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Too Much Knowledge, Too Little Power: An Assessment of Political Knowledge in Highly Policed Communities

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Studies regularly conclude that ordinary Americans lack the knowledge they need to form meaningful political preferences, leading to inefficient or counterproductive policy making. Our study of conversations about policing among black residents of highly policed neighborhoods challenges this prevailing account. We find that people possess dual, contradictory knowledge about how the state should operate based on written law and how it actually operates as a lived experience; that their knowledge is attained through involuntary encounters with the state rather than through civics education; and that this knowledge, rather than functioning to improve preferences to be communicated to an elected official, serves to help individuals distance themselves from the antidemocratic face of the state. Our findings point to a rethinking of political knowledge and its role in contemporary American democracy.

Existing research on political knowledge has reached a near-consensus that American citizens lack the knowledge they need to form high-quality political preferences, leading scholars of political knowledge to lament the low level of citizen competence in American democracy. In 1954, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McFee wrote that “individual voters today seem unable to satisfy the requirements for a democratic system of government outlined by political theorists” (312). Decades later, in what has become perhaps the best known study on the topic, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) argued that for uninformed citizens, democracy is “a tragedy and a farce” (60). Some have even expressed concern that elected officials heed the public more often than they should (e.g., Quirk and Hinchliffe 1998). The dominant message sent by existing scholarship on political knowledge is that the public has “too little knowledge, too much power.”

In this article, we offer a new approach and, as a result, a substantive intervention. We use a new technology and civic infrastructure, Portals, to facilitate conversations about po-

licing and incarceration in highly policed communities across the nation. Our approach follows Katherine Cramer and Benjamin Toff’s (2017) suggestion to build accounts of political knowledge from the ground up, focusing on what knowledge people do have and examining how they use it to reason about politics. Our findings from this extensive collection of first-hand accounts of policing unsettle standard accounts of the nature, source, and function of political knowledge.

First, Portals participants exhibited extensive political knowledge of contradictory faces of the state, covering both the recognition of how police should operate according to formal dictates and the actual operation of policing-in-practice; we term this bifurcated character *dual knowledge*. Portals conversations revealed that many people carried two sets of rules in their minds based on their lived experience—one that was the official law on the books, and one that was for them, what Benjamin Justice and Tracey Meares have termed the “hidden curriculum” (2014). Portals participants were acutely aware that the unofficial rule book was what they actually lived by—

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that they would never see a jury of peers, that riding “in your car four deep” constituted probable cause to be stopped and searched, that police shoot first and ask questions later, that if they had money they would get better adjudication, and that certain mundane behaviors were forbidden, such as not having your identification on you at all times. “It may not be written policy,” one conversant explained, “but that’s what they do.”

Second, in contrast to scholarly wisdom about political knowledge in the mass public centered on uninformed electorates, Portals conversations revealed widespread, detailed knowledge about policing and government authorities more generally sourced from direct experience. Critically, people did not obtain abstract knowledge *voluntarily* as interested students through civics education or as dutiful citizens seeking to fulfill their democratic obligations. Instead, they obtained specific knowledge about the day-to-day practices of government—and such knowledge was imposed on them by the state through involuntary encounters with police and other criminal justice institutions.

Third, the function of this knowledge was not to improve the quality of public preferences in order to improve democratic outputs. After all, Portals participants reported that their preferences have little influence on policy or the practices of public authorities and few mechanisms of redress to unfair police treatment. As one pointed out: “But then we have nowhere to turn. We look to the media, ‘Oh you guys just complaining.’ We go to City Hall, they’re going to tell you what you want to hear to get out of there. . . . The politician is not going to listen because we’re not affecting the bottom line, which is money.” Instead, knowledge about police served to help citizens distance themselves from police oversight in an attempt to preserve their autonomy, sense of dignity, and immediate physical safety.

Our findings, in sum, suggest that the claims of existing research get it exactly backward. Residents of highly policed communities have *too much knowledge, too little power*.

We conclude by addressing the implications, both methodological and normative, of these findings for scholars’ understanding of political knowledge. When political scientists berate citizens for their ignorance and encourage their elected representatives to ignore them, and when democratic competence stems largely from antidemocratic means (Lerman and Weaver 2014), we are more likely to compound the real problems with our democracy than to help right them.

PORTALS: A NEW METHOD

As Joe Soss and Vesla Weaver (2017) observe, political knowledge stems from two separate “faces” of the American state. The first is its liberal-democratic face, where citizens liaise

with the polity through voting and having their legislative will represented. Scholars typically prioritize this first face when measuring levels of political knowledge (i.e., focusing on what offices various leaders hold). The second face represents institutions of social control and state activities of surveillance, regulation, and discipline. We suggest this second face is overlooked in conventional measures of civic knowledge and the methods of measuring it. For instance, for many white Americans and the middle class, the state is primarily experienced as distributive and is less visible (Mettler 2011). In contrast, James Forman Jr. (2004, 2) has described police as the “central representative of the state in inner-city communities,” echoing Gunnar Myrdal’s (1944, 535) observation 60 years earlier that “the Negro’s most important public contact is with the policemen. He is the personification of white authority in the Negro community.” Given Bruch and Soss’s (2018, 37) observation that “policy-based experiences of authority relations serve as occasions for political learning,” we seek to measure political knowledge from “the ground up,” looking to the ways in which race-class subjugated communities interpret their relationship to one of the most present state authorities in their lives: the police.

