American community.

Regarding the field of study of oppression, Spector’s<sup>77</sup> study about racial oppression urges for the elimination of what he calls racial oppression through changing “the structural power and class relationships that reinforce racist oppression.”<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, Spector’s definition of racial oppression will not be used in this study since it is Young’s fivefold perspective of oppression that will be used which has been given a clear explanation for above. Other scholars<sup>79</sup> have found that the racial oppression of Black individuals can result in what they have called “*internalized racial oppression*.”<sup>80</sup> This is a development which is characterized by colored people accepting “the dominant White culture’s oppressive actions.”<sup>81</sup> In this regard, this study is differing to the previous study since it examined African Americans rejection of the dominant discourse about their social group.

Besides police brutality and oppression there is a third field of study which is worth to name briefly, namely research about narrativity. Rose examines for instance the case of the African American woman Kelley Williams-Bolar from Ohio who was put in prison

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<sup>73</sup> Bazley, Thomas, Childs, Kristina, Lersch, Kim M. & Mieczkowski, Thomas, “Police use of force and neighbourhood characteristics: an examination of structural disadvantage, crime, and resistance”, *Policing & Society* Vol. 18, No. 3, September 2008, 282-300, p.285

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p.283;

<sup>77</sup> Spector, Alan, “Racism and Capitalism- Crisis and Resistance: Exploring the Dynamic between Class Oppression and Racial Oppression”, *Humanity & Society* 2014, Vol. 38(2) 116-131

<sup>78</sup> Spector, 2014, p.116

<sup>79</sup> Bailey, Tamba-Kuui M., Chung, Y. Barry, Singh, Anneliese A., Terrell, Heather K. & Williams, Wendi S., “Development and Validation of the Internalized Racial Oppression Scale for Black Individuals”, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 2011, Vol. 58, No. 4, 481–493

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p.481

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

in 2011 for “sending her two daughters to a predominantly White suburban public school in Copley Township without meeting the township’s residency requirements.”<sup>82</sup> Rose examines how the dominant racial narrative in the debate got challenged by the victim’s supporters. This is interesting for this paper since it examines as well how African Americans challenge the official discourse of the police being the one protecting the population with narratives about the police as oppressor of members of the social group. What might however be the most relevant aspect for this study is that Rose made the finding that it was the “power of social media” that made it possible for Kelley Williams-Bolar’s supporters to unite.<sup>83</sup> As mentioned earlier, the impact of social media for the Michael Brown case and the reactions to it are significant aspects in this study.

This presentation of previous research is anything but exhaustive. Nevertheless, it is sufficient in order to gain an understanding of the context and background of this study. As named earlier, the lack of the use of the term oppression when talking about police violence is the primary motivation for this study. This study aims therefore to contribute with an examination of the specific case in Ferguson using the chosen theoretical and methodical framework to analyze African Americans’ narratives about distinct aspects that contribute to the social group’s oppression.

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<sup>82</sup> Rose, Tricia, “Public Tales wag the Dog: Telling Stories about Structural Racism in the Post- Civil Rights Era”, in du bois review: social science research on race 10:2, 2013, p. 447

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p.447

## 4. Analysis of the empirical material

The following analysis of the empirical material, which has been presented in a preceding chapter, consists of an examination of the most central narratives expressed in the aftermath of Michael Brown's shooting in Ferguson. The theoretical and methodical framework composed from Somers' and Young's distinct but however related perspectives, is guiding the conduction of the study which is divided into four sections. One central understanding that pervades the analysis is that African Americans, like every other social group, are giving meaning to "what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives."<sup>84</sup> The analysis focuses furthermore on making African Americans' social reactions to Michael Brown's death intelligible by regarding the context of the group's oppression in contemporary American society. Last of all, the significance of the study's findings and contribution to previous research will be presented in the concluding discussion of the last chapter.

