Racial Profiling: The Afro-French Experience

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Abstract

French residents of African descent have long complained that police single them out for discriminatory identity checks. Several studies have examined the relationship between law enforcement and minority populations in France. In 2007, a study concluded that police stops and identity checks in Paris (France) were principally based on the appearance of the person stopped, rather than on their personal behavior, with individuals perceived to be ethnic minorities disproportionately stopped by the police. Blacks (of sub-Saharan African or Caribbean origin) were overall six times more likely than Whites (of Western European origin) to be stopped by police while Arabs (of North African origin) were generally 7.6 times more likely than Whites to be stopped by the police. Moreover, minority youth in France were shown to be the victims of frequent stops involving lengthy questioning, invasive body pat-downs, and the search of personal belongings. In order to eliminate these inequalities, a collective of associations, non-government organizations and individuals launched the Stop le Contrôle au Faciès (SLCF) initiative in 2011. The purpose of this study is to describe the Afro-French citizen's experiences with perceived racial profiling in France. Twenty-six interviews in which French artists of African descent discussed the first or worst identity check they experienced were analyzed. Improved understanding about these experiences can inform interventions and solutions designed to address these discriminations and reduce their consequences in Afro-French populations.

Introduction

Ethnic diversity has led some societies to attach labels and fabricate myths about people with different skin and/or hair colors (Diop, 1981). This is the result of racial stratification, a subtype of social stratification that can be defined as the unequal distribution of scarce goods and services in society (Geschwender, 1980). In a society experiencing extensive class stratification, individuals who are members of the ruling class will seek to maintain their power advantages by reinforcing divisions in society (Geschwender, 1980).

In the United States, the importance of skin tone has played an important role in race relations and racial stratification. One of the most defining features of the contact of Africans with Europeans is the existence of the institution of slavery. This institution was an exploitative system that subjugated millions of Africans in the Americas in order to maximize profits on plantations. This coercive system was maintained by racial "differential treatment of Blacks in terms of an attitude of rejection based on group differences, with a special emphasis on skin color" (Jordan, 1968). Jordan (1974) stated that Englishmen viewed Africans as different and as a lower order of humans; he viewed slavery and prejudice as interacting constantly and reinforcing each other. In his model, Africans in the Americas were debased not only for profits, but because they were different. Bettelheim and Janovitz (1964) suggested that prejudice based on skin color was associated with social mobility. They argued that prejudice occurred to limit social mobility of members of the Black community. White racism and prejudice thus helped perpetuate the social hierarchy with Whites in a position of dominance. The presence of this prejudice that still permeates United States society has led to numerous consequences, such as stress, health disparities, as well as the high presence of discriminatory acts perpetuated by security institutions (Cooper et al., 2004).

In France, however, despite the existence of French slavery, colonialism, and postcolonial migrations, race and its idiom remained a highly taboo concept (Keaton, 2013). The French public discourse continues to maintain that "race" is not a social construction, but a physical definition of human groups that is therefore rejected (Simon, 2008; Wieviorka, 2012). Furthermore, French history, culture, and politics have maintained formidable barriers to the recognition of racial issues in its society despite the fact that French residents of African descent have long complained that police single them out for discriminatory identity checks (Mouzer & Onana, 2007).

Moreover, several studies have examined the relationship between law enforcement and minority populations in France. Jobard and Lévy (2009) concluded that police stops and identity checks in Paris (France) were principally based on the appearance of the person stopped, rather than on their personal behavior, with individuals perceived to be ethnic minorities disproportionately stopped by the police. Blacks (of sub-Saharan African or Caribbean origin) were overall six times more likely than Whites (of Western European origin) to be stopped by police, while Arabs (of North African origin) were generally 7.6 times more likely than Whites to be stopped by the police (Jobard & Lévy, 2009). Moreover, minority youth in France were recently shown to be subjected to frequent stops involving lengthy questioning, invasive body pat-downs, and the search of personal belongings (Human Rights Watch, 2012). In order to eliminate these inequalities, a collective of associations, non-government organizations, and individuals launched the Stop le Contrôle au Faciès initiative in 2011. This research seeks to describe the experiences of citizens of African descent with racial profiling in France as well as the common themes emerging from these experiences. This analysis argues that this campaign

will have important consequences on the welfare of French residents of African descent as well as the emerging Afro-French identity.