Of course, police encounters are only one arena where citizens’ direct experience can inform political knowledge. Operating beyond the traditional political knowledge literature, studies of social provision programs—the GI Bill, social security, welfare, and Medicaid, for example—have long focused on how receipt of various social benefits inspires political learning; bureaucrats teach program participants what they can expect from government and how government treats them (Lipsky 1980). Policies encourage citizen competence, cultivate or erode the skills necessary for engagement, and shape understandings and assessments of government.¹ Yet such accounts typically focus on the enhanced capacity or undermining of engagement and attachment to the political system that is a consequence of their knowledge, not the nature or content of the knowledge itself. Thus, it may be that the dual knowledge that people readily express (i.e., the disconnect between official rules and the “facts of experience” of police practices) finds counterparts in other policy contexts, particularly those in the second face of the state. But to date,

1. See Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) on agricultural policies, Henig (1994) on market-based education policies as corrosive of capacity, Lawless and Fox (2001) on workforce development programs giving rise to civic skills and experience with social workers giving rise to political learning, Soss (1999) on welfare interactions and negative lessons, Mettler (2002) on the GI Bill imparting knowledge of a responsive government, Michener (2018) on Medicaid, Valelly (1993) on policies that promote local problem solving, Edelman (1971) on repressive policies giving rise to knowledge that government will not provide, and Graeber (2012) on bureaucratic learning.

scholars have not theorized the knowledge imparted by encounters with housing authorities, interventions by Department of Children and Families (DCF) or Child Protective Services (CPS), and interactions with parole agents, those serving eviction notices, and others during important moments of state intervention.

To rectify this omission, we analyze 233 conversations about policing in Portals, gold shipping containers equipped with immersive technology that allows people in geographically disconnected locations to occupy the same virtual space and converse as if in the same room. We placed the Portals in 13 different neighborhoods that typically have high concentrations of police-citizen encounters in Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, and Newark on residential blocks or outside of community institutions.² We worked with curators, often local organizers and artists, to invite community members to participate in the project.³

The process is powerful in its simplicity. Individuals enter the Portal typically after wandering in out of curiosity or word of mouth. After participants hear about the study and give consent to participate, but prior to beginning a conversation, they fill out an iPad survey consisting of 12 brief questions, including basic demographic background as well as queries about the frequency of interactions with police. Portal participants are then prompted to discuss their experiences and perspectives about police in their communities for approximately 20 minutes with someone else in a paired city. Finally, each of the dialogues is video recorded, transcribed, then coded for analysis.

Nearly one thousand conversations were collected from these locations between the spring of 2016 and 2018, the largest collection of policing narratives to date. For this article, we focus on the 233 conversations between two black Americans, regardless of city. These data capture different neighborhood contexts, political geographies, and policing regimes. To varying degrees, these participants experienced high rates of adverse police encounters beginning in adolescence; 28% reported being stopped by police in the last week or month, 20% had not ever been stopped, 39% had been stopped over

seven times, and the mean age at first stop was 15. Sixty-eight percent of participants identified as male, 54% had a high school degree or less, and the mean age of participants was 37. Readers should refer to the appendix, available online, for further details on each location and the Portals method.

We analyze the data using the constitutive and “active listening” approaches of scholars such as Melissa Harris-Lacewell (2004) and Katherine Cramer (2016). Our approach is thus an interpretive and inductive exercise in listening to how Portals participants make sense of the world, how they describe the “rules of engagement” with the state, and how they perceive their communities’ power and position. We rely on an in-depth reading and coding of the transcripts to provide an accounting of some of the most prominent categories, themes, and ideas that surfaced in conversations. For this article, we prioritize the role and function of police in constructing citizens’ knowledge and that of their communities.

Before we analyze each of our three claims about the nature, source, and function of knowledge in policed communities, we begin by showcasing an initial conversation (edited for length) that illustrates how political knowledge is voiced, to give readers a sense of the complexity and linkage to direct experience in Portals conversations. Rather than taking each argument alone supported by excerpted evidence as we do below, here we observe how conversations easily and organically piece together lived experience (source), the “unofficial” knowledge they obtained from those direct encounters (nature) and its importance for their lives (function), and the ideological reasoning that often accompanies it, in which people interpret the broader political system and its motivations. The exchange also captures something we see frequently in the dialogues: the narrating of an unofficial rule book alongside the absence of power to claim anything else. Both participants are middle-aged black men who report being stopped at least five times beginning at age 14 and who both say they “never” trust police; the Baltimore man has a high school education while his Los Angeles counterpart has a postgraduate degree.

BALTIMORE (B): I have a blatant distrust and a blatant dislike for the law. Um, not only am I, you know I’m rebellious to authority—that may have me biased somewhat, but, my life experiences man, I’ve always seen police mishandling me and my people. It leaves a nasty taste in my mouth, you know?

LOS ANGELES (LA): I would agree with that, because here in Los Angeles, you know since the Rodney King thing . . . they were telling us on national television—like we were idiots—they were saying, “Look, you don’t actually see what you see.” They were saying, “Don’t

2. The places were selected largely because of convenience and connections—the existence of community partners who would help run the Portal and share space. We often partnered with local nonprofit organizations that have an artistic and justice-oriented mission; they typically provide the Portal a physical space in a central location with high foot traffic as well as an enduring connection to the community.

3. The curator also uses the Portals as a community gathering spot, supporting many town hall discussions, providing a space for art and performance, or dialoguing with global Portals on the days and times that conversations were not being recorded for our study.

you see him trying to get up? You see his hand?" They were pushing this through the district attorney's office. And it was a white dude, Bratton—no it wasn't Brat, uh, Darell Gates. That white dude. And they had this intimidation to, after they had whooped Rodney King's butt, with this batter ram and things like that. Yeah, brother, it was so bad on the streets of Los Angeles that they had Rampart. You remember Rampart.

B: Right.

