Police Racial Violence: Lessons from Social Psychology
L. Song Richardson

Abstract: This Essay uses lessons from social psychology to examine police violence. Many accounts attempt to explain instances of racial violence at the hands of the police, ranging from arguments that the police acted justifiably to arguments likening these killings to Jim Crow lynchings. Certainly, it is tempting to blame this violence either on the racial animus of officers or the purportedly threatening behaviors of victims because it simplifies the problem; either the individual officer or citizen is at fault. This Essay argues that reducing the problem of racial violence to the individual police-citizen interaction at issue obscures how current policing practices and culture entrench racial subordination and, thus, racial violence. As a result, unless institutional interventions are made, racial violence is inevitable regardless of whether officers have malicious racial motives or citizens engage in objectively threatening behaviors.