

4 Racist policing, practical resonance, and frame alignment in Ferguson

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Michael Brown, a Black teenager, was killed on Canfield Drive in Ferguson, MO, by officer Darren Wilson at about noon on Saturday, August 9, 2014. Local Black activists protested what they charged was a case of racist policing. Soon, hundreds of people in the local Black community (see below), and hundreds of thousands of people globally, were discussing the case on social media (Hitlin and Vogt 2014). Many adopted the activists' framing of the killing as an expression of racist policing. And some offered support. For example, by the next morning, Reverend Al Sharpton—a leading national anti-racist activist—had set a date to travel to Ferguson (AP 2014).

When Michael Brown was killed, it was not at first obvious that a lot of people would adopt the racist policing frame about the killing. At the time, there was not yet a national Black Lives Matter organization, and the phrase “Black Lives Matter” was still unfamiliar to most people. The killing of Eric Garner three weeks earlier and the killing of Trayvon Martin two and a half years earlier had garnered national attention. Michelle Alexander's *New Jim Crow* (2010) got many people talking about racism in criminal justice. Historically, many Black protest organizations sought to challenge racist policing (see, e.g., Bloom and Martin 2016). But in the period preceding August 2014, in contrast to the period that followed, large-scale protests of racist policing in response to police killings of Black people was relatively infrequent and localized.¹ Something changed in Ferguson.

Social movement theorists have devoted a great deal of attention to the question of frame alignment. For people to take collective action, they have to see the issue at hand in a similar way, i.e., share a subjective framing of it. Frame theorists originally focused on activists' linguistic activities of frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation as they seek to bring others into alignment with them (see Snow et al. 2019 for review). This line of theorizing would suggest that previously mobilized activists were important for creating frame alignment in Ferguson and that detailed research would find social movement organizations at the core of the initial mobilization, linguistically engineering frame alignment. However, several lines of recent theorizing emphasize that framing is not static but develops dynamically in reference to interactions between activists and authorities as ordinary people

seek to make meaning of the situation (Benford 1997; Ellingson 1995; Koopmans and Olzak 2004; McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017; Snow and Moss 2014; Steinberg 1999).² Frames and framing are never just about ideas; they are always tied to and mutually constitutive of practices. Frame resonance is a practical matter—it depends on whether the framing, as part of a broader set of potential practices, and given the conditions in which they are enacted, offer a practical means for addressing a situation. Sometimes frames and practices reaffirm the basic goodness of the society, sometimes they produce submission to authority, sometimes they are the frames and practices of affluent people who see themselves as solving problems. Sometimes frames and practices by oppressed people support insurgency.

We consider Ferguson as a case of frame alignment in the emergence of an insurgency. Insurgent practice theory suggests that those who are oppressed can intentionally trigger frame alignment through engaging in actions that force the authorities to respond. This approach is somewhat distinct from resource mobilization or political process approaches in that it takes a practice-centered view of movements. Rather than comprised by organizations or the members of a social category, insurgent movements are seen as the widespread adoption of a novel set of insurgent practices. In this approach, an insurgent is any individual who participates in practices that disrupt established institutions for transformative social aims. Over time, successful insurgents *do* often build formal movement organizations—like SNCC’s formation following the 1960 sit-ins, or the national spread of Black Panther Party offices in 1968–9. But the crux of sustained insurgent mobilization is the often informal development of a powerful and relatively coherent set of insurgent practices (frame, tactics, and target) that can sustain disruption in a given political environment. This is accomplished when an insurgent practice draws third parties, i.e. those who are neither insurgents nor authorities—to support insurgents in the face of repression by authorities. Effective insurgent practices offer potential insurgents a means to influence their situation. While people are trying out all different kinds of framings all the time, and all different kinds of tactics, the emergence of a powerful set of insurgent practices capable of sustaining deep and far-reaching disruption, and thus substantially transforming social power relations, is quite rare (Bloom 2014; Bloom 2015; Bloom and Martin 2016).³

The insurgent practice theoretical framework guides this study, and suggests a novel approach to analyzing the frame alignment process in the emergence of insurgency in Ferguson. In particular, we ask how and to what extent did the police response to insurgent practice in Ferguson, on August 9, 2014, lead third parties to adopt a “racist policing” frame?

In the past, it was usually impossible to know exactly how actions and reactions unfolded in an emergent event. But social media allow us to see how people talked to each other in real time about the events in Ferguson as they happened. It is possible to see how the people who were on the street at the

time and place of the killing drew in third-party supporters, that is, other Black people who were not themselves initially present at the killing. Rather than the engineered linguistic product of a formal social movement organization, it was through a series of defiant actions that insurgents drove alignment around the framing of Michael Brown's killing as an expression of racist policing. Many local Black people and some observers nationally felt personally threatened by the circumstances of the killing of Michael Brown, and sought means of redress. Contrary to theories that focus on the problem of ideological alignment, we find that there was virtually unanimous agreement among local Blacks that the police were in general racist. Instead, initial debate focused on whether this specific incident was an instance of racist police violence, or whether Brown had done something that made his killing just. Then, as the day progressed, those at the site engaged in small-scale nonviolent acts of defiance or protest and the police reactions became increasingly aggressive and militaristic. Twitter discussions increasingly focused on the reactions of the police and developed a consensus that this was a clear instance of racist policing. Widely shared pictures of hundreds of police in riot gear and armored vehicles brought in third-party support from all over the country. Thus, in the nine hours after Michael Brown was killed, through the interactive dynamics of insurgent practice and police response, the initially ambiguous event subject to multiple interpretations took on meaning as an instance of racist policing, and an insurgent movement emerged.

Practical resonance and frame alignment

Frame theory has provided the most influential approach to accounting for the subjective aspects of mobilization.⁴ The crux of frame theory is the proposition that collective action requires a shared understanding, i.e., frame alignment. Frame theory thus focuses analysis on the question of how activists come to share such an understanding.