LA: People were saying, "Hey, the police is evil." They were like, "Naw!" At 150 West 50—at 1507 West 59th Street between Hadell and Dinker, this super-cop—they called him Crater Face—I was too young at this time, it was in the 80s. I was going to college then, right? And he would ride through the neighborhood and terrorize the brothers. No one—look at all the people, look at all the—30, 90, 400 people he terrorized and he physically wounded them for like years to come, but we don't know what happened to him. Think about that, huh? So I'm quite sure in Maryland, y'all experienced the same stuff that we experience here.

B: Absolutely. Absolutely. Listen my, my overall opinion is . . . the police is a legal gang. They, they, they—they conduct business just like gangbangers here conduct business, right? So, but they hide behind the shield and they got the law protecting them. Legally carry their weapon, and use it, with no consequences!

LA: Yes.

B: And they cruddy. They cruddy as fuck here! You know I've had, I've had evidence planted on me. I've had, I've had money and evidence removed over the years. I've had police get on the stand and flat out lie. The charge papers is definitely gonna be a lie. You know they'll write up some charges that have you sittin' in city jail for a year, year and a half, you know? And, and, and, and the whole thing is fabricated.

LA: Can I ask you this? Do you guys have a police—you say information is fabricated like that, right? And you and I both know that's true because they did in studies of people in Maryland was havin' information planted on 'em. They have a police commission right across the street over here, right? And what they do is that when you, when a brother and sister go in to complain, you say the police planted information on

me. They'll tell you to do one of those 832.5 citizen's complaint forms, right? After you do the form, don't nothing happen.

B: They on the same team! They on the same team, man! They on—

LA: Yeah. All over the state.

B: They gon' protect one another man. Right? Check this out. This is honest to God. 'Bout 10 years ago, right? I was waiting for—under the 12 step program . . . so I'm at the place where the meetin' was being held—I got there early. So—I'm waitin' for the rest of the people to show up, and I see an incident involving a police officer. And, he pulled a guy over for a traffic stop. Man, listen . . . I witnessed him call backup, and they beat this man, they beat him. And I—I'm talkin' to my sister who works for 911, she's a 911 dispatcher, so she said, "Call the police." I got off the phone with her, I called 911, and I said I'm at this address, and this is what I'm witnessing. Right? So the lady asked me all kinda questions, the 911 operator, what I'm wearing, this, that and the third. So she says, "Well assistance will be there in a moment." The assistance came, two officers pulled up in a car—plainclothes officers—and they asked me, "Are you such, such, such?" I said yes. "Are you the one that called about the disturbance?" I said yes. They got out the car with their weapons drawn. "Get the fuck on the ground!" Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom! Locked me up and took me to jail.

LA: Look at that. Serious. Serious. Now, you and I would say this . . . I tell anyone this . . . what restrains us African Americans is the Constitution. We wanna see—although we're not in the Constitution—we wanna see our kids grow up. We wanna see our family members excel. Other than that, we would never allow law enforcement to—one, take advantage of us. Disrespect our space. Come in our communities like you gangster. We wouldn't allow you to do that, we wanna see our families grow up. Don't we man? We want the same thing they want for they families.

B: That's true.

LA: But we're not no one's whooping boy. I've always witnessed that in Los Angeles. I said right across the street is the police commission. And they, they this police commission probably once a month, twice a

month, and you will see the disrespect when you have the African Americans in the police commission talkin' about people who have been mortally wounded by officers who didn't have a gun. You'll see officers lined up on the wall doing the meeting. And you'll wonder why would you have adversarial officers lined up against your wall—as if these people are goin' to do something to you. That's what I don't understand. There's never a meeting to where we're trying to find a mutual, or amicable solution. It's never like that in Los Angeles. It's always us versus them. And they don't see me—if I'm workin', whatever—they don't give a damn about me workin' every day.

B: No.

LA: Because I'm still a brother. They gon' pull me over and say, "Hey brother, what you doin'? Where you goin'?" They don't give a damn about us like that.

B: No.

LA: No. Unless you're wearin' a police uniform, and here in Los Angeles, our worst ones are brothers. [What follows is a discussion of Freddie Gray, the "stop snitching" campaign, and police officers' refusal to snitch.—Ed.]

LA: When we saw Freddie Gray, it was, it reminded us of Rodney King. So all the officers were acquitted. I don't understand this. You and I both know. Why is George Zimmerman still drivin' around? He shot a 17-year-old baby in Florida. That was a baby. That's like you and I goin' to have a fight with a 17- or 16-year-old kid. Little old skinny kid.

B: Bottom line, the criminal justice system is lopsided. It doesn't work for me. The, the, the, the . . . the criminal justice system has never benefited me. Never!

LA: Never.

B: I never went in the courtroom and received any type of justice. Now I'm gon' be honest to God witchu. My first incarceration, I got found guilty by a jury of my peers for a murder that I did not do. And I don't have no reason to lie to you. Two African Americans on the jury.

LA: Well that's not a jury of your peers! I'm just saying in my opinion.

B: Nevertheless, I wasn't worried about what type of jury was selected when I—I expected to be acquitted. But, the way the prosecutor and the judge mishandled me . . .

LA: Yes. They're friends.

B: It took my lawyer six years to get me back in court and to be acquitted. I stayed locked up for seven and a half years for that.

LA: It's the same thing that happens here in the Los Angeles County Jail. So they actually came in with a federal indictment. They indicted all the Sheriffs—and the Sheriff. He supposed to go to jail and do three years. But the criminal justice system would not allow us to have that justice. We would love to see Sheriff Baca go to prison. He keep appealing. But the criminal justice system would not allow you and I to skip out on justice, would they man? So they were saying brothers like us in the criminal justice system—we'd get these exorbitant bails that they know that's disproportionate to our livelihood. They know that. That's why did it. So the jails will remain full. You have to go—

B: Lemme share this witchu . . . I just shared witchu the first time I, I, I was convicted—wrongly. Nevertheless, I still have a charge of murder second degree on my record, right? Because the felony is unexpungeable. Right?