Methods

The hermeneutic phenomenological method proposed by Van Manen (1997) was used to study the lived experiences of discriminatory identity checks as perceived by black hip hop artists in France and to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon. Van Manen described phenomenology as how one orients to lived experience and hermeneutics as how one interprets the "texts" of life. As a research method, hermeneutics phenomenology focuses on the interpretation and illumination of the essence and the uniqueness of the human experience.

Setting and Participants

Stop le Contrôle au Faciès (SLCF) was founded in the spring of 2011 as an effort to raise awareness about discriminatory identity checks in France and to motivate the public to take legal actions that can eventually reform the law governing these checks. In November 2011, SLCF launched the "Mon 1er contrôle d'identité" 'My First Identity Check' web series to introduce the collective on the national level. The data for this study were collected from the first season of the "Mon 1er contrôle d'identité" web series, which was produced by Ladji Real and consisted of 26 interviews in which French artists (5 of North African origin and 21 from Sub-Saharan Africa or the West Indies) discussed the first or worst identity check they experienced. The interviews, conducted between November 2011 and March 2012, were filmed and posted on the SLCF website. All the participants were Hip-Hop artists selected by the collective. Their participation was voluntary and they were not compensated. According the University of Cincinnati

Institutional Review Board, no authorization was needed to analyze the interviews as they were part of the public domain.

Data Analysis

Two of the co-investigators who are fluent in French and English transcribed the interviews and translated them into English. The two co-investigators met and shared the initial coding and analysis of transcripts, which included developing code word definitions for the codebook. Two research activities proposed by van Manen (1997) were used to guide data analysis: reflection and writing. Hermeneutic phenomenological reflection was conducted by carefully reading the transcripts and using the iterative interpretative process—going back and forth throughout the stages of analysis and the repeated readings of the interview. Writing included creating a brief summary analysis of each interview, capturing the participants' key points as well as describing and interpreting the discriminatory identity check experience as a whole. At subsequent meetings, the two co-investigators selected meanings for the various codes and themes that emerged from the initial analyses, as well as the coding of selected data into each theme. Consensus was reached among the co-investigators agreed, who that the meaning of the theme was clear and true to the participants' words. The co-investigators met 5 times during the data analysis process during which a series of sub-themes ($n=6$) were created, from which emerged a few major themes ($n=3$). The goal of the data analysis was to capture the lived experiences of the Afro French hip hop artists who shared their stories regarding the first or worst identity check they had to endure.

Discussion

The following 3 themes were identified throughout our analysis: normative experience, race, and humiliation. In what follows, each theme will be discussed with excerpts from the "Mon 1er contrôle d'identité" series.

Theme 1: Normative experience

There was an overwhelming amount of data that directly related to the normative aspect of racial profiling. This perception was consistently displayed in the comments. Many of the participants in the campaign commented on the high frequency of these police stops. As Mac Tyer notes:

> Ça fait tellement longtemps que c'est arrivé dans ma vie, qu'il faut que je dois réfléchir pour en trouve une qui sorte du lot!
>
> It happens so often that it is hard to think of one that stands out!

In his interview, Soprano referred to this theme twice:

> Au début, ils nous demandent les papiers. Moi, je les avais par habitude déja sorti de ma poche.
>
> At the beginning [of the identity check], they asked us for our identity documents. I already had them in hand out of habit.
>
> Moi, contrôle de papiers, je parle plus. J'attends qu'il fait son truc! Il dit ses trucs habituels!
>
> Me, when there is an ID check, I don't speak anymore, I wait for him to do his thing! He [the officer] says the usual thing!

Participants' interviews revealed how these stops generate a pervasive sense of being victimized, as shown in the following excerpts by La Fouine and MAS, respectively:

> Moi, maintenant, les keufs ils me contrôlent, je trouve cela normal alors qu'en vrai, ils n'ont pas le droit de faire cela!