In their foundational work, Snow et al. define "frame alignment" as "the linkage of individual and [Social Movement Organization (SMO)] interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary." They propose that "by rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective. So conceptualized, it follows that frame alignment is a necessary condition for movement participation" (1986: 464). Classic frame theory proposes that this frame alignment, in turn, fundamentally depends on the congruence of an activist frame with the underlying ideology of potential adherents so that SMO framings "resonate" with the underlying ideologies, values, and beliefs of potential activists (Snow and Benford 1988; Benford and Snow 2000).

Classically, frame theorists "identified four ... basic strategic alignment processes: frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation" (Snow et al. 2019).

Although the earliest writings often implied that movement frame alignment was generated primarily by the linguistic activities of formal SMOs and their activists as they sought to advance frames that would resonate with ideologies in target populations, many scholars—including the founders of frame theory—have developed more dynamic approaches. We draw on these works, plus insurgent practice theory, to advance several propositions about how frame alignment dynamically develops in the emergence of insurgency. In short, we propose that frame resonance, and thus frame alignment, is a fundamentally *practical* process. The resonance of insurgent frames with potential supporters depends on the insurgent practices of which they are a part, and authority responses. We develop three propositions concerning practical resonance and frame alignment in insurgent politics that guide our analysis of the emergent insurgency in Ferguson.

McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory (2017) put the frame theoretical concept of resonance on a practice-theoretical foundation. Rather than the product of ideational “credibility,” and “salience,” they argue that resonance emerges in response to practical situations or challenges. Oliver and Johnston (2000) illuminate the ways that structural conditions shape movement ideational processes. People have deeply rooted ways of understanding the world that are thickly enmeshed in their structured social roles, commitments, and histories. These deeper commitments and understandings often motivate collective action. Steinberg (1999) also emphasizes the historical and institutional grounding of discursive movement practices. He argues that discourse itself is structuring and constraining—tied to social organization—but also “multi-vocal,” subject to different interpretations, and contests over them. Opposing the view of frames as independent ideational productions, Steinberg situates contentious discursive practices as “grounded in ongoing contention within institutional histories” (1999: 749). Beyond ideational congruence, frame resonance concerns practical solutions to pressing problems. In insurgent politics, we propose that:

- 1 Frame resonance emerges in practical response to situational political challenges.

Snow and Moss (2014) show that frames are not always crafted anew for a situation, but may already be available for use when appropriate. Drawing on George Herbert Mead, they argue that constituents may be primed with certain frames of understanding, and as a consequential situation develops, activists can draw on these frames to address the challenges that arise. Relatedly, McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory attribute the resonance of a frame to its practical utility in a given situation. They argue that the resonance of a frame (or other cultural object) for an audience is not static and is not determined by the congruence of that frame with the underlying values and beliefs of the audience, but instead emerges when forward-moving actors encounter cultural objects that help them address a problem. “Cultural objects do not resonate because

they are resonant—they are experienced as resonant *because they solve problems better than the cognitive schema afforded by [familiar] objects or habituated alternatives*” (McDonnell, Bail, and Tavori 2017: 10) This theorization simultaneously accounts for the depth of people’s social positionality and related understandings and the dynamic, strategic, interactive, and situational way that actors align understandings. Frame alignment, in this view, is not determined by the congruence between fixed frames and underlying beliefs and values. “To the extent that resonance is about congruence, we argue that it is about the act of *making* a cultural object congruent as a person works through a situation or problem they face rather than having an already congruent or familiar solution ready at hand” (McDonnell, Bail, and Tavori 2017: 3). Some of the framing activities prompted by resonant objects lead third parties away from activist views. Benford (1997) touches on a similar point. These works resituate framing activities as actively engaged by third parties rather than unilaterally shaped by SMOs. In insurgent politics, we propose that:

- 2 Third parties actively engage in their own framing activities, using resonant cultural objects to make sense of the situation.

Not only does frame alignment emerge, in this sense, through the practical problem-solving activity of ordinary people. The whole practical situation, especially the interaction between insurgents and authorities in insurgent politics, shapes frame alignment. McAdam (1996) shows that tactics can play an important framing role. Ellingson (1995) argues that, rather than discretely linguistic processes, frame alignment is fundamentally shaped by collective actions themselves. He concludes that

processes of frame alignment are influenced ... by the course and interpretation of collective action events. Such events intervene in the process of creating frames or discourses, change the value actors assign to collective beliefs, and motivate some groups to abandon a set of arguments and adopt those of a rival or create new ones.

(1995: 136–7)

Bloom’s studies of postwar Black Freedom Struggle, and insurgent practice theory, reinforce these points, and suggest further extensions regarding frame resonance and alignment in insurgency (Bloom 2014, 2015; Bloom and Martin 2016). Black insurgent mobilization did not develop continuously through the post-war decades. It developed in waves, and each wave of insurgent mobilization involved a distinct, yet internally consistent, set of insurgent practices, each comprising a unique combination of frames, tactics, and targets. In each wave of Black Freedom Struggle, the framing of the insurgent practice was largely inseparable from the tactics. The efficacy of the overarching set of insurgent practices was specific to the political contours of the moment. In particular, in each wave, the capacity to sustain disruption as

a source of power from below depended on the way that a specific set of practices leveraged broader political cleavages to draw third-party support in resistance to repression.⁵ Broader social adoption of the frame tended to follow the efficacy of the insurgent movement, rather than the other way around. Thus, framing was not an independent ideational exercise. It was intertwined with the development of a powerful and relatively coherent set of insurgent practices that constituted each wave of the Black movement. Thus, in insurgent politics, we propose that:

- 3 Situational dynamics—including the practical action of non-activists—drive frame alignment. In particular, the character of repressive action by authorities in response to insurgent practice plays a crucial role in the frame alignment process.