LA: Oh so they gonna stereotype you.

B: On my jacket, right? So listen. If I go, later in my life, I've had problem with drugs and alcohol so I was getting petty charges. You know just [inaudible 00:12:48] and thefts, things of that nature. . . . And I would still receive a no bail because of that . . . because of a murder on my record from 20 years ago.

LA: They can only clarify, they say everything is in the computer. But the criminal justice system, I don't think, look at a computer. I think it's just, I think here, how I see our criminal justice system at the end of month in Los Angeles County, if you don't have your stuff together, if you don't have your shit together, you will be going to the county jail. Because they arbitrarily stop brothers 'cause they gotta meet their quota. That's what I think. . . . And it keeps the courts full 'cause they got all those county jail buses. And those county jail buses will

have to go pick up people, right? So you gotta, you gotta pay for gas and you got drivers, so you gotta have—

B: Big industry, that's a big industry.

LA: That's what I think when they say criminal justice. I look at it from the police all the way up to the state penal institutions. I think they all homeboys and friends. That's what I'm thinkin'.

B: And the only role that you and I play in that whole circle is the victim.

LA: Really.

B: We really are man.

LA: Yes we are. Yes.

B: We the ones they depend on, you know?

LA: They gonna try and put you and I in one of them holes.

B: I asked the officer, when I was arrested, I had tears in my eyes. I said man, why would you want to plant this and lie on me, you are going to really, you're ruining my life man. You are affecting the lives of many.

LA: Ain't that somethin'? What did he say, he say yeah?

B: It was funny to him, right. I was in cell over at the precinct one time and a gang of—group of officers, about five, or six of them. All white, one black, right. They were laughing at an officer sharing his story about how he Tased somebody. Oh, I hit him with a Taser, oh it was funny [laughs].

LA: But you've gotta ask yourself, in the trainings of criminal justice, I thought it was the color of law. I thought the mandate of law was the voice. I was always under the impression that a person could not act outside the badge, but here in Los Angeles . . . well damn, this is totally the whole system is debauched, right, I would think.

In this initial conversation, we hear extensive direct experiences with police, extensive knowledge in a factual sense (one partner specifically names the district attorney in the early 1990s, the Rampart scandal, and even the name of the

complaint form given by the police commission) as well as unofficial knowledge of how things routinely occur across multiple venues within the system (“exorbitant bails,” being stopped for no reason, being under police surveillance even at the community meetings to contest police treatment); we see derived ideas formed by experiential knowledge, as when one partner opines “the police is a legal gang” or concludes “the only role that you and I play in that whole circle is the victim,” or another describes collusion between the police, district attorneys (DAs), and judges; we see *sources* of that knowledge being combined from multiple personal experiences across different points in the system (having evidence planted and fabricated charges by police, being imprisoned for years before a reversed conviction, being a bystander at the police commission, and arrest after witnessing a police beating), childhood memories (the story of “crater face,” who terrorized the community), media consumption, and communal vicarious experience and collective racial memory (“when we saw Freddie Gray, it was, it reminded us of Rodney King”). We see them challenge “official” story lines that tell them “you don’t see what you see,” default to an understanding that the “official” was not meant for them (“although we’re not in the Constitution”), and revise prior knowledge about the law keeping officers from “acting outside the badge.” They ultimately coordinate around a shared discourse of differentiated racial rules that denied them justice for predatory police (“the criminal justice system would not allow us to have that justice”) while also holding them to a different standard as when they describe the system “not allow[ing] you and I to skip out on justice.” We see them articulate that they hold both a knowledge surplus and a power deficit, pointing to the fact that “Because I’m still a brother. . . . They don’t give a damn about us like that.” This conversation captures themes we will now elaborate on in greater depth.

THE “WORK” OF DUAL KNOWLEDGE: COUNTERPOSING THE OFFICIAL WITH THE LIVED

We are certainly not the first scholars to argue that race-class subjugated communities have widespread knowledge of government. Within the traditional study of political knowledge, some have countered claims that black and Latinx populations have uneven political knowledge (Pérez 2015). Beyond this literature, Melissa Harris-Lacewell has underscored the need to see ordinary sites of black cultural life as sites of political discourse and shared knowledge (2004); scholars in other traditions (i.e., standpoint theory) have long understood the importance of the unique experiential knowledge of oppressed populations, or what Michel Foucault termed “subjugated knowledge” (Cohen 2004; Cohen and Luttig, forthcoming; Collins 1990; Foucault 1980; hooks 1990). Still,

this understanding is not typically taken up by scholars working on political knowledge.

In communities structured by police supervision, knowledge of the state is characterized by what Justice and Meares (2014) have called the “hidden” and “overt” curriculum. Building on their useful theoretical framework, we provide empirical evidence that concentrated police interactions create a store of knowledge that is dual and contrasting and reflects how the official rules abrade the actual rules based on lived experience. This discursive counterposing can take several forms: (a) what legal rights you are supposed to have but actually do not possess in practice (as in the reference to a jury of one’s peers mentioned in the initial conversation); (b) what the police say they do as a matter of official agency policy versus what they actually do; and, mostly as a result of the first two, (c) what one is supposed to be able to do in daily life versus the extra precautions one has to perform or actions and spaces one must avoid. Often grasping onto prominent legal phrases (“protect and serve” and “innocent until proven guilty”—the overt curriculum), Portals participants present a counterdiscourse and theory of state action informed by experience: “justice is just for us”; “protect and serve themselves”; “guilty until proven innocent”; police as just another (legal) “gang”; all of this reveals a hidden transcript (Scott 1990) and renders a critique of both the emptiness of official rules and the hypocrisy of the “hidden curriculum” they must go by. Because the official dictates run counter to the truth of their experience, from here many derive the conclusion that official statutes, ordinances, and legal protections are hollow and irrelevant, and some even suggest that they are produced in order to facilitate and legitimize police oppression. In turn, this dual knowledge shapes how Portals participants conceive of the broader democratic project and how they engage within it.