> Me, now when the cops stop me, I think it's normal, when in reality they don't have the right to do so!
>
> Tu te fais contrôler une fois toutes les deux semaines, déja, c'est chiant… une fois par semaine n'en parlons pas! Que tu sois a pied, en voiture, dans le train
>
> You are checked every couple of weeks and, for one thing, it is a pain in the ass… once a week, don't talk about it! Whether you are walking, in a car, on the train.

Others participants connected these stops with life as a member of a minority group living in France.

> Vous savez comment ca marche, des fois cela se passe bien, des fois, cela ne se passe pas très bien…. Cela depend comment on te parle, comment on répond, cela dépend comment ces messieurs sont lunés. (16AR)
>
> It means that you all know how it works, sometimes it goes well, sometimes it doesn't go very well…. it depends on how we are talked to, how we react, how we talk, how these individuals [police officers] are feeling.
>
> On a tellement subi les contrôles de police dans nos vies que cela fait partie intégrante de notre vie. (Rim-K)
>
> We have been subjected so often to police stops in our lives that they have become a normal part of our lives!
>
> Nous l'avons accepté. On est soumis! Pour nous, ca nous parait normal! Si je dis a Meshad, je me suis fait controlé. Franchement, en 2 minutes, on passe a autre chose! (Axiom)
>
> We have accepted it. We are indeed subdued! For us, it seems normal! If I tell Meshad I was stopped by the police, we'll talk about it for 2 minutes and then talk about something else.
>
> Tout le monde subissait ca! C'est pas normal… ce genre de situation surtout a cet age la! (Fababy)
>
> Everyone has dealt with this. It's not normal… this type of situation, especially at that age!

> Je vais te dire comment cela marche sur le terrain pour les gens comme nous, entre parenthèses. (Zesau)
>
> I'm going to tell you how things work in the streets for people "like us," so to speak.

Data from the interviews convey that a sense of injustice coupled with feeling discriminated against seems to be a widespread experience in the Afro-French community. Participants of this campaign (all from the Afro-French community) accepted racial profiling as a part of their lives. These results seem to support work being done in the United States, such as the normative theory of prejudice that takes the view that daily prejudices reinforced by social norms serve to discourage the tolerance of minority groups (Pettigrew, 1959).

Theme 2: Race

Another theme that was consistent related to racial discrimination. There were frequent comments on the prevalence of identity checks for people of African descent (Arabs and Blacks). The definition of what a supposedly 'average' French citizen looks like was mentioned in several of the comments:

> C'est par rapport a quoi qu'on nous fait cela? C'est parce que l'on ne ressemble pas au citoyen moyen. (Jango Jack)
>
> Why are they doing this to us? Maybe it's because we don't look like the average citizen?

> J'ai un nom trop français pour eux comme je viens des Antilles! Ils auraient préféré que j'ai un nom plus d'Afrique de l'Ouest ou de Centrafrique! Ils pensent que je me fous de sa gueule! (AP)
>
> I have a too French name for them since I am from the West Indies! They would have preferred that I have a more West African or Central African name! They [police officers] think I am making fun of them!

The perception of Whiteness (and its importance) in the French context was also expressed by several participants:

> Il [l'officier] regarde devant et il fouille comme ils font mais plus tendre quand ils ont vu Madame blanche blonde… (Axiom)
>
> He [the officer] looks in the front [of the car] and searches like they do, but when they see a White blonde woman, it is more careful.

> J'ai l'impression qu'il y a aussi un peu de racisme aussi, ils ont fait par rapport a ma couleur car mon ami qui était sur le scooter avec moi lui, il était Blanc, il n'a rien eu. (Doumass)
>
> I feel that racism is a factor, because my friend who was White did not get anything [any form of abuse]!

> J'était avec un Blanc. C'est le Blanc qui ne voulait pas leur donner le code mais c'est moi qu'ils ont voulu arreter! (Sur1)
>
> I was with a White boy and it was the White boy that did not want to give them the code but it's me that they wanted to arrest!