Research design

For the purposes of this analysis, the overarching aim is to explain how and to what extent the character of police action in Ferguson on August 9, 2014, led third parties to embrace a “racist policing” frame. While only a few dozen activists were directly involved in insurgent activities that day in Ferguson, hundreds of thousands of third parties who were not directly involved engaged in discussions online that day trying to make sense of the situation. Many quickly aligned their understanding of the situation with insurgents, framing the situation as an instance of racist policing. We develop our analysis along the lines of three specifying questions concerning each of the three explanatory propositions developed above.

- 1 First, our preliminary priority is to assess what motivated some locals to engage the framing process. For local third parties to adopt the insurgent “racist policing” frame, they had to first pay attention to the situation and seek to understand it. If frame resonance responds to practical political challenges, what practical concerns were at stake here? Did local third parties not involved in the initial activism attempt to explain the situation, and to the extent they did, what motivated these efforts?
- 2 Second, is frame alignment statically determined by the congruence between activist frame and constituent ideology, or actively constructed by potential supporters engaged in their own framing efforts? If third parties engage their own framing activities, we ought to see evidence of such framing activities on social media. Was this the case in Ferguson on August 9, 2014? If so, around what kinds of questions did the early framing efforts by local third parties revolve?
- 3 Third, in the context of such discussions, how was photo and video evidence about the character of police actions in Ferguson that day received? How did it influence both local and national efforts to make sense of the situation? To what extent did such evidence contribute to third party adoption of a “racist policing” frame?

Considering frame alignment as an important aspect of the mobilization process, we are interested especially in local third parties “at risk” of supporting insurgents in the initial mobilization process; i.e., we seek to explain what motivated the interest of third parties who could conceivably challenge repressive action and materially support the insurgents mobilizing in Ferguson that day. To construct a pool of individuals who plausibly could have chosen to support insurgents, we began by identifying as many third parties as possible active on Twitter who decided to come see the insurgency for themselves in person that day. We identified 22 such individuals. These individuals ranged in age from teenagers to senior citizens. Some were elected officials; some were news reporters. There were a few activists. Most just lived nearby and were concerned or curious about what was going on. Except for one White reporter, all these individuals were Black. As far as we know, none of these individuals participated in direct confrontation with the police that day, and only one—State Senator Maria Chappelle-Nadal—participated in a memorial vigil. We then generated a much larger pool of potential third-party supporters by including everyone local these individuals were in Twitter conversation with that day.⁶ This comprised a pool of *hundreds of local tweeters* “at risk” of support, representing a range of perspectives and positions on the insurgency.

To consider third-party responses to evidence of police repressive action, we then worked in the other direction. We constructed a comprehensive sequence of insurgent and police actions in Ferguson that day triangulating Twitter and other time-stamped sources (see Bloom and Frampton 2019 for a detailed account and analysis of the interactive dynamics on the street).

Table 4.1, below, provides a timeline of the main insurgent and police actions.

Evidence of police actions on Twitter

There are no prior studies we are aware of that have assembled this kind of detailed data on the perspectives of so many potential supporters and how they changed over the course of the day in response to developing events. It has been hard to study the initial gestation of third-party support for a specific insurgency. Participant observers are rarely present, and when they are, it is usually only one person who is limited in how much of the early mobilization process they can observe. No one observer can be in hundreds of thousands of places at once to observe the range of responses to events as they unfold. News coverage is also spotty at best. Retrospective interviews are especially poor at reconstructing subtle framing processes as such processes are thoroughly re-situated in memory due to subsequent life-changing events.

Movements that have succeeded construct their own frames. Thus, in providing access to rich data on many people’s reactions to events as they unfolded, social media has drastically improved the prospects for analyzing subtle and previously obscure early framing processes.

To identify individuals who came to the site to check out the situation in person, we explored the universe of tweets that day through a variety of

Table 4.1 Main insurgent and police actions on Canfield Drive in Ferguson, MO, on August 9, 2014

<i>Insurgent Actions</i>	<i>Police Actions</i>
12 pm. Michael Brown and Dorian Johnson walk down middle of Canfield Drive and defy police order to get out of street.	12 pm. Following confrontation, Michael Brown killed. Police leave body bleeding in street for hours.
12–3 pm. Dozens gather outside police tape where Michael Brown’s body lies in street. Minor chants and protests. Report of gunfire in the area.	3 pm. Police respond with canines, assault rifles, and armored vehicles. They force everyone off the street, clear the area, and erect a blockade at Canfield and West Florissant 0.3 miles away.
3–7 pm. Prayer Vigil in intersection at Canfield and West Florissant. Increasingly angry protests at police blockade there.	3–7 pm. Police maintain a militarized blockade. They tape off Canfield Drive, and post a double line of armed officers facing crowd to prevent entrance to the neighborhood. Armored vehicles and police from many jurisdictions stand by.
7 pm. Once the blockade is removed, Michael Brown’s mother and supporters create a rose petal memorial blocking Canfield Drive at place Michael Brown was killed.	8:30 pm. Hundreds of police storm Canfield Drive armed with assault rifles and canines. Police helicopters above. Police vehicles crush rose petal memorial. Police once again try to clear the area.
8:30 pm. Insurgents refuse to allow police car to pass.	
8:30–9 pm. Several dozen nonviolent protesters defy police and refuse to clear the street where Michael Brown was killed. They raise their hands in the air chanting “We Are Michael Brown!” Hundreds of angry Black residents on sidewalk appear to support them.	9 pm. Police retreat and leave.

sampling schemes until it became very hard to identify additional such individuals. We aspired toward a comprehensivist approach in identifying such individuals, implementing searches on a wide range of Boolean search terms; utilizing geo-coding when available; tracing re-tweeted images to their originators; and following social networks among tweeters. We far exceeded the saturation point, making our analysis robust. The character of Twitter conversations we studied were not significantly changed by identifying additional individuals past about the halfway point in our analysis.