At times, the misalignment of official and lived is presented explicitly—“this is written policy, but this is how it actually works”—but more often, the contradiction is implied from emphasizing the truth of “commonsense” understandings derived from experiential knowledge. Portals participants do exhibit formal, sometimes quite extensive, knowledge of bureaucratic and legal procedures, mentioning the Hicks Waiver, probable cause, specific municipal ordinances, and other features of civil and criminal legal procedure. However, these formal codes and procedures were viewed as less immediately relevant for their lives. Core American ideals, and the jurisprudence to structure those ideals in practice, were simply not the central logic defining the conversations and the experiences they drew on. When they did arise, it was as a point of incongruity—as in the references, in the initial conversation presented above, to a jury of one’s peers that didn’t

consist of peers, a complaint system that produced no results, and the double standard in how the sheriff was treated by the courts and how residents of highly policed communities are treated.

Critically, participants did not attend to formal law or broader democratic ideals and their own accompanying moments of divergent, unlawful experience in order to make a claim for better treatment or democratic accountability or to articulate the expectation of more lawfulness in practice. Instead, the duality of knowledge emerges in political talk to emphasize what they must understand about the “real” rules of government in order to avoid the worst outcome. The concern was not momentary acts of bias in a consistent rule book; it was a different rule book, or as one participant put it, “we shouldn’t have these separate rules on how we need to act.” The official law is empty of substantive protection in their actual lives. Their lived law is tilted toward police being able to stop them for no reason, treat them as suspects instead of victims seeking help, and roughly handle their bodies. From here, they arrive at broader interpretations of how the system unofficially works—“we are guilty before we are proved innocent.” In none of the conversations was the existence of these unofficial tenets questioned or debated by one of the parties. For example, when a 25-year-old Chicago (C) participant says to his conversation partner in Milwaukee (M), “we don’t got our freedom to . . .,” he demonstrates awareness of stated policy as hollow:

C: And it’s like they just take—it’s like all the laws and amendments that they gave us? Shit, it don’t mean nothing, you know what I’m saying? We don’t got our freedom of speech, we don’t got our freedom to bear arms.

M: Right.

C: None of that, you know what I’m saying? Them was amendments, this is how the world is supposed to be. Everybody in the world is supposed to be able to bear arms, you know what I’m saying?

In the next example, when he says “it ain’t for us no way,” the person he is conversing with (a 25-year-old man) agrees and actually renames the law they get—the Willie Lynch Law, making an explicit historic connection to a tactic to rule the enslaved by pitting them against one another.

C: But it’s unconstitutional but it ain’t for us no way, you know what I’m saying? These laws, they meant to fuck us over.

M: Yeah, we under 20—we under the Willie Lynch Law, you know what I’m saying?

The juxtaposition of the official role of police to keep the peace and protect the public with how participants actually experienced the role, motives, and guiding principles of police action in their lives was one of the most common conceptual moves in the Portals dialogues. Typically, one side of the pair would state the claim “police are supposed to protect and serve us” and subsequently pose a forceful rejoinder like “but really they are there to make life worse.” The “protect and serve” frame (and counterframe) occurred within 120 conversations across the full data set of 850 conversations. “Protect and serve” is one of the most widely associated concepts of police bureaucracies, the “knowledge” police agencies themselves promote, a slogan emblazoned on the sides of squad cars and substations and medallions, an oath sworn by every new recruit. To contradict and reframe it, then, was to take one of the best known officially promoted “facts” and undermine it with experiential “evidence” that police did not know how to protect, nor was that their goal. “Protect and serve” was a fiction.

Often, the phrase was used to highlight problems of government treatment of their communities in the abstract. For example: “You cannot serve and protect when you got a fucking gun up to a little boy’s head. You cannot serve and protect when you got a sister, you have got your foot on her neck and she is on the ground, and you are telling her to stop resisting.” But frequently, participants countered the official and abstract police role “protect and serve” by drawing on concrete ground knowledge about how police practices occurred, and therefore posed a *de jure* denial of that goal. In the following example, the participant exhibits a three-part set of knowledge—what the police can be expected not to do, what they actually do based on his experience, and his evaluation borne out by these facts:

They don’t protect and serve. I say they regulate and . . . and try to force us into certain thing, you know what I’m saying? Like, for example, they not gonna come up here and ask questions to see what’s going on. They gonna arrest everybody first and figure out who got warrants, and figure out who need to be in jail, and then take you away, and then question everybody else that—you know what I’m saying—that’s good.

Space constraints prevent a full consideration of the broader conversational context for each of these phrases, or the process of reasoning that the phrase is usually accompanied by,

but the excerpts below provide a sense of just how prevalent an anchor the “serve and protect” duality was.

They don’t live up to their motto, which is protect and serve. They, they infested, they infest fear. Like, they give fear to, to the community.

They’re paid to protect and serve but they’re not protecting us, they’re not serving us, they’re killing us and eliminating us.

So who do we call to protect us? The people that’s here to protect us is pumping fear in our hearts.

[Chicago man:] Right, these motherfuckers ain’t serving and protecting, they out here to murder, and kill, and whoop ass, shit.

[Milwaukee man:] Whoop ass, give cases, make yourself look good.