Several interviews revealed that participants believe that their "Non-Whiteness" increased their likelihood of being stopped:

> Les flics, lui ont dit "Bin Laden, tu prends ta barbe, tu dégages dans ta banlieue!" (Fik's)
>
> The cops told him, "Bin Laden, take your beard and go away, back to your suburb!"

> Ils arrivent qu'on soit a 4 Rebeus, 2 Blacks, et un Français et lui dise "Mets toi sur le coté!" Ils ne le calcule pas! (Sofiane)
>
> There are times when there may be 4 Arabs, 2 Blacks, and one Frenchman [in the car] and they tell him [the driver], "Go to the side [of the car]!" They ignore him!

> J'ai jamai vu, par example, une bonne femme française, blonde se faire contrôler et se faire sortir de la voiture ou un mec, un "babtou" en costume tout ca

> tranquille, qui se fait sortir de la voiture, écarte les jambs! .C'est toujours les memes genres de personnes. On va dire Rebeu, Renoi, Métisse! (Kamelanc)
>
> I have never seen, for example, a French woman, a blonde, get stopped by the police and ordered to get out of the car or a guy in a business suit asked to get out and spread his legs to be searched. It is always the same type of person. Let's say *beur* [Arab], *noir* [Black], *métissé* [mixed-race].

Many of the participants perceived that being a Black male was associated with negativity in France:

> Et les gens des pavillons qui voient cela et qui voient des Noirs en train de se faire prendre, de se faire mettre dans la voiture comme cela, eux, ils vont se dire les gars ils ont fait un truc de fous ou quoi, tu vois! (Grodash)
>
> And the people in their houses, when they look out their windows and see Black kids being put into police cars, they are gonna say to themselves, these guys did something crazy, you know.
>
> Et la on me dit "Qu'est ce que ca fait un Négro dans une voiture comme ca?'… c'est normal. (MAS)
>
> So they told me, "What is a Black guy doing in a car like that?"… It's typical.
>
> Il n'y avait que des Blacks, des Renois. (Sefyu)
>
> There were only Blacks [in the police lineup]

Data from this research revealed that a significant number of participants believed that race was a contributing factor (or being part of a minority group in France) to being stopped by police. The findings of this study exposed the nature of the discrimination faced by the Afro-French minority, a discrimination partly based on race.

Theme 3: Humiliation

Another theme that was consistent among the interviews was the prevalence of humiliation during the encounters. Youssoupha, for example, insisted on how disruptive this humiliation was:

> Je sors des cours donc je suis vraiment dans autres chose… mais malgré ca, tu m'humilies devant les gens!
>
> I came out of class so I am really into something else… but despite that, they humiliate me in front of people!

Numerous interviews highlighted how the location of the stop increased their humiliation:

> A cote d'autre gens qui m'ont vu,je me demande ce qu'il devaient se dire dans leur têtes à ce moment là? (Sultan)
>
> Besides, people who saw me, I wonder what were they thinking, in their head, at that time?

> On était plus énèrvés car il y avait des gens qui passaient… Et nous comme on est jeune, on avait vraiment l'impression qu'on avait fait quelque chose [de mal]. (Alibi Montana)
>
> We were upset, because there were people walking by…. And people were watching us, giving us the impression that we had really done something [wrong].

> Les gens, ils s'arrêtaient…. C'était en plein National 7, les gens s'arrêtaient, ils regardaient. On avait un peu honte.. car les gens ils s'arrêtaient [et] pensaient qu'on est des voyous ou quoi que soit… (Modor)
>
> The worst was that people were stopping…. It was on National 7 [highway], so people were stopping, they were watching. We were a bit ashamed because people were stopping [and] thinking that we were thugs or something…

Several participants described the emotions they experienced as a result of being humiliated by the authorities:

De là, quand on les voyait dans le quartier contrôler d'autres personnes, on repensait toujours a cette humiliation. Ca nous a un peu marqué… cad qu'après on avait plus le meme regard envers la police , on a plus eu la même image avec ces flics. (Kamelanc)

Afterwards, when they [the police] would come to our neighborhood and stop other people, we were always reminded of the humiliation we had experienced. It left a mark on us… that is to say that ever since, I never had the same image of the police

Parce quand tu t'es fait controlé il y a 5 minutes, tu te refais controlé 5 minutes et encore dix minutes apres, … forcément tu commences à prendre des haines, tu as du mal à te controller. (16AR)

Because, when you have your ID checked every five minutes, and then again five minutes later, and again 10 minutes later… you start to feel hateful and you have a hard time controlling yourself.