### 4.1 African Americans' experience of group identity

There are many narratives and fragments of narratives that are relating to a similar theme. One of the most recurring themes that is expressed in the empirical material concerns African Americans' experience of identification with Michael Brown, the teenager who was subject for deadly use of police in Ferguson. A sign held up by a colored woman at a demonstration in the suburb in St. Louis states for instance "I am Michael Brown"<sup>85</sup> and "he is me"<sup>86</sup> while referring to the victim. These fragments of a narrative are clearly expressions of this woman's feeling of identification with the victim which as well is constructing a "sense of solidarity."<sup>87</sup> The significance of this sense of group identification is further being expressed on the same sign when the woman calls Michael

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<sup>84</sup> Somers, 1994, p.614

<sup>85</sup> Schuessler, Ryan, "After vigil and looting, the people of Ferguson try to pick up the pieces", 2014-08-11, *Aljazeera America*, <america.aljazeera.coml>, "Mike Brown is my son is my brother is my people HE IS ME I AM MICHAEL BROWN", [picture]

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Young, 1990, p.167

Brown her “son” and “brother.”<sup>88</sup> That she actually neither is Brown’s mother nor his sister makes it even more appealing for her to use these terms in order to express her experience of what Iris Young calls “a special affinity.”<sup>89</sup> This deep empathy members of social groups often have for each other is precisely due to their shared group identity, as in this case the identity as African American. This deep affinity is rooted in the woman’s experience of her social group representing a family which she constructs in a narrative about Michael Brown being her “people.”<sup>90</sup>

Clearly, African Americans are not a homogenous group due to differences regarding the members’ “age, gender, class, sexuality, region.”<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, the intersectionality of the victim’s age and gender has no importance for this grown woman to identify with the young man due to their shared group identity. This narrative is constructed in order to express her personal experience of the death of Michael Brown and is thus what Somers calls an ontological narrative.<sup>92</sup> However, this woman is far from the only African American individual that expressed a narrative about African Americans’ special group affinity and a feeling of identification with Brown. Thus, her expressions are contributing to the construction of a narrative that is representative for the social group as such, namely a public narrative.<sup>93</sup>

It is for instance the African American teenager Shane Flowers who is being followed in the “Am I Next” documentary<sup>94</sup> who also contributes to the construction of this overarching narrative. Shane’s despair about the fact that Michael Brown was just about to start college when he got shot to death by a police officer is expressed in the following narrative that shows how Shane puts himself into the victim’s situation. “*What if that was me, man? Like, I’m fourteen, I’m just, just now going to school and stuff, like what if that was me feeling for going to college, like, and then the only person in my family and then I die right before the day of school start?*”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Aljazeera America*, 2014-08-11, “Mike Brown is my son is my brother is my people HE IS ME I AM MICHAEL BROWN”, [picture]

<sup>89</sup> Young, 1990, p.47

<sup>90</sup> Schuessler, 2014-08-11, *Aljazeera America*, “Mike Brown is my son is my brother is my people HE IS ME I AM MICHAEL BROWN”, [picture]

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48

<sup>92</sup> Somers, 1994, p.617f.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p.619

<sup>94</sup> Levine, Truesdell, & Weissman, ““Am I Next?”: Ferguson’s Protests Through the Eyes of a Teenager”, *Transient Pictures*, August 2014

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, my emphasis

Numerous other members of the social group were imagining themselves experiencing Brown's fate and were thus identifying with the teenager. These themes could foremost be seen expressed on two recurring signs stating fragments of the above named public narrative. The title of the short documentary "Am I next?"<sup>96</sup> is one of the phrases that were the most seen on protesters' signs as well as the sentence "I'm Michael Brown."<sup>97</sup> Pictures of these signs were widely spread on social media which makes them contribute to above named themes to become the dominating public narratives by the social group of African Americans. The former expresses a similar concern for one's own safety being a member of the same social group as the victim like Shane did in his narrative.

They are related to another public narrative about the reason for their expression of these concerns. The deadly police assault on Michael Brown is reminding them that the whole social group is subject to what Iris Young calls "the oppression of systematic violence."<sup>98</sup> Violence as a face of oppression does not implicate that every single member has to fall victim for such violence for the group to be oppressed. What gives violence its oppressive character is in this case the aspect that African Americans are living with a forced awareness that any member could be the next victim of police brutality. Thus, the happening in Ferguson is not only regarded as constituting an attack on Michael Brown but as well on the social group as such. A feeling of exhaustion due to this awareness is for instance expressed on a sign stating "I'm tired of fearing for my life! I deserve to live!"<sup>99</sup> This theme of discontent about African Americans being subject to excessive police violence confirms Young's definition of such awareness that "needlessly expends their energy."<sup>100</sup>

This feeling of fatigue and opposition to the injustice Michael Brown and the social group are being subject to is one of the driving forces for African Americans to publicly react on the happening in Ferguson. The motivation for their responses to the shooting is being expressed in narratives about the group members' feeling of identity steering their

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<sup>96</sup> Times, 2014-08-15, "Am I next?", [picture]

<sup>97</sup> BBC, 2014-08-18, "I'm Michael Brown" [picture]