Everybody knows they are supposed to protect us, but at the same time, we feel like we are being mowed down.

How can I trust you to protect me when you’re the criminal yourself? I’m gonna start a petition that we as officers, you are to protect and serve us, not maim and destroy us and to manipulate and harass and kill us at will.

Because they don’t really, you know what I mean? Display no kind of control or power to serve and protect . . . so it’s like, the police ain’t going with that type of protocol. They’re going with, you know what I mean? Demonstrate this power.

Of course, political scientists have already emphasized the importance of knowing how government operates, or “the rules of the game” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 65), yet what the Portals conversations show is that there is a key difference between how the rules of the game claim to operate and how they actually do operate. We concur with Bruch and Soss’s (2018, 39) observation that “Street-level bureaucratic practices are very much a part of what a policy is—and thus, part of the policy’s effects on politics—even though street-level practices may deviate from ostensive policy commitments.” While political scientists studying political knowledge tend to agree with Converse’s (1975) claim that “popular levels of information about public affairs are, from the point

of view of the informed observer, astonishingly low” (79), residents of highly policed communities appear to have knowledge about policy as it actually exists—as it is actually practiced at the street level—that many political scientists may not.

The dual knowledge we locate in Portals exchanges reflects the new institutional context of policing, the wide latitude police have to approach people in poor communities of color, the discretion they have in deciding who to stop or arrest, and the “qualified immunity” they enjoy when they engage in poor discretionary actions that harm people. Such discourses also operate in a context of a sweeping change in policing toward targeting minor violations of order or the possibility of crime under broken windows theory, resulting in a sharp increase in stops that did not yield arrests, and arrests for minor infractions. Legal cases effectively deregulated policing, encouraging stops of people for “furtive movements” or “simply being in a high crime area” or race plus location, and civil ordinances that criminalized mundane behavior across the nation encouraged police to make contact with many more Americans. In due course, police training manuals began to take advantage of their new discretion. For a dramatic example, one instructed police to “develop suspicion or mere curiosity about a person,” find a legal justification to make the stop like a minor violation of code, make the stop, decide on whether to seek to search, and seek “bonus benefits” like a forfeiture (described in Epp et al. 2014).

Thus, when people say they can be stopped for no reason, that they must always be in possession of their ID, that they cannot be in a group of black people, that they are seen as “guilty before being proven innocent,” or that police can roughly handle them with little repercussion, it is perhaps no surprise that the existence of formal constitutional protections in an era of proactive and deregulated policing feels less robust in people’s actual lives (“the only role that you and I play in that whole circle is the victim”).

Dual knowledge does not just lead to interpretations of government; it also structures behavior. The information derived from often substantial experience with police is used to navigate government. Dual knowledge is most apparent when participants describe, sometimes matter-of-factly or in the course of making another point, the mannerisms, behaviors, and situations one must routinely avoid, even though these may be permitted as a matter of law or official policy. Adhering to these unofficial but real requirements demands a performance, called “negotiating the script”—they have to do the regular things asked of all citizens but also take extra steps, precautions, workarounds, and actions prescribed not by law but prohibited by unofficial rules in order to demonstrate law-abidingness and thereby claim noninterference, which ironi-

cally results in being positioned as the very thing one sought to avoid (Capers 2011). A number of sociologists, including Elijah Andersen, Victor Rios, Forrest Stuart, Monica Bell, Rod Brunson, and Alice Goffman have demonstrated an extensive set of shared frameworks, adaptations, and strategies that highly policed communities develop for navigating everyday contexts. Stuart (2016) actually describes this knowledge as “cop wisdom,” the idea that residents see daily life through the eyes of surveillant authorities and seek out ways of impeding police oversight and securing autonomy from police. While these scholars have shown that this wisdom explains strategic distancing from people and places and restigmatization of certain areas and behaviors, their primary focus has been on alterations of social dynamics and personal habits. Scholars have not yet theorized this wisdom as constitutive of their political worlds, political discourse, and relations with and expectations from government.

Across the body of Portals knowledge, we can map a very detailed and consistent set of prohibitions based on the “facts of experience” (Cramer and Toff 2017). Their experiences provided ample information to structure expectations of local governing authorities and resulting ideas about the extent of American ideals and constitutional protections in practice, such as privacy, freedom of assembly, limits on the state’s use of physical force, and having a jury of one’s peers. Many official freedoms and regulations governing how the state should operate were not experienced and thus led to the conclusion that they were “just some myth, or a flat out lie.” These are some of the more commonly articulated: being in a group would trigger police suspicion, being viewed primarily as a suspect by police rather than as a victim or innocent bystander, being vulnerable to frisk or search regardless of cause or for no cause at all. These experiences communicated the need to be on guard when calling police, limit group assembly, and “get to where you’re going” directly. The range of ways this comes to the fore in conversations is quite broad—from more minor behaviors to extreme ideas about police assault. Please refer to the appendix for more examples.

SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

Portals participants drew heavily on their direct knowledge of police behavior, and conversations featured sometimes lengthy recollections of experience. Out of 233 conversations in this sample of conversations between black participants, 142 specific stories described in detail personal experiences with the police (a single conversation can involve multiple stories), and about 25% of these Portals conversations included an experience involving police violence. In the initial conversation

presented above, participants reference personal familiarity with a specific police officer who “terrorized and physically wounded” multiple people, incidents in which police lied on the stand, cases in which police planted or fabricated evidence, a time when a participant reported a police beating and was taken to jail himself as a result, and more. This discussion is illustrative of a wide range of experiences Portals participants have had with police, from routine pull-overs to calling police to incidents of police brutality.