J'ai compris cette relation entre la police et les jeunes…. C'est quelque chose que je connaissais pas,et voila, j'ai découvert pourquoi on a cette amertume-là contre la police dans ce pays. (Grodash)

I understood the relationship between the youth and the police… It was something I hadn't known about before. And there you have it; I understood the bitterness felt against the police in this country.

Et toi, t'avais ton ticket, tu te fais controler salement devant les gens…. Donc le sentiment qui nait après cela, c'est un sentiment de haine. (Mass)

But you, you have your ticket and they search you in a horrible way in front of everyone…. So the feeling you have after is one of hate.

Se faire controler régulièrement, ca te met en panique pour plein de choses, ca veut dire que rien n'est plus sure! (Sofiane)
Getting stopped regularly puts you in panic over many things; it means that nothing is secure.

Franchement, c'est humiliant! Ils te controlent, ils te fouillent, en pleine journée et tu ne sais meme pas pourquoi. Apres ils te rendent tes papiers, à la limite, ils te le jettent en pleine gueule et tu pars et devant les gens, on va dire, c'est humiliant. Il n'y a pas pire pour un être humain que d'être humilié. Quand tu es humilié, tu as

> l'impression que tu es un sous-merde, t'as l'impression que personne ne te respecte et puis voilà! (Kamelanc)
> Frankly, it is humiliating! To be stopped, searched, all in broad daylight and you don't even know why. When it's done, they throw your ID back in your face… right in front of lots of people. It is humiliating… there isn't anything worse for a human being than to be humiliated. When you are humiliated, you feel [un sous-merde] like a worthless piece of crap, respected by no one!

The SLCF interviews describe the range of feelings experienced by the participants. Often, participants felt humiliated and their encounter with the police left them embarrassed and frustrated. Moreover, the emotional consequences of the stops sometimes left a lifelong mark on some of the interviewees.

The results of this analysis confirms that Afro-French citizens, which include Arab Black populations, are facing racial profiling and are still perceived as foreign by several segments of French society (Lozès, 2012). The findings from this research are informative regarding the nature of discrimination faced by French citizens of African descent. The creation of the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity, and Codevelopment by then French president Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 continues to highlight the national debate taking place on French citizenship. In order to improve the life of French citizens of African descent, the CRAN (the Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires) demanded that the number of "Black French discriminated against as well as the specifics forms such discriminations takes" be known (Le cran pour des statistiques ethniques, 2012). The association even goes further, stating that "For this to happen, there need to be statistics" on diversity, raising the controversial issue of establishing statistics based on ethnicity, which is currently against the law (Lozès, 2012, p.103). As a candidate, the current French president, Francois Hollande, had promised to bring more equity to the police/citizen relationship and had at least partially accepted the idea that receipts be given after each identity check could result in the beginning of a possible response to the issue

of racial profiling. This measure is perceived as a potential tool to objectify police arrest as well as constituting a material proof for both parts (Assbague, 2013). However, until recently, the new interior minister, Manuel Valls, seemed to resist the idea of implementing mandatory receipts (Valls entérnait, 2012).