<sup>98</sup> Young, 1990, p.61

<sup>99</sup> "Turmoil, tear gas and give way to hope as police pull back from protests over Ferguson shooting", 2014-08-15, Fox News, <foxnews/>, my emphasis, originally "I'm tired of fearing for my life!!!! I deserve to live!", [picture]

<sup>100</sup> Young, 1990, p.61

social action by the motto “I act because of who I *am*.”<sup>101</sup> Shane Flowers expresses the social group’s drive to mobilize in demonstrations as a necessity to make their experiences of the injustice that Michael Brown’s death represents for African Americans heard and recognized by others. He says that “this is what we gotta do to get respect.”<sup>102</sup> These aspects confirm the perspective of narrative identity which states that “people act in particular ways because *not* to do so would fundamentally violate their sense of *being*.” It is important to recognize that this sense of being and “narrative identities are constituted and reconstituted *in* time and *over* time.”<sup>103</sup> Demonstrations and protests are most intense and concentrated in the direct aftermath of incidents like Michael Brown’s death. This explains furthermore why the narrative identity of African American’s being vulnerable for police violence is in these narratives contributing to the process of reconstituting the identity of African Americans in the United States as an oppressed group.

To clarify, this section has found that several narratives expressed by members of the social group were relating to experiences of a deep affinity for Michael Brown due to a shared group identity as African Americans. This feeling of identification and the group’s identity construction as oppressed triggered the social action of the demonstrators in Ferguson. The central narrative that articulated these themes is an expression for the group’s experience of the happening in Ferguson concerning all of their members. Michael Brown’s death is namely regarded by the social group as a reminder for African American’s that they are more frequently than others, victims to police brutality.

## 4.2 Fears for the future of the social group

As mentioned above, the deadly shooting of the unarmed teenager Michael Brown has been responded to by African Americans calling attention to their social group’s vulnerability to fall victim to police assaults. The members’ fear, anger and frustration about this seemingly unchanging situation in American society is finding expression for in narratives about the future of the social group. One protest sign is articulating this in a rather sarcastic way when it states “Justice for (*blank space*) I left it blank because I’ll

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<sup>101</sup> Somers, 1994, p.608

<sup>102</sup> Levine, Truesdell, & Weissman, *Transient Pictures*, 2014

<sup>103</sup> Somers, 1994, p.624



probably need this next year.”<sup>104</sup> This ontological narrative is expressing a belief about the occurrence of police misconduct against foremost young colored men in the United States probably not finding an end with the Michael Brown case. Nevertheless, even though its rather pessimistic message, this narrative is as well indicating that it will not be the last time for African Americans to unite in protests to challenge and criticize cases of such oppressive police violence. This protest sign is thus relating to a theme of hopelessness for the future but is at the same time expressing a strong determination to not give up the group’s social action and opposition to the injustice that cases like Michael Brown’s shooting are representing for the group.

The fear of African Americans of themselves or their loved ones someday being targets of police brutality has already been touched on in the previous section. This narrative can furthermore be said to constitute a central public narrative since the theme is expressed by a large number of African Americans, among them teenagers, children, men and women. The ones being regarded as the most vulnerable to fall victim to police brutality are however young men which becomes clear when regarding a sign that related to Michael Brown’s identity as a son. “Stop killing our sons”<sup>105</sup> is an understandable reaction to the shooting of teenager Michael Brown when recalling the theme of special group affinity analyzed in the previous section. By using “our”, a notion of the attack on one young colored man concerning every one of the social group regardless of the members’ personal relation to the victim is being constructed. The woman holding up the above named sign is not only expressing this fear for future assaults on Michael Brown’s generation but is as well making a clear demand to the police to stop their use of violence against young colored men.

Another narrative that expresses a fear for the future is being constructed by a very young African American girl. She is similarly making a clear demand to stop excessive use of police force by stating “My Generation is next...Don’t shoot!!”<sup>106</sup> Numerous photos of African Americans wearing T-shirts and holding up signs stating the demand to not shoot and videos of protesters in Ferguson doing the symbolic gesture of

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<sup>104</sup> Culzac, Natasha, « Michael Brown shooting. The poignant signs of protesters in Ferguson and beyond », 2014-08-14, *The Independent*, <independent.co.uk>, “Justice for (*blank space*) I left it blank because I’ll probably need this next year”, [picture], my emphasis

