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The police killing of Amir Locke: a critical discourse analysis of the press conference held by Minneapolis's mayor, the interim police chief, and the response by activists

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ABSTRACT

Communication research has extensively examined the police killing of Black individuals in the United States. There are, however, no prior critical analyses of press conferences held by authorities following these killings. In this study, we take a Foucauldian approach and use critical discourse analysis to analyze the reactions and responses of Minneapolis's Mayor Frey, Interim Police Chief Huffman, and three activists: Nekima Levy Armstrong, Jaylani Hussein, and Michelle Gross, during a press conference two days after the police killing of Amir Locke on February 2, 2022. The killing occurred roughly 18 months after the murder of George Floyd. This analysis focuses on what the mayor, police chief, and three activists valued or dismissed, and what biases were presented during the press conference. The findings indicate that power resides in the authorities. The response of the police chief is defensive and evasive, and the mayor's response can be perceived as apologetic.

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Communication research has extensively examined the police killing of Black individuals in the United States (DeAngelis, 2024; Durán, 2016; Hawkins, 2023). There is, however, a lack of critical analyses of press conferences held by authorities following these killings. Several studies have examined relevant cases using discourse analysis, including how traffic police officers used language and social status to exert power over drivers, often leading to coercive or oppressive interactions (Dastjerdi et al., 2011) and the dynamics of power and resistance in police interview discourse (Haworth, 2006). Although joint press conferences with police chiefs and mayors following the killing of Black and other minority raced folks are common, these conferences have not received significant scholarly attention (Walby & Alabi, 2022).

Scholars have examined related areas of policing, including police communication (Waegel, 1984); police training, where officers are conditioned to perceive public interactions as a form of war (Simon, 2023); stop-and-frisk policies (Omori et al., 2024); dehumanization and racial biases in police shootings of Black citizens (Nassauer, 2024); and a greater likelihood of police stopping and shooting Black men, compared to other races,

even when the men are unarmed (Correll et al., 2007). Durán's (2016) study considered issues involving legal decision-making in controversial officer-involved shootings in the City and County of Denver from 1983 to 2012. He concluded that "community members desired justice and accountability whereas public officials managed shifting notions of legality and policy shrouded by a terminology of justification" (p. 65). He found that "Black males were proportionately four times (3.9) more likely to be shot in the City and County of Denver than Whites" (Durán, 2016, p. 75). Only one police shooting in 30 years in the City and County of Denver was found to be unjustified, the case of Thomas Jackson, a white man, who was shot in one of Denver's predominantly white neighborhoods by an intoxicated plainclothes officer. Jackson reportedly possessed a higher level of social capital than the rookie plainclothes officer involved (Durán, 2016). Survivors of police shootings and belligerence in Denver characterized those officers as aggressive, trigger-happy, scary, and obsessive (*The Denver Post*, 2007; Durán, 2016; Pankratz, 2008). Survivors of police shootings often experience a multitude of challenges, including physical, psychological, and financial hardships. These challenges can manifest as long-term health issues like chronic pain, disabilities, and mental health conditions (Price, 2025; Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019).

This study examines the press conference involving Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, Interim Police Chief Amelia Huffman, and three activists, Nekima Levy Armstrong, Jaylani Hussein, and Michelle Gross. The press conference was held on February 4, 2022, following the killing of Amir Locke, a 22-year-old African American man, two days prior. Officer Mark Hanneman, a member of the Minneapolis Police SWAT team, fatally shot Locke nine seconds after entering the downtown apartment where he was staying. Officers were serving a no-knock warrant in connection with a homicide investigation in St. Paul. The officers were searching for Locke's 17-year-old cousin, Mekhi Camden Speed, who was named in the warrant. Locke was wrapped in a blanket, holding a gun, with his finger off the trigger, when police startled him awake. He was a legal gun owner with no criminal record, according to his family (Spencer, 2025; Yancey-Bragg, 2022). The prosecutors declined to press charges against the officer. In 2025, the Minneapolis Police Department appointed Sgt. Mark Hanneman as its new use-of-force training officer, sparking community outrage. At a press conference organized by Communities United Against Police Brutality on July 22, Locke's father and other members condemned the decision, displaying a banner reading "Amir Locke Should Be Alive" (Bruce, 2025). The killing of Locke occurred roughly 18 months after the police killing of George Floyd. Approximately eight months before the killing of Locke, a jury found Derek Chauvin guilty of murdering Floyd. Chauvin was sentenced to 22 and a half years in prison. These events have helped shape the activists' discourse by setting a precedent for perusing legal action against offending officers. We use a discourse analysis framework to analyze the press conference and activist responses. This press conference is available on YouTube (WCCO – CBS Minnesota, 2022).

Specifically, we use the qualitative method of Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Fairclough, 1989, 1995) to examine the press conference. This study focuses on what the police chief and mayor valued or dismissed during the press conference and what biases were presented. We divided the press conference into three discursive moments for analysis: (a) the mayor's speech, (b) the police

chief's speech, and (c) activists' engagement. Analysis of the video press conference indicates that power resides with the authorities. The response of the police chief is defensive, the mayor appears conciliatory, and the activists demand accountability and transparency. Analysis indicated the need for transparency between policymakers and the public. Entrenched structural power dynamics must be challenged, and equitable relationships between authorities and the public, particularly Black communities, should be fostered to promote a healthy, supportive environment.