By rooting their opinions about the police in their direct experiences with them, Portals participants challenge existing perspectives on public opinion. Walter Lippmann’s seminal study (1922, 17), for example, argues that “public opinion deals with indirect, unseen, and puzzling facts, and there is nothing obvious about them.” That is, much of politics is complicated and far removed from people’s personal lives, and therefore people construct “pictures of the world” (4) that represent politics—pictures that are often distorted. But Lippmann’s perspective does not appear to capture the reality of residents of highly policed communities. Portals participants didn’t have to imagine the political world; they could simply recall it in vivid detail from the last time they were in handcuffs. Indeed, many emphasized this source in the course of conversation: “But every black and every Hispanic that gets stopped, especially here in LA, they asked to get out their car . . . okay. And it’s a difference. When you’re telling me, you’re going to go and say, ‘Oh you’re just nitpicking, you’re crying, you’re complaining.’ *But we live this. You see? We live it*” (emphasis added).

If personal experience was one source of knowledge for Portals participants, news, including social media, was another. One participant noted: “I was scrolling through my Facebook news feed, and I saw this video that the police department these other policeman shooting and killing a man that just had his headphones in, and he had his hands up moving backward like this. They shot him for nothing.” The initial conversation featured discussion of national television’s coverage of the Rodney King beating. Yet there was also a substantial tendency to cross-check narratives from the news against personal experience, similar to findings in Cramer and Toff (2017). When the two did not align, it tended to be experience that won out. For example, one Milwaukee participant said, “The police they shot the boy down, that was one of my friends, I knew him. . . . The way they portray him on the news, that really wasn’t his whole style.” Participants often expressed skepticism of the “facts” portrayed by the news about crime in their communities. For example, another participant complained that crimes committed in black neighborhoods receive the lion’s share of attention while diminishing white criminality: “they don’t say, in the suburbs 15 kids

got molested, that happens though! Everyday in the white community but they don’t put it on TV . . . only our stuff go on TV. People they think it’s a shoot-out every day on the street.”

However, when messages sent by the news and personal experience ran in the same direction, they tended to cumulate; participants would reference both as important sources of knowledge and resulting opinions. One participant, for example, first described what appears to be the police shooting of Tamir Rice in Cleveland:

Just like that time I seen that thing in, what, little boy no more than 7, 8 years old. He playing in the park with a little play gun. The lady on the TV I seen, I don’t know what town it was in, but the lady told them, like, it ain’t no real gun, it ain’t no real gun. The police get out the car before the car even stop. He open the passenger door, got straight out and start shooting shorty. I’m like, damn, that’s crazy as hell. You killed that little boy for no reason.

The participant then went on to make a connection between this event, which she had learned about from television, and a police shooting of a child whom she knew personally:

Just like Tayshawn. Just like Tayshawn, that little boy got killed over there on 69th and David. He used to hang out with my grandson, played basketball with him. When I heard Tayshawn, my grandson named Tayshawn. I’m like, please I hope it ain’t him. I hope it ain’t him. Then the guy, they shot him, they killed him. Little boy ain’t no more than 9 years old. You gone bring him in the alley and shoot him in the back of the head. That’s a baby. He was a baby . . . he didn’t live his damn life yet. That type of shit makes me mad. Makes me want to . . . I don’t even want to talk about it. ‘Cause it brings tears to my eyes.

FUNCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Public opinion scholars who lament the ignorance of the American public often claim that political knowledge is necessary for citizens to fulfill their democratic obligations. Specifically, knowledge is supposed to improve the quality of citizens’ political preferences. Then, when citizens make claims on the state and their voices influence policy, policy making will be improved. In the absence of political knowledge, in contrast, public input into the democratic process can have deleterious effects (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Quirk and Hinchliffe 1998).

While this perspective is common among political scientists, it was nowhere to be found in Portals dialogues. While it was certainly true that Portals participants emphasized the importance of knowledge, none of them explained its utility in terms of improving the quality of their political preferences or obtaining a tightened connection to government. Instead, the function of knowledge was to help people avoid, manage, or withdraw from encounters with the police. Thus, rather than improving the quality of citizen engagement with the state, the purpose of knowledge was to help citizens *distance* themselves from the state.

This involved strategies to appear as nonthreatening to the police as possible. Other participants referenced the need to manage police officers' fear. For example, one man from Baltimore said:

So, on top—it's like we shouldn't have to change our mentality because they're allowed to get away with illegal shit bro. We should be able to do what the fuck we want, within the law, within the limits of the law, and not have to worry about oh if I get smart with this cop, he might punch me and put false charges on me bro. You get what I'm saying? I'm—based on what you saying to me, your whole—you're not—I'm not going to say your whole mind-set but your perspective on police is I'm gonna stay calm, I'm gonna not—I'm gonna try and stay as calm as possible, I'ma be cooperative so I don't end up in a bad situation. AKA in a bad situation is them planning something, them putting false charges on you, yo. We shouldn't have to think like that.

The calm-them-down strategy appears to be particularly available to women. In another instance, a female participant said that the police officer who pulled her car over was high on cocaine, thought he saw a car full of black men, and was ready to be violent as a result. But she saved herself and her friends by calming the officer down. This practice is reminiscent of Stuart and Benezra's (2018) finding that boys on Chicago's South Side use feminine strategies to deflect police attention such as carrying the bookbags of girls who are strangers to them when police approach.

At the same time, other participants spoke not about how to manage police officers' fear but instead how to respond strategically to police officers' attempts to provoke them in order to use "resisting" as a justification for an arrest. As one participant, an 18-year-old black male from Chicago, said:

They laying low, shit, to see what you fitting to say, see if you fitting to start getting on it with them, start

yelling at them 'cause they yelling at you. Then they gonna have a reason, like, he started doing this, he started doing that.