Nonetheless, we did not have the resources to closely read every one of the hundreds of thousands of salient tweets that day. So while the probability is small, it is possible that we missed some Twitter conversations involving local third parties “at risk” of supporting insurgents that were qualitatively different than the ones in our sample.

Conversely, it is likely that some third parties “at risk” of supporting the insurgency but not using Twitter underwent a somewhat different process of

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deciding whether to support insurgents. For example, those third parties who accessed only mainstream news coverage of the events had access to a very different—and much more limited—set of information concerning developments on Canfield Drive that day. It is worth studying the ways that richness of data access, and different forms of data access, shape the likelihood that third parties will decide to support an insurgency. But those questions are beyond the scope of this study.

Findings

We present the findings from the analysis in three sections along the lines of the three specifications of the central substantive question, related to the three theoretical propositions, above.

1 Practical concerns: assessing the personal threat

If frame resonance responds to practical political challenges, what practical concerns were at stake following the killing of Michael Brown? Local Black people in Ferguson were concerned to understand the threat the situation posed to themselves and their loved ones. To assess the implications of the killing, many locals were especially concerned to make sense of *why* police killed Michael Brown.

Classic frame theory suggests that mobilization depends fundamentally on the congruence between the activist framing and the underlying beliefs and values of potential activists. Insurgents confronting the police in Ferguson on August 9, 2014 almost always implied, and sometimes explicitly claimed, that the killing of Michael Brown was an expression of racist policing. In the discussion among potential third-party supporters that day, we found very little debate concerning whether policing practices generally were racist. Most local Black people appeared to assume they were.

For example, Conrod wrote “Go to traffic court in Ferguson. Everyone w/ a ticket is Black. We don’t make up the whole population. They target us. They go where we live” (Conrod 20140809a). Delafro noted: “I’ve seen kids of color getting harassed by cops for just standing, breathing, existing” (Delafro 20140809a). LoveKhyB wrote: “It’s hard to teach these young men to respect the police when all they have ever seen from the police is hate and murder” (LoveKhyB 20140809a). And FLOCKA fierce wrote: “Some white folks honestly cannot comprehend why anybody would run from the police. You can’t fault someone for not understanding” (Flocka 20140809b). These kinds of general statements garnered little attention or debate.

The active debates among local Black third parties in Ferguson that day were much more specific. At issue was not a general question about whether policing is racist, but rather the specific and consequential question of whether the killing of Michael Brown constituted an instance of racist policing. In the context of institutionalized racist policing in Ferguson (DoJ 2015)⁷, the

killing of Michael Brown by police created a consequential practical puzzle for local Black people. With imperfect access to information, local Black third parties had a personal interest in understanding the police killing of Michael Brown, and in assessing whether it was a racist action that had implications for their own treatment and that of their loved ones.

Various eyewitnesses speaking publicly the first day claimed that Brown was walking casually down Canfield Drive when the officer confronted him, and after a brief altercation, Brown fled, was shot in the back, and then killed with his hands up. For example, Piaget Crenshaw, a 19-year-old Black woman, said, “I witnessed the police chase after the guy, full force. He was unarmed. He ran for his life. They shot him. And he fell. He put his arms up to let them know he was compliant and that he was unarmed. And they shot him twice more, and he fell to the ground and died.” Piaget specifically made the parallel with Trayvon Martin’s killing, and called the incident “brutality from a different race—it is racial profiling” (Fox 20140809a).

Police handling of Michael Brown’s body had a strong impact on people at the scene and online. Michael Brown had been shot multiple times and killed at about noon. Police cordoned off the area and left his body lying face down in the middle of the Canfield Drive, bleeding out of his head and back. As Michael Brown’s body lay there, local Black people gathered outside the police tape. One man video-recorded a conversation with a friend as he tried to make sense of the situation. He recounted: “They say he had his hands up and everything.” Attempting to understand why the police killed Michael Brown, the friend asked, “They trying to get at him?” The man responded “I don’t know, I wasn’t out here. I just heard the gunshots.” The first man, upset, denounced the police as “some lousy mother fuckers ... They’ve just got him laying in the street, dead as a mother fucker. They’ve just got him laying here.” The friend observed “This is fucking unreal” (TDiddy 20140809a 3:45–)

One young woman shared a photo of Michael Brown’s body bleeding in the street with the caption “How in the hell do you shot [sic] an unarmed teenager? Somebody please tell me!” Michael Brown’s cousin shared a photo of him vibrant and alive. Toya, a local young woman, tweeted the two photos together with the comment, “My heart so heavy for this young man,” and lots of others chimed in, and several hundred re-tweeted it (Toya 20140809a).

Viewing the image of Michael Brown’s body left bleeding in the street was the way many people first heard about the case. The police left Michael Brown’s body lying in the street for hours, which many local Black people saw as callous and dehumanizing. Shawty tweeted “They had that body laying out in the ground for ... hrs. Like, why?” (Elzie 20140809L). MrRe wrote: “Had that child laid out there like fucking roadkill ...” Liberienne added: “They did not cover his dead body. He lay there, decomposing” (Elzie 20140809m,n).

As local third parties heard about the killing of Michael Brown, many were upset and tried to make sense of why the police had killed him, often in conversation with witnesses or friends on the scene. Chuckey asked “Shot 10 times ... why?” (Chuckey 20140809b). Eman who witnessed the killing, tried

to explain: “i have no idea. As far as i know, no reason. He was running. apparently” (Eman 20140809k). Nate wrote: “How [the fuck] you shoot somebody after you told em to put they hands up. 10 times? Not necessary bra” (Nate 20140809b). Ray, who did not live in Canfield apartments, but a couple minutes away, went over to check out what was happening (Ray 20140809a,b). He wrote: “They shot that boy 10 times that shit wasn’t even necessary” (Ray 20140809c). “Why shoot somebody that’s unarmed” (Ray 20140809d). Johnetta exclaimed: “I’m overwhelmed. Why would you kill an unarmed 17 year old?!?! Who surrendered?!?!” (Elzie 20140809af).