Police violence toward Black men and Black communities

Many reports indicate that Black men are significantly more likely to experience police brutality than their white counterparts (Kahn et al., 2016; McLeod et al., 2020). Studies show that there is a historical component to police violence that affects Black communities across the country (DeSilver et al., 2020; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Edwards et al. (2019) reported that in the United States, police brutality is a leading cause of death among young Black men; approximately one in every 1,000 Black men will be slain by police. The risk of being killed by police increases between ages 20 and 35 for men and women of all races and ethnicities; however, it is highest for Black men. Edwards et al. (2019) noted that Black men face the highest levels of mortality risk inequity. They further showed that, throughout their lives, Black men are approximately 2.5 times more likely than white men to be killed by police. Compared to white women, Black women have a 1.4 times greater risk of being killed by police. Alang et al. (2017) argued that police brutality is correlated with excess morbidity among Black individuals through five intersecting mechanisms:

- (1) fatal injuries that increase population-specific mortality rates; (2) adverse physiological responses that increase morbidity; (3) racist public reactions that cause stress; (4) arrests, incarcerations, and legal, medical, and funeral bills that cause financial strain; and (5) integrated oppressive structures that cause systematic disempowerment. (p. 662)

Unwarranted interactions with police in the form of searches, harassment, and general police dealings lead to significantly higher psychological stress in Black communities.

A no-knock warrant is a search warrant issued by a judge, permitting police officers to enter specific premises without first knocking and announcing their presence or purpose before entering (Dolan, 2019; Moses, 2025; Sonnenreich & Ebner, 1970). The no-knock warrant aims to ensure that residents do not destroy any object that police seek and to avoid compromising the safety of officers and others. The Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) report showed a 92% drop in no-knock warrants served since 2022 following the killing of Locke (Henry & Brown, 2025). Of the no-knock warrants still being used today, the Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association (MCPA) states they are typically used for worst-case scenarios (Henry & Brown, 2025). No-knock warrants have resulted in several deaths and are becoming increasingly controversial. Karen Wells, the mother of Locke, told 5 Eyewitness News, "I feel like, with the numbers dropping, he's saving lives, but his life wasn't saved" (Henry & Brown, 2025). She suggested that no-knock warrants should be banned across the United States.

In addition to the Locke no-knock incident, other notable casualties of no-knock warrants include seven-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones (Smith, 2016) and 92-year-old

Kathryn Johnston (Hilton, 2007). Another recent casualty was Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black emergency medical technician. She was shot and killed by police officers in Louisville, Kentucky, on March 13, 2020, during a botched raid on her apartment as part of an investigation into drug-dealing operations (Cook, 2022; Grant et al., 2022).

Structural power dynamics

Structural power dynamics work through institutional rules, cultural expectations, and information control to create imbalance. In press conferences and broader institutional communication, these dynamics determine (a) what is said, (b) who can speak, and (c) how the audience perceives authority. They are subtle, powerful mechanisms that shape not just communication but society's broader understanding of truth, legitimacy, and authority (Giddens, 1998). Structural power dynamics refer to underlying systems and patterns within a society or organization that distributes power, shaping how influence and control are exercised between individuals or groups, and are based on factors like social class, race, gender, or economic status rather than personal interactions. Fundamentally, it is the framework that dictates how power operates within a given structure (Bailey et al., 2023; Bouvier & Machin, 2018; Joseph, 2009). Structural power dynamics can be observable, concealed, or invisible, and include authority, wealth, and other privileges. Although authorities may not use visible power, the system is inherently structured to advance the privilege of some groups while devaluing and suppressing others.

Against the backdrop of police brutality and power relations, structural power manifests in government organizations such as mayoral offices and police departments. This occurs when the mayor's office and police department maintain the decision-making and control the conference and narrative. For instance, in a press conference, leaders like the mayor and police chief determine which questions to answer and when to end the conference. Nevertheless, concerned citizens continue to resist and challenge power through various means (Guitar & Griffith, 2021), including critical scholarship and protests. One of the strongest sources of resistance in the past decade is Black Lives Matter (BLM), which was born from the rise in police brutality against African Americans (Burns, 2023; Coleman, 2025; Jackson, 2021). In 2013, three Black organizers, namely Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, co-founded the Black Lives Matter movement, a Black-centered political and social justice project. The movement initially emerged as the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the 2013 shooting death of Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager killed in 2012.

According to Bailey et al. (2023), videos and images capturing police violence shared via "online public spheres have been, and continue to be, crucial to the social power of the BLM movement" (p. 351). The BLM movement has significantly altered the power dynamic between media and activists by demonstrating the transformative potential of social media in challenging traditional media narratives and empowering marginalized communities. This study demonstrates how oppressive power structures, like those organized around class, race, gender, and ability, are perpetuated, defended, and, just as importantly, resisted through culture.

Critical discourse analysis

This study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore language from a grammatical perspective, and as a societal practice, to discern the subtext of what is said (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993, 2015). CDA provides a platform to assess the dialogue of people in power, relate it to relevant incidents, and identify the relationship of the subjects from a societal standpoint. Fairclough (1989, 2014) conceptualized three states of CDA: description, interpretation, and explanation. Description is concerned with the language presented in the text. Interpretation attributes weight to the production, distribution, and consumption of discourse. Explanation frames the discourse within a particular social setting. We align our methodology through a Foucauldian lens (Foucault, 1982, 2013), which suits the research of power relations (Fairclough, 1992, 2012). CDA aims “to shed light on the linguistic-discursive dimension of social and cultural phenomena and process of change in late modernity” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 61). Through the Foucauldian lens, we can situate statements made by police that understate the severity of the situation, and we analyze how actions (such as no-knock warrants) relate specifically to racial profiling by police. Foucault considered language from a societal perspective. We consider why the mayor and police chief decided to hold the conference and its political implications. Thus, to investigate the structural power dynamics, the discourse shaped by authority-led press conferences, and the