Another important element to add to the discussion of racial profiling in France is the role of French hip hop, which is notable for its diversity as well as its activism. The makeups of many French hip hop groups correspond to the multiethnic composition of the "banlieues" 'suburbs' from which they often emerged. Likewise, since its origins, French hip hop has been defined by its social engagement, with Kool Shen (of Portuguese origin), Mokobé (of Malian origin), and Youssoupha (of Congolese origin), all of whom appeared in the SLCF video, standing out as particularly successful artists and activists. The increasing popularity and commercialization of French hip hop has not diminished its political and social relevance. Tshimanga (2009) observes that, while commercially viable and even enormously successful, French hip hop is more than an entertainment commodity because it "creates counter-narratives in conflict with official discourse" (p. 262). The record sales of female rapper Diam's, for example, topped 2.7 million Euros in 2006, the third highest totals of any French musical act. Diam's is perhaps best known for her song "Ma France à moi" [My own France], which openly challenged the government and President Nicolas Sarkozy. This sort of success and the prevalence of hip hop on the French charts since the early 1990s have led Tshimanga (2009) to conclude that it "suggests that popular culture is the site at which cultural hegemony is being challenged" (p. 253).

With the SLCF initiative in mind, it is important to underscore that these challenges are undertaken in a non-violent fashion by artists who, in response to repressive police actions, are much more likely to promote the reform of the system versus violence against it. The

engagement of French hip hop artists extends beyond their lyrics and into public and media interventions. A series of interviews carried out by *Libération* following the 2005 suburban riots are particularly illustrative of the above tendencies (Binet, 2005). In the story, rap artists from the Paris "banlieues" 'suburbs' made a variety of comments that defied stereotypes that associate hip hop with violence. A long list of celebrated rappers had the following things to say about the situation: "besoin d' un plus grand niveau de mixité sociale" 'a greater level of societal mixing is needed,' "Je pense que la France me donne le respect qu'elle me doit" 'I think that France does now give me the respect she owes me,' and "un débat sur la discrimination devrait etre lance… il y a une recherche d'identité qui se doit d'etre adreséee" 'a debate on discrimination should be launched… there is a search for identity that needs to be addressed.' Disiz La Peste, the stage name for actor and rapper Sérigne M'Baye Gueye, even suggested that youth should "learn to say thank you" for their right to protest and express themselves.

Reconnecting our two threads of discussion—hip hop musicians and the contrôle au faciès—it is significant that the 2005 riots were sparked by the death of two teenagers (one of Malian and the other of Tunisian origins) who were attempting to avoid being subjected to a police identity check. Such actions by the police, which have the ostensible goal of detecting illegal immigrants, have been the source of great distress and frustration for those (often young) French citizens who differ visibly from the perceived "typical" Gallic or European appearance. Essentially selective internal "border checks," these *contrôles* leave many citizens in a position of constantly proving they belong in France (Hargreaves, 2007) as expressed by Block, one of the participants:

> Le sentiment c'est qu'on vit dans un pays ou la justice est a 3 vitesses, c'est même plus 2 vitesses! Dans le sens ou tu as les gens qu'on controle, met en garde a vue sans aucun motifs et relachent le lendemain. Y'en d'autres, peut-être parce qu'ils

> sont un plus cultivés donc on va leur invente un motif, et d'autres ou la justice est simple: on les controle pas du tout!
>
> You get the feeling that you live a country where there are 3 levels of justice, not even 2 anymore! You have folks that get stopped and put in custody without any motive and get released the next day. You have others, maybe because they are somewhat educated, where a motive gets invented, others where justice is simple, they never get stopped.

Identity checks by the police are a major cultural flashpoint and are seemingly ubiquitous in cinematic and literary works about life in the *banlieue.* Such an encounter closes *La Haine* [*Hate*], the well-known 1995 film by Matthieu Kassovitz about a day in life of three suburban youth of diverse ethnic origins. Yamina Benguigui's documentary film *9.3 Mémoire d'un territoire* [*9.3 Memory of a Territory*], which focuses on the history of the 93 administrative department that encompasses the northern suburbs of Paris, interviews a young man of African descent from suburban Clichy-sous-Bois, where those 2005 riots started. The subject recounts having been submitted to 9 separate identity checks in the course of a single day when he ventured into a nearby affluent neighborhood.

This analysis argues that the results obtained during the SLCF campaign will have important consequences for the welfare of French residents of African descent as well as on the emerging Afro-French identity. Further work will need to assess the relationship between the number of abusive police controls and the mental health of Afro-French populations in continental France.

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