<sup>105</sup> Montanaro, Domenico, Pathe, Simone & Wellford, Rachel, “Sharp black- white divide on perceptions of Ferguson as clashes continue”, 2014-08-19, *PBS*, <pbs.org>, “Stop killing our sons”, [picture]

<sup>106</sup> Culzac, 2014-08-14, “My Generation is next...Don’t shoot!!” [picture]

surrendering by raising both hands above the head while shouting the slogan, were spread on social media. “Hands up, don’t shoot”<sup>107</sup> is thus linked to a central public narrative expressed by the African American community in Ferguson about the injustice of the police using force in cases where it is not necessary. That the demand was expressed as a reaction to Michael Brown’s death can furthermore be made comprehensible when regarding the narrative’s relationality<sup>108</sup> to the event of the shooting and its circumstances. The slogan is namely relating the fact that the police officer responsible for Brown’s death, shot the unarmed teenager several times even after the teenager had put up his hands in surrender.

That the circumstances of the case are highly unjust is furthermore expressed by Shane Flowers who is condemning that the police officer chose to shoot Michael Brown in the head when he could have shot him in the leg to stop him from escaping.<sup>109</sup> Thereby, Shane is partly contributing to the public narrative about the intentionality of police violence directed against young African American men. That the killing of colored men is being regarded as a conscious action by the police is even more clearly expressed in a narrative referring to the police as “Killer Cops.”<sup>110</sup> Young states that the problematic for the members of a marginalized social group lies in them “being legitimately subject to the often arbitrary and invasive authority of social service providers and other public and private administrators.”<sup>111</sup> The case of Michael Brown’s death can thus be regarded as a symbol for the group’s marginalization by the police. It is namely the police’s use of power and violence against African Americans that makes it the social group’s oppressor.

During the demonstrations in the direct aftermath of the shooting, the social group made clear statements about what was being regarded as justice in this specific context, namely an indictment of the police officer who caused Brown’s death. This is expressed on a sign stating “We won’t cease till Darren Wilson is charged”<sup>112</sup> and is also expressed

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<sup>107</sup> Brody, Rachel, “Views You Can Use: War In Ferguson”, 2014-08-13, *U.S. News*, <usnews.com>, accessed 2014-11-22, “HANDS UP DON’T SHOOT” [picture] my emphasis

<sup>108</sup> Somers, 1994, p.617

<sup>109</sup> Levine, Truesdell, & Weissman, *Transient Pictures*, 2014

<sup>110</sup> “Missouri police tear-gas crowd after Ferguson curfew”, 2014-08-17, *BBC*, <bbc.com>, accessed 2014-11-29, “NO KILLER COPS in our community”, [picture]

<sup>111</sup> Young, 1990, p.54

<sup>112</sup> Caulderwood, Kathleen, “Ferguson Protesters Also Mourn St. Louis Shooting Victim [PHOTOS]”, *International Business Times*, 2014-08-19, <ibtimes.com >, accessed 2014-11-29, ““We won’t cease till Darren Wilson is charged”, [picture]

in the documentary when Shane says "...and if we don't get justice, that's just what's gonna happen, we will be out here every day."<sup>113</sup> However, the teenager's death is not to be regarded as solely caused by Darren Wilson since the oppressive violence that characterizes the case is not an "individual moral wrong"<sup>114</sup> but rather an existing structure of "social injustice."<sup>115</sup> This structure is namely the problematic of policing in the United States partly being affected by racist convictions and by a dominating discourse that sees young colored men like Michael Brown as a threat. This is related to what Young says to be the face of oppression called violence. Such oppressive violence is often "motivated by fear or hatred"<sup>116</sup> against a certain group which in this context is the belief in established stereotypes about young colored men which will be further analyzed in a following section.

African Americans do not only see the excessive force used by the officer as injustice, but as well the handling of the case by both the police and the American media which according to the social group were trying to discredit the victim in order to render the handling of the officer comprehensible. "He's not a suspect he's a victim to police brutality"<sup>117</sup> is for instance a sign which relates to this. The media were using pictures of the victim which might appear as suiting to portray Michael Brown as a stereotyped thug<sup>118</sup> instead of using Brown's graduation picture in which he looks like an ambitious and calm teenager. Another factor which was answered by outrage by foremost the African American community in Ferguson was due to the release of a video tape by the police that shows the teenager stealing cigars in a local shop. That focus was thereby taken away from the actual crime of the shooting<sup>119</sup> is for instance expressed in the following narrative saying "This is *not* about the "alleged" stealing of cigars. This is about the loss of *life* in a system that habitually criminalizes and *kills black people*"<sup>120</sup> This