2 *Assessing the racism of police action*

If third parties engage their own framing activities, we ought to see evidence of such framing activities on social media. Was this the case in Ferguson on August 9, 2014? And, if so, around what kinds of questions did the early framing efforts by local third parties revolve?

At the heart of the frame alignment process were local Black people’s own efforts to make sense of the character of Michael Brown’s killing. Were the specific actions by police in this situation racist? Some of this early discussion hinged on the question of whether Michael Brown had committed a crime before he was killed.

The rumor circulated that Michael Brown had stolen rellos, a kind of mini-cigar, from the Quick Trip convenience store. Delisha, trying to make sense of the veracity of the story, wrote: “Rellos? I thought all places kept that shit behind the counter. But I could be wrong” (Davis 20140809a). Chucky responded: “They are” (Chucky 20140809c).

A number of third parties challenged the conclusion that Michael Brown had stolen anything. Poe wrote: “No clear evidence that he actually stole from quick trip” (Poe 20140809n). FLOCKAferce wrote: “WE DONT EVEN KNOW IF HE STOLE SOMETHING AT ALL.” Vandalyzm reported that: “The cashier stated that he stole nothing. Nor did anyone at QT call the police” (Vandalyzm 20140809a). Johnetta reposted a post from Jasmine containing a firsthand account of the shooting that denied Michael Brown had stolen anything: “He did not steal anything from anywhere. He was walking home the police pulled up on him, hit him with the car door. Shot him once, when he fell to his knees the officer stood over him and shot him in the head. I’m here now and was here when it happened” (Elzie 20140809ag). Cash questioned the veracity of the account: “who is that? A news reporter because the report said different ... wait that’s a Facebook friend. Ok.” And Johnetta responded that it was an eyewitness account (Elzie 20140809ah).

Various local third parties were obviously troubled by the situation and struggled to make sense of what had happened with incomplete information. Tony wrote: “I gotta get more information, man. Something ain’t adding up” (Joseph 20140809a). In a quick series of posts, FLOCKAferce tried to make sense of the killing. “It’s soooooo many different stories

circulating at once [I don't know] what to think or believe now.... I just read on [Facebook] that he wasn't even running from the police. He was walking home and they ran up on him. Lord I dnt know It's breaking my heart man. Seeing this little guy face down in the pavement. We deserve to know what happened ... I get that stealing is wrong. Running from the police even is still wrong, BUT you're telling me this was the LAST resort at restraining him ... You're tell me this young man was murdered in the street over a misdemeanor theft? Shot TEN times for a MISDEMEANOR if he stole at all ... Whatever he stole was less than \$500 hell less than \$50. NO I'm not justifying stealing. The force doesn't match this crime.... They saying he had his hands up and they shot him once and he fell and the shot him again. I can't man.... Man I couldn't hold back. I'm so hurt ... after watching that [Instagram] video i started crying. this is truly heartbreaking" (Flocka 20140809c-j).

As the discussion progressed, a debate ensued with a few local Black people asserting that Michael Brown deserved what he got, and many others pushing back against the idea that it was relevant whether or not Michael Brown had stolen anything. From the start, many framed the killing of Michael Brown as an expression of racist policing.

Bunyan wrote: "These niggas gotta stop giving cops a reason to do dirty shit ... I swear I ain't trying to be funny" (Bun 20140809a). GeekNStereo responded: "Wait you have to give cops a reason to harass you?! Please!" (Stereo 20140809a). Bunyan floated the question: "If he had never shoplifted would the police had been after him?" Elzie responded: "No one knows if he even stole anything. Next question" (Elzie 20140809ai). Bunyan responded: "Yall missing the point & right now y'all upset so you won't see it." (Bun 20140809b). Cash took a similar position "Criminal activity waived cuz they killed a guy? We gotta do better on a whole" (Elzie 20140809aj). Sarah countered that the whole question was irrelevant: "Debate now over whether he shoplifted. Irrelevant. NOTHING justifies shooting an unarmed teenager ten times" (Kendzior 20140809a). Rashad agreed with this perspective: "So many stories goin around but all have the same ending: UNARMED BLACK KID KILLED BY POLICE" (Rashad 20140809a).

Pheno wrote: "So are we ignoring the fact that he stole something and ran? Or does that not matter?" Ayo responded "So that means shoot him 10x?" Tory responded: "and what was the rest? The whole thought. Validated death that you agree by asking did he steal? A child did something wrong and he was killed. And yall validating it. If it's okay to you. Stealing = death?" (Toya 20140809b; Russell 20140809b,c).

Conrod recounted a conversation with an older relative, and criticized the idea that Michael Brown's actions might justify his killing. He wrote: "You know what really bothers me? As I relayed what had happened, an elder relative immediately asked 'what did he do? Why was he running?' Racism is so institutionalized that black people can't see how brainwashed we've become. We focus on 'surviving' instead of what's right. Regardless of the

details of the situation, no unarmed person should be shot multiple times by a police officer. We side with our oppressors and don't even realize it" (Conrod 20140809d-g).

In some of these conversations, the pushback against the "haters" who justified the killing of Michael Brown became heated. Vernie wrote: "Stop putting yourself in a position to be dealt with by the police." Desire responded "Stop being black in American then?" (Elzie 20140809ak). Emily wrote "Now, so a blk male saying stop appearing guilty to police & you will be a-ok on these streets? That's what I read?" (Emily 20140809a). Beauty_jackson wrote: "You think being a good nigger won't get you fucked up or shot? That's cute" (Dione 20140809a). Yves wrote: "Massuh is always right Uncle fucking Tom ass niggas" (Elzie 20140809am).