His conversation partner in Milwaukee, also an 18-year-old black male, talked about police strategies to create "resisting" behavior as follows:

Then they gonna try to use that, like, oh yeah, he resisting. Uh, he resisting, da, da, da, you know what I mean? So I'ma take probable cause or I'ma do this to him because he did this or he did that and he said a vulgar word to me which made me flip and made me, you know what I mean, get out my character or whatever and put my hands on him.

The Portals dialogues do not exhibit consensus about what exactly the best strategy is to increase their likelihood of safety in police interactions. For example, when one participant advocated getting out of the car to reassure police officers following a pullover, another emphatically stated in response that this move would not be received well. Still, underlying this disagreement on the exact tactic to use is consistent agreement that a need to know how police behave, and the need to know how to respond effectively to police behavior, is important to stay safe and to avoid being put "in the system" and thus durably marked with criminality—not to form high-quality preferences to be communicated to a legislator to improve democratic outputs.

Nor do Portals participants describe knowledge about policing as intrinsically worthwhile. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, 59) describe civic knowledge as "ultimately more than simply instrumental, but is a good in and of itself. An informed citizen is one who is politically and socially oriented and so more fulfilled." In contrast to this perspective, many Portals participants argued that the knowledge they gain about policing is wholly instrumental, a means to an end: remaining immediately safe, avoiding future encounters and entanglements with the system, and keeping one's record clear. Gaining this knowledge was not fulfilling but fatiguing.

Here we find useful anthropologist David Graeber's (2012, 118) concept of "interpretive labor," which encapsulates his observation that "within relations of domination, it is generally the subordinates who are effectively relegated the work of understanding how the social relations in question really work." Portals participants expend a lot of energy attempting to understand police and adapting to their actions. But interacting with police is often humiliating and aggravating—it increases their knowledge but not their status. At best, knowledge leads to behaviors that are stopgap measures, de-

creasing the probability of violence in individual encounters without influencing group stigma, policy, or police practice. As one participant, a 69-year-old black man from LA, puts it, “it’s not a justice system. It’s a justice system to the point, it’s just for us—to go through. *It’s nothing for us to get anything out of, but for us to go through*” (emphasis added). Thus, knowledge is not an intrinsic good but a necessary evil. It is not a democratic input but an authoritarian output—it emerges as a by-product of the racialized governance of residents of highly policed communities.

CONCLUSION: EXPERIENTIALLY OPPRESSED BUT EPISTEMICALLY ADVANTAGED

The dominant approach to contemporary research on political knowledge is as follows: political scientists identify some set of concrete facts that they believe citizens should know in order to fulfill their democratic obligations, then measure the extent to which these facts are in the possession of the mass public. In many cases, scholars have reached pessimistic conclusions, echoing Converse’s (1970, 178) claim that “non-attitudes on a wide range of matters which seem ‘common culture’ to the investigator are an inevitable consequence of information impoverishment among the less well-educated strata of heterogeneous populations.”

In fact, the Portals conversations reviewed here—conducted by participants who tend to have lower levels of formal education than are found in many national surveys—have revealed not “information impoverishment” but substantial knowledge about democratic deficits in everyday political contexts. Rather than assuming that democracy functions in the way it is often taught in high school civics classes and then asking whether citizens are up for the task allotted to them, political scientists would do well to attend to the knowledge that citizens of race-class subjugated communities *already* have about the ways in which democracy-in-practice fails to live up to our idealized image of it—especially when government practices are at odds with what the more formally educated have been led to expect.

Indeed, Portals participants report that their experience of government bears little resemblance to official governance or written law. Their collective knowledge of how government manifests in their lives through the police is consequential for how the larger “we” understand the problems in our democracy. Their bottom-up mapping of governance as it occurs in their communities should sharpen our own attention to problems of American democracy. By transmitting their “facts of experience”—facts that cut against mainstream portrayals of American government—they can clarify to observers of democracy what that democracy actually con-

sists of, what protections are not just promised, but *received*. Discounting their experiential knowledge not only tells them they got the wrong facts, but also gives rise to a collective distortion of democracy as it actually exists.

In this way, the experience-borne facts of Portals participants not only are helping them arrive at realistic expectations of government and ways to navigate it with the least harm to their person, but also have the potential to be crucial to the nation’s wider knowledge base, forming a more realistic picture of government by including race-class subjugated experience and the evidence it provides. Thus, when residents of highly policed communities say “it may not be written policy, but that’s what they do,” they are providing crucial counter-knowledge of governance based on concrete, firsthand experience. When they say “the laws aren’t for us” or “that may be your reality but it’s not ours” or “we’re not in the Constitution,” they are *not* mounting a challenge that their preferences are not registered (a common concern in our subfield of late). Instead, they are demanding a revision of the state as operating in antidemocratic ways as a matter of unofficial policy in their neighborhoods. That the policy is not written does not make it any less real. The “ostensive” and actual bureaucratic practices may deviate from one another, but the latter is as important as the former in understanding democracy’s limits in citizens lives (Bruch and Soss 2018).

When residents of highly policed communities say, “we have the law but police don’t follow it no way,” they mean to document that sworn oaths and constitutional protections mean little to communities when most experience police subverting those safeguards in the course of their lives. When they go another step and theorize the police as a “criminal organization” or their own citizenship as “we’re still that three-fifths of a person,” this provides a counterwisdom of how police power (and its rendering of them as anticitizens) actually operates that challenges dominant liberal democratic frames and questions the extent of de facto freedom. In other words, they are not just stores of accumulated “facts of experience”; they are central witnesses to democracy. It is time we take seriously their experience-informed critiques. The collective act of understanding government treatment, not just government responsiveness to mass preferences or policy outcomes, requires no less.

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