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<sup>113</sup> Levine, Truesdell, & Weissman, *Transient Pictures*, 2014

<sup>114</sup> Young, 1990, p.61

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p.62

<sup>117</sup> Taub, Amanda, "11 essential facts about Ferguson and the shooting of Michael Brown", *Vox*, 2014-08-18, <vox.com>, "He's not a suspect he's a victim to police brutality" [picture]

<sup>118</sup> Jones, Layla A., "#Iftheygunnedmedown: How the media killed Michael Brown", 2014-08-21, *Philly*, <philly.com>\_accessed 2014-12-26

<sup>119</sup> Sandoval, *Daily News*, 2014-08-24

<sup>120</sup> Gordon, Kalani, "Photos that define the Ferguson, Mo., protests", *The Dark Room*, 2014-08-21, <darkroom.baltimoresun.com>, accessed 2014-12-17, my emphasis, originally "This is *NOT* about the "alleged" stealing of cigars. This is about the loss of *LIFE* in a system that habitually criminalizes and *KILLS* black *PEOPLE*" [picture]

ontological narrative relates as well to the theme of intentional and structural aspects of police violence mentioned earlier. That African Americans expressed their demands to change this structure is according to Young “a claim about social justice.”<sup>121</sup> The above stated narratives have been constructed due to what Somers calls “emplotment.”<sup>122</sup> The shooting of Michael Brown and other recent events of police brutality are namely being translated into an episode<sup>123</sup> of African American contemporary history. It is an episode of challenging police violence and a system that is constituting African American’s central experience of the oppression and injustice of their social group.

To sum up, clear demands to end police violence directed at members of the social group, especially against young men like Michael Brown, are triggered by a fear for future generation’s safety. That both the police and media discredited the victim was experienced by African Americans as attempts to suit the dominant discourse of young colored men being in a need to be controlled by the police. A public narrative about the group’s subjectivity to the conditions of oppression called marginalization and violence are central expressions of the group’s perception of the injustices the case relates to.

### 4.3 The group’s opposition to the dominant discourse

African American’s experience of group identity and their motivation for social action in the aftermath of Michael Brown’s death that has been analyzed in the first section, will further be examined beneath. It is not above all the attribute of their shared skin color that makes African Americans associate as members of the same social group but rather their shared history<sup>124</sup> which can be explained by the Michael Brown cases’ “relationship to other events.”<sup>125</sup> It is namely “historicity and relationality”<sup>126</sup> that gives meaning to a protest sign with “Keep the dream alive”<sup>127</sup> written on it. The given historical context of African American’s fight against oppression in the United States makes this fragment of a narrative intelligible. The sign relates namely to one of the most central events in the history of African Americans, namely Martin Luther King’s “I have a Dream” speech that

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p.9

<sup>122</sup> Somers, 1994, p.616

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Young, 1990, p.44

<sup>125</sup> Somers, 1994, p.616

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p.617

<sup>127</sup> Taub, 2014-08-18, “Keep the dream alive”, [picture]

he held in 1963 in Washington D.C.<sup>128</sup> King is a symbol for the fight for freedom, equality and justice for African Americans.

“Keep the dream alive”<sup>129</sup> might not appear as a very comprehensive narrative but when related to the famous speech it becomes comprehensible as a reaction to the happenings in Ferguson. That Michael Brown’s death was caused by a police officer makes it highly relevant for the protester to refer to the speech in which King claimed that African Americans no longer should experience “the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.”<sup>130</sup> There are distinct other feelings expressed in the speech that are relatable to certain narratives expressed at the demonstrations. Hope for the younger generations to “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character”<sup>131</sup> is such a theme. More than 50 years after King’s speech, signs stating “Praying For the Lives of my Unborn Sons,”<sup>132</sup> “My blackness is not a weapon”<sup>133</sup> and “Don’t shoot I’m not a threat”<sup>134</sup> are expressing the same problematic of being judged due to the attribute of one’s skin color. The signs are in relation to each other constructing a public narrative that challenges the dominant discourse that regards Blackness as a threat. The African American woman Leola Johnson is calling this discourse “the demonization of young, black man.”<sup>135</sup>

To be “white, male, and western”<sup>136</sup> is regarded as the norm in the American context against which colored people are being judged and thereby constantly being depicted as inferior or deficient.<sup>137</sup> This is how the dominant discourse of Blackness constantly is reinforced. That “there is a group that is *privileged* in relation to”<sup>138</sup> African Americans results in the group members’ feeling of an established separateness to members of other social groups.<sup>139</sup> In Ferguson, this separateness towards the white population is partly