Many local Black third parties took the position that the police killing of Michael Brown was fundamentally an expression of racism. Tory wrote: "You forgot to say black. Black teenager killed by police. That's really the key" (Russell 20140809d). TallAndTatted tweeted about Michael Brown: "if he was white he most likely wouldn't be dead." Elzie responded "Absolutely not. He would've gotten a talking to ... They killin us everywhere" (Elzie 20140809e,f). Kelsy wrote: "Been hearing about stories similar to this my whole life. but this is breaking my heart because it's so close to home" (Kelsy 20140809a). Peter recalled: "Ferguson PD killed my Grandfather Reginald Hampton 30 years ago. I feel for the family" (Stephen 20140809a). Oz wrote: "They gone keep killing us and telling us we shouldn't have looked so dangerous" (Flocka 20140809k). Toya wrote: "I'm so disgusted right now. I'm angry, sad, heartbroken, everything bad right now. Seems like a black life is worthless nowadays" (Toya 20140809c).

Johnetta concurred: "Not teaching my kids to roll over and play nice so the white people with badges and guns won't hunt, shoot and kill them ... [I don't care] how much ass you kiss. Your black ass can get shot and killed to for no got damn reason. Wake up ... Murdered him for walking down the fucking street. When has walking down the damn street in YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD ever been illegal?! ... They killed this baby for walking down the damn street." (Elzie 20140809an-aq). Rik wrote: "Why was he running? BITCH because he scared to death of cops. And what black youth in low income community isn't?" (Rik 20140809a). Shire responded: "Word is that he didn't even fucking run he stopped, put his hands up and they still shot him." (Shire 20140809a). BookofJonah wrote: "Just being black is reason enough, ANYTHING we do is reason enough to kill us." (Jonah 20140809a).

3 The role of repressive action by police in the frame alignment process

In the context of third-party framing efforts, how was the character of police response to insurgents in Ferguson that day received?

In the context of local Black people's efforts to make sense of whether police were acting racist, photos and videos of callous and threatening action by police, not least repressive action against people nonviolently protesting

the killing of Michael Brown, became resonant cultural objects that powerfully influenced people's understanding of the situation and the frame alignment process. The resonance of insurgent frames with local Black third parties was not a fixed question of frame congruence. Instead, local Black third parties viewed police responses to insurgent actions fundamentally in terms of their ongoing interpretive debates about the character of the police killing of Michael Brown. The character of authority responses, often captured in photo and video circulated online, became resonant cultural objects which local Black people—who were already trying to make sense of whether this was an instance of racist policing—took into account.

Michael Brown's body lay bleeding face down in the street for hours. Dozens of people from the neighborhood, almost all Black, gathered outside the police tape. Michael Brown's mother, supported by friends, complained to police. A small group of perhaps a dozen people chanted several protests including "No Justice, No Peace!" Police reported shots fired nearby.

At about 3 pm, hundreds of police moved in with assault rifles, dogs, and armored vehicles to clear the area. They chased people off of the street of the Canfield Green apartment complex where Michael Brown was killed, told residents they had to stay inside, and forcibly removed all observers a third of a mile away to the corner of West Florissant Boulevard where they constructed a blockade to keep people out. These police actions became the focus of online discussion among local Black people. Vandalyzm challenged the haters citing the police action as evidence: "Y'all not getting the fact that they showed up in riot gear with assault rifles and ARE NOT ALLOWING ANYONE TO LEAVE THAT NEIGHBORHOOD" (Vandalyzm 20140809a).

One of the people who heard about the killing after the neighborhood had been cleared and people were locked outside the blockade was Johnetta "Netta" Elzie, a St. Louis local who had a significant presence on local Black Twitter. Elzie lived about fifteen minutes from Canfield Green apartments, but her aunt and cousin lived there (Elzie 20140809a,b). In the discussion among Elzie and her friends, information about the repressive police action resonated and was incorporated into their efforts to make sense of the situation. Elzie tweeted that police were carrying military-style weapons. A friend replied: "Jesus are you serious?" Elzie confirmed, and then elaborated: "SWAT + 200/300 police?! Ferguson not even big enough for all that" (Elzie 20140809g,h). Elzie retweeted a photo of the police armored vehicle near the blockade, and another friend replied in disbelief (Elzie 20140809i). Elzie compared the situation to the war in Gaza (Elzie 20140809j).

As images of the militarized police action spread, local Black people tried to make sense of what they were seeing. Many explained the police actions as expressions of institutional racism, reflective of the customary and racist treatment of Black people. Discussions among Elzie and her friends on Twitter are illustrative. NotBeezy wrote: "I cannot recall ONE incident in my lifetime where i saw a police officer and felt safe or protected." AlexDon responded: "Ever." (Elzie 20140809o). Airln wrote: "People are literally

afraid of us, as if we are animals ... It's baffling" (Elzie 20140809p). Elzie pointed out the historical irony of White people being afraid of Black people: it's like we're "the ones to be afraid of, like we're the ones who hung/burned/castrated ppl & took pics smiling next to the bodies ... Like we're the ones who raped and mutilated men, women and children ... Like we're the ones who kidnapped and stole HUMANS for centuries and sold them ... Black people aren't the ones. Be afraid of your got damn selves white folks" (Elzie 20140809q,r,s,t). Civil wrote: "Shit isn't safe out here for us. None of us. Woman, man, child" (Elzie 20140809v). Elzie concurred: "Can't even walk down the street" (Elzie 20140809w). Crown despaired: "As a father of 2 little black boys how am I supposed to sleep at night?" (Elzie 20140809x). Upset about the situation, Elzie and several of her friends eventually drove down to Canfield "for black people" (Elzie 20140809y,z,aa).