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<sup>128</sup> *Martin Luther King, Jr. I Have A Dream Speech* [video], YouTube, ‘Ilya Gokadze’, 2013-08-28, <youtube.com>, accessed 2015-01-06

<sup>129</sup> Taub, 2014-08-18, “Keep the dream alive”, [picture]

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> *Martin Luther King, Jr. I Have A Dream Speech* [video], YouTube, 2013-08-28,

<sup>132</sup> Culzac, 2014-08-14, *The Independent*, “Praying for the Lives of my Unborn Sons”, [picture]

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., “My Blackness is not a weapon” [picture]

<sup>134</sup> Caulderwood, Kathleen, “Ferguson, Missouri: Clashes Between Police, Protesters Persist”, 2014-08-16, *International Business Times*, <ibtimes.com>, accessed 2014-12-28, “Don’t shoot I’m not a threat” [picture]

<sup>135</sup> Khan, 2014-08-26, Aljazeera America

<sup>136</sup> Somers, 1994, p.608f.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p.608

<sup>138</sup> Young, 1990, p.42

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p.43

because the white population does not overtly seem to recognize African American's oppression. Many white people in Ferguson went to the streets to show their support for the police officer who shot Michael Brown which in the eyes of African Americans' is expressing these people's ignorance for their suffering. One narrative that expresses this feeling of ignorance by others is the question "Would you support Darren Wilson if he killed your son?"<sup>140</sup>

Theorists have found that counter-narratives challenging the dominant ones are being constructed in order to show one's struggles to those who are living without them and are therefore not seeing or ignoring them.<sup>141</sup> That the dominant discourse in the American context implicates the police as the protector of the citizens results in African Americans' experience of the police as their oppressor being "suppressed, denied, and devalued,"<sup>142</sup> when others ignore to recognize their experiences. The social group is thus subject to the form of oppression Young calls powerlessness, namely African Americans' "inability to accommodate certain happenings within a range of available cultural, public, and institutional narratives."<sup>143</sup> The motivation for African American's counter-narratives to make their struggles of oppression and police violence heard is expressed in a sign that says "If it had not b(een) for a great noise out of St. Louise the world would still be sleeping."<sup>144</sup> A young man in the documentary expresses furthermore the importance of African Americans' action to unite their social group in protests. "Nobody hear us until we do shit, 'till we do stuff like this,"<sup>145</sup> is what he says. He sees it as a necessary action in order to get attention by the media and the environment to spread their experiences of what Michael Brown's death is about.

The themes of powerlessness and ignorance that are expressed in the above stated narratives are as well relating the topic of respectability. Members of the social group are furthermore subjects to powerlessness since they experience "disrespectful treatment"<sup>146</sup> due to their group identity. The African American woman Janai Nelson says that such a

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<sup>140</sup> Culzac, 2014-08-14, *The Independent*, my emphasis, originally "Would you support Darren Wilson if he killed your son" [picture],

<sup>141</sup> Somers, 1994, p.631

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p.609

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p.630

<sup>144</sup> Culzac, 2014-08-14, *The Independent*, "If it had not b(een) for a great noise out of St. Louise the world would still be sleeping"

<sup>145</sup> Levine, Truesdell, & Weissman, *Transient Pictures*, 2014

<sup>146</sup> Young, 1990, p.58

disrespect for her social group would be the ignorance “by the broader American community”<sup>147</sup> in the aftermath of Michael Brown’s death. Janai Nelson is further expressing the importance of others than African Americans recognizing their sufferance in order to not feel “that these lives were not lost in vain,”<sup>148</sup> referring to the numerous deaths of young colored men caused by the police. Through this narrative, Nelson is trying to somehow make sense of these incidents.

This attempt to give meaning to cases like Michael Brown’s death can as well be seen in a narrative expressed by the well-known adviser for the White House and the civil rights activist Al Sharpton. He says that the victim would have wanted “to be remembered as the one that made America deal with how we’re going to police in the United States.”<sup>149</sup> This gives a notion of the death of Michael Brown being a chance for change. That the teenager’s death is bringing change to the situation is furthermore expressed by University professor Garrett Duncan. “We see cracks in the wall of oppression that was brought out by this,”<sup>150</sup> he said. As mentioned earlier in this paper, narratives are used to “make sense of the social world.”<sup>151</sup> This process can be seen in the narratives of Nelson, Al Sharpton and Duncan giving Michael Brown’s death the meaning of a departure for change. This change lies in the fact of society not being able to easily ignore this case due to its immense media coverage worldwide and the immense support for Michael Brown that condemns the police officer’s action as unjust.

This section found several central narratives expressed by African Americans that give expression for struggles their social group has been experiencing during decades. Hopes for their social group’s future, demands to stop stereotyping and police brutality and the group’s subjectivity to powerlessness are as well central in this context. Some other central narratives express the motivation for the social group’s reactions to the case. Their reasons for the demonstrations and the constructing of narratives is namely to challenge the dominant discourse and to change the structures of policing in the United States that contributes to their group’s oppression.

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<sup>147</sup> Khan, *Aljazeera America*, 26-08-2014

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> “‘His death is not in vain’: Mourners pay respect to Michael Brown”, *Aljazeera America*, 2014-08-25

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Somers, 1994, p. 606

## 4.4 The problematic of racial stereotypes

To further regard how African Americans' experiences of their group's oppression are not being recognized by society, it is utile to regard "throwness."<sup>152</sup> The term displays how it feels to be defined and classified by others "in terms of groups which are always already associated with specific attributes, stereotypes, and norms."<sup>153</sup> Such stereotypes are constantly placed on young colored men by society. As mentioned earlier, Dottolo and Stewart<sup>154</sup> found in their study that the occurrence of discriminatory encounters with the police happen more often to Black people due to stereotypes about African American men being "dangerous and criminal."<sup>155</sup> Young men like Michael Brown are being stereotyped as criminal by television and the movie industry too, where "Blacks rarely appear in roles of authority, glamour, or virtue."<sup>156</sup> The problematic for young African American men is that they cannot escape these stereotypes since the attributes and characteristics others pose on their identity is based on their skin color.<sup>157</sup>

An African American man in the "Am I next" documentary is talking about the importance of resisting these stereotypes. Some young colored men are being filmed while defacing property over which the man expresses his discontent. He says to Shane and some other teenagers that "this is what they want you all to do." He refers to the problematic of violent reactions like the riots and lootings giving the feeling to the ones believing in the above stated stereotypes to be right to regard young colored men as violent. That cases of deadly police force against unarmed citizens in the United States result in violent riots is nothing uncommon.<sup>158</sup> In his speech at Michael Brown's memorial, Al Sharpton condemned African Americans' "disrespect for each other"<sup>159</sup> by rioting and looting. "Some of us act like the definition of blackness is how low you can go. Blackness has never been about being a gangster or a thug. Blackness was no matter how low we was pushed down, we rose up anyhow."<sup>160</sup> This narrative expresses that young colored men are choosing to act the way American society expects them to due to

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<sup>152</sup> Young, 1990, p.46

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Dottolo & Stewart, 2008

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. p.354

<sup>156</sup> Young, 1990, p.20

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p.59

<sup>158</sup> See Fyfe, 1988; Gül, Hekim & Terkesli, 2013

<sup>159</sup> "'His death is not in vain': Mourners pay respect to Michael Brown", *Aljazeera America*, 2014-08-25

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.



their own distorted conception of what it means to be Black in the United States. A narrative expressed by a young man in the documentary shows contrariwise comprehension for the more violent responses by saying that if the police would not have killed Brown “we would not have gotten to all this.”<sup>161</sup>

Cultural imperialism<sup>162</sup> is another central aspect that relates to the theme of stereotyping and ignorance. Cultural imperialism indicates namely that the social group experiences the paradoxical feeling of being “invisible at the same time that one is marked out as different.”<sup>163</sup> The feeling of being portrayed as something divergent is for instance expressed in a public narrative about African Americans’ experience of being belittled as a person expressed on signs stating “Black lives matter”<sup>164</sup>, “Don’t shoot, black men are people too”<sup>165</sup>, and “I am a man.”<sup>166</sup> These fragments of narratives are together constructing a public narrative of African Americans’ subjectivity to cultural imperialism since they all implicate the feeling to be “marked as Other,”<sup>167</sup> as something else than an equal human. These statements are understandable responses to the deadly shooting of Michael Brown and is a result of society regarding African American men as less worthy due to their color of their skin.

To sum up this last section, it can be said that narratives about the problematic of stereotyping young colored men is regarded as the reason for the police’s behavior in interactions with young African Americans like Michael Brown. Another problem that the social group sees is that stereotyping results in young Black men choosing to act violently in the aftermath of Michael Brown’s death which reassures the ones believing in the dominant discourse that sees young colored man to be in need of police control. The reasons for the young men who responded to the happenings in Ferguson by rioting and looting is their own false perception of what the color of their skin implicates for their way of life. Their reactions depend on that they know that even if they themselves are

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<sup>161</sup> Levine, Truesdell, & Weissman, *Transient Pictures*, 2014

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58f.

<sup>163</sup> Young, 1990, p.60

<sup>164</sup> Taub, 2014-08-18, “Black lives matter” [picture]

<sup>165</sup> Lott, Joshua, “Outrage In Missouri Town After Police Shooting Of 18-Yr-Old Man”, *Getty Images*, 2014-08-17, <gettyimages.se>, accessed 1014-12-16, “Don’t shoot, black men are people too”, [picture]

<sup>166</sup> “Missouri: Police confront new protests over Michael Brown”, *BBC*, 2014-08-16, <bb.com>, “I am a man” [picture]

<sup>167</sup> Young, 1990, p.59

escaping their stereotype, others will still regard them as a threat and treat them accordingly.

## 5. Concluding discussion

Recalling the purpose of this study, the questions at issue to be answered are how African Americans construct their identity as an oppressed group through narratives, which central themes they are relating to and how these narratives are making the public responses to the shooting of Michael Brown comprehensible as social action. This study found that narratives constructed by the social group of African Americans were articulating experiences of all conditions that Young calls the five faces of oppression. Narratives about the social group's subjectivity to powerlessness, marginalization, cultural imperialism, exploitation and foremost of oppressive violence were constructed as reactions to Michael Brown's death. All of these conditions are expressed as results of police brutality as seen in the Michael Brown case. They are also regarded as results from the ignorance by the broader community about the injustice their group is facing, especially by the white population supporting the police's action in the case. The majority of the examined narratives clearly related to Michael Brown due to the members' shared group identity with and special group affinity to the victim.

However, the narratives of the social group are not exclusively relating to the members' experiences of the case but are rather expressing experiences about daily struggles African Americans face as an oppressed group in the United States. This became evident as numerous narratives had to be related to not only the circumstances in the Ferguson case but as well as to other events in African American history. These narratives expressed for instance that the social group is experiencing the same struggles and is having the same hopes for the future as African Americans did in previous decades. This explains why some narratives were expressing a perception of the current situation for colored people in the United States as unchanging and hopeless.

The earlier presented research of African American's self-defense in Harlem found that cases of police brutality were responded to by protests that were regarded as a legitimate response by the social group.<sup>168</sup> Regarding the context of Ferguson in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death, the protest were as well regarded as a legitimate and necessary response. Brown's death was a reminder for the whole group that one could fall victim to such violence only due to one's group identity as African American. This

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<sup>168</sup> King, 2011, p.757

experience of fear is the reason for African Americans regarding it as a necessity to unite their group and to publicly condemn the injustice of the shooting. Other reasons for their social action as demonstrators was the longing for respectability and justice given to their group by the broader community. This was regarded to be possible to obtain by spreading their experiences of their group's oppression in such an extensive way that it cannot easily be ignored by others.

Since the members' of the social group expressed highly similar experiences of their oppression by using different words, their narratives are constituting the narratives of all African Americans as a united group. It could however be found that certain ontological narratives expressed by African Americans were rather deviant from the public narratives constructed by the social group. The central narrative about the more violent reactions to the shooting condemned the riots and lootings while a rather deviant narrative expresses comprehension for the reactions. The public narrative expresses the group's concern for their sons contributing to establish the conviction of their social group to be in need to of control by the police. This problematic can be related to the previous study of "*internalized racial oppression*."<sup>169</sup> These young men do not accept the oppression by the police as the term would indict but what is relatable to the process of this oppression is that they choose to live after the stereotypes the dominant norm imposes on them.

Some other rather small but however interesting findings this study made is that the distinct narratives expressed by the social group are establishing an overarching metanarrative of the police as oppressor against the social group of African Americans. As mentioned earlier, the case of Rodney King has in previous research found to represent "the face of police brutality in America."<sup>170</sup> Michael Brown's death was as well followed by an immense media coverage and social reactions. Even though the case of Michael Brown has a highly different context than the King case, the social group of African Americans perceives the teenager and his death as well as a symbol for oppressive police violence in the United States. They see their social action to condemn the specific case as their fight against the underlying oppressive structures that caused the death of Michael Brown.

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<sup>169</sup> Bailey, Chung, Singh, Terrell & Williams, 2011, p.481

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