Antonio French posted a picture of an armored police vehicle outside the blockade that was retweeted hundreds of times. Responses to Antonio French's tweet of the armored vehicle show how the threatening police response was taken up as part of people's efforts to make sense of the situation. Some commentators strongly identify with the protesters as Black people: "Then they wonder why in the fuck we thugs ...", "Because we are enemy combatants." Other commentators suggest that the police actions are expressions of institutional racism: "This is the real danger in the black communities. Where do people go for protection from thug cops?", "Funny how they didn't bring out this hardware when the T-Partiers were protecting the Bundy Ranch.", "Is this Circa South Africa 1982 or is it America 2014?" (representative same-day comments on image of armored vehicle, French 20140809a).

An image of a police armored vehicle caught Kelsy's attention. She retweeted it with the note "omg." Then, she retweeted images of police with dogs and shotguns, and the note "UNBELIEVABLE." And another picture of armored truck. "i wanna cry so bad," she commented ... "is this MY city? these pics and photos look like their from the 1960s." After a while her surprise and sadness turned to anger. Addressing police she tweeted: "YOU ARE IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD STARTING SHIT. GET. OUT" (Kelsy 20140809b-f).

Several hours later after police removed the blockade, a hundred or so mourners and protesters reconvened on Canfield Drive at the spot where Michael Brown was killed. Michael Brown's mother, Lezly McSpadded, constructed a rose-petal memorial at the site. People lit candles. Several young women blocked the street at the memorial site, and would not let police pass.

At about 8 pm police stormed the area, perhaps two hundred officers from multiple jurisdictions, came from behind the protesters, charging up Canfield Drive, sirens wailing. The police pushed through the protesters, and drove over the rose-petal memorial Michael Brown's mother had constructed, crushing it. The crush of police cars remained parked on top of the rose-petal memorial, lights flashing. Police helicopters circled above, shining spotlights on the scene below (French 20140809ah,ai).

In response to photos of the crushed rose-petal memorial, Thespin tweeted: “Can’t even have a memorial for this murdered child without #FergusonPolice destroying it. Disgusting” (Thespinster 20140809a). Lisa responded: “Heartless!” (Lisa 20140809a). D asked: “Did his mother not just leave some of those? ... no words” (Macdonald 20140809a). Sara wrote: “Oh Lord have mercy” (Holmes 20140809a). Ashleigh posted a broken heart emoji (Ashleigh 20140809a).

To many, police crushing the rose-petal memorial appeared to demonstrate a lack of respect for Michael Brown’s humanity. Tezzy pointedly characterized the police action as “Disrespectful” (Tezzy 20140809a). Mstrmnd agreed: “Blatant DISRESPECT” (Mstrmnd 20140809a). R said “Not OK” (R 20140809a). Marcus called “foul” (Marcus 20140809a). Ant stated: “That’s coldblooded” (Allen 20140809a). Cheryl declared “ATROCITY in our own back yard!” (Morin 20140809a). Allen insisted “we putting double out there tomorrow!” (Gates 20140809a). X concluded “fuck the cops man” (X 20140809a).

More people decided to join the protest and stepped into the street to confront the police at the spot where Michael Brown was killed. With their cars parked on top of the rose-petal memorial, the police again responded with the threat of violence, demanding protesters clear the street. As they had earlier, police brandished assault rifles as they confronted nonviolent protesters. Using snarling dogs, police attempted to force protesters out of the street and back onto the sidewalk (SLPD 20140809d,e; French 20140809h). The police helicopter continued to circle overhead shining a spotlight on the crowd (French 20140809L).

Antonio French tweeted video and photos of the police with dogs confronting nonviolent protesters (French 20140809h,m,n,o). Hundreds retweeted them. Elzie, on her way to the scene, retweeted the photos, commenting: “You can’t even mourn the loss! Look at the police dogs” (Elzie 20140809ae). Making sense of the situation, Shire proclaimed: “Helicopters, Attack Dogs, Armed Police. We are the victims.” (Shire 20140809b) MrRe commented: “First riot gear now dogs? THEYDONTGIVEAFUCKABOUTUS” (Fan 20140809a). Rashad responded: “You would think we did something wrong” (Rashad 20140809b). Les, a Black St. Louis native tweeted “Looking a little like déjà vu for some of our grandparents” (Les 20140809a).

Brenna quickly found a historical photo from the Civil Rights movement that looked a lot like Antonio French’s photo of the police with dogs confronting protesters on Canfield Drive, and tweeted the two images side-by-side with the caption “Someone please remind me what year it is again? #ferguson” (Muncy 20140809a). Her tweet was retweeted more than 6,000 times.

While there were no television cameras on site, news spread both locally around the Ferguson area,⁸ and globally, with many commenting in real time about the character of the police response. Barbara wrote acerbically: “Response to grieving community. Wow” (Reid 20140809a). Relly wrote: “fucking disgusting” (Relly 20140809a). Ken wrote: “THIS IS SHAMEFUL AND WRONG” (Ken 20140809a). The images of threatening police

repressive action amplified the racist policing frame. Tea noted: “Times change police DONT” (Tea 20140809a). Big added: “ain’t shit changed” (Big 20140809a). Mia mused that in Ferguson, the year was “1964 apparently” (Mia 20140809a). Slack tweeted “AmeriKKKa” (Slack 20140809a). Zek noted: “Racism is still alive” (Zek 20140809a). Sharee concluded: “don’t matter the year. It’s up to us” (Sharee 20140809a).

Conclusions

Social media data allowed unpacking of the process of frame alignment in the early phases of mobilization in Ferguson on August 9, 2014. Consideration of how potential local supporters responded to events as they unfolded is revealing. In conclusion, we will summarize the findings in terms of each of the three specifying questions, and their implications for a general understanding of frame alignment processes.

First, the analysis shows that frame resonance was not an independent ideational process.

Instead, it was a situated response to a practical challenge (McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017) based on deeper understandings of the world posed by structured social roles (Oliver and Johnston 2000) grounded in institutional histories (Steinberg 1999). Local Black third parties, and to some extent observers around the country, felt personally threatened by the police killing of Michael Brown and their handling of his body. The situation posed a practical political challenge about how this threat would be managed. The resonance of a “racist policing” frame grew out of the broader political situation, rather than an independent ideational process.

Second, in response to the specific practical political challenges posed by the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, and as McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory (2017) argue, potential supporters actively engaged in their own framing activities, trying to make sense of the situation. While the insurgent “racist policing” frame was already available (Snow and Moss 2014) and congruent with the general viewpoints of most local Black third parties, general congruence was insufficient to generate frame alignment. Instead, third parties sought to make sense of the specific situation. A central topic of debate was the accusation that Michael Brown had been involved in a petty theft before he was killed. People tried to assess the available evidence as best they could. But many local Black people also challenged the premise that such accusations were relevant. Many saw allegations of petty theft as tantamount to justifying murder. In short, frame alignment, was constructed by observers working through their own interpretations of a pressing situation using the framings, and other cultural resources available.

Third, in particular, evidence of repressive actions by police in Ferguson proved crucial in driving the frame alignment process. Police crushing the rose-petal memorial constructed by Michael Brown’s mother seemed callous

to many observers. Police wielding assault rifles and police dogs against non-violent protesters seemed threatening to many local Black people. In the initial phases of mobilization on Canfield Drive, insurgents defying police made few programmatic declarations, and their words rarely reached potential local third-party supporters directly. But photos and videos of the callous and threatening actions by police were widely disseminated on social media. These photos and videos became powerfully resonant cultural objects which local Black people and third-party observers nationally used as important resources in making sense of the practical political challenge posed by the killing of Michael Brown. This footage convinced many to adopt the insurgents' framing of the situation as an instance of "racist policing."

It was not dry ideational congruence that led people to adopt insurgents' frame of "racist policing" in Ferguson on August 9, 2014. Given the documented racist character of policing in Ferguson (DoJ 2015), the idea that policing was generally racist was consistent with the lived experience of local Black people and seemed to fit the facts of the case. But beyond an assessment that the frame fit, it took practical action to make the framing salient (Ellingson 1995; McAdam 1996). When insurgents on the street nonviolently defied the police, the repressive police response exposed the institutionalized racism in local policing for the world to see.

Consistent with insurgent practice theory (Bloom 2014, 2015; Bloom and Martin 2016), the callous and threatening character of repressive action by police did more than the words of activists ever could to characterize the situation as an instance of racist policing.

Much of what people saw on social media and even on the television news that first day in Ferguson—despite news stations largely adopting language provided by police—was a heavy-handed police response to nonviolent defiance. Insurgents' greatest role in shaping the shared subjective understandings that enabled escalating mobilization was not their linguistic spin. The resonance of the insurgent "racist policing" frame was *practical*. Protesting at the police tape, constructing the rose-petal memorial in the middle of the street, and nonviolently defying police orders to disperse—insurgents achieved frame alignment through practical actions that drove interactive political dynamics on the ground.

Notes

- 1 Thus the "racist policing" frame had been developed, but had not been strongly attached to a coherent set of insurgent practices. Coupling charges of racist policing with blocking traffic, mourning in streets, and defiance of police orders, in the wake of a police killing of a Black person, began to proliferate following the killing of Michael Brown and the large-scale insurgent mobilization in Ferguson. For insightful work on these kinds of non-organizational dynamics of movements, and the way ideas developed earlier are picked up by insurgents when practical situations are conducive, see Oliver (1989).

- 2 These newer approaches have striking affinities with the theories of Gramsci (1971) and Bourdieu (1990).
- 3 A range of contemporary texts have explored related theoretical perspectives. See Gaston (2017), Jansen (2016, 2017), and Kay and Evans (2018) for exemplary work.
- 4 With tens of thousands of cumulative cites to the major theoretical statements (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow et al. 1986), Google Scholar March 31, 2019.
- 5 It is worth noting that core defenders of insurgents often reject the basic premise of insurgent collective action. For example, in 1969, politically moderate Whitney Young, Executive Director of the Urban League, worked as a key ally of the Black Panther Party, calling for a Federal special investigation into the police and FBI orchestrated killing of revolutionary Black Panther leader Fred Hampton. Young did not agree with the Black Panthers' revolutionary politics, yet acted as a key ally to challenge repressive actions taken by authorities against them (Bloom and Martin 2016: 244). This is not just the difference between diagnostic and prognostic framing—Young's moderate diagnosis of the political situation was as different from the Black Panthers' anti-imperialist diagnosis as much as his moderate political prescriptions appeared nonsensical from the vantage of the Panthers' revolutionary prognosis.
- 6 Not all local accounts are explicitly geocoded as local. We used geocoding as one way of getting into local networks. Once we were in local networks, we found other people who were clearly local, either because they were actually driving down to the local events, or because they were regularly interacting in person with other local individuals. This required looking through not only movement related posts of candidate individuals, but the range of posts from those individuals in the days preceding the protests. "Local" means they live in the greater Ferguson area, including not only Ferguson proper, but Jennings and other parts of North County, and other parts of Saint Louis. Since we were sampling for potential protesters, we worked out from the networks of people who got involved rather than trying to do some kind of random sampling of everyone who lived in the area.
- 7 DoJ 2015 = United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division. 2015. "Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department."
- 8 See, e.g., retweets FLOCK, and BLV (Flocka 20140809a; Law 20140809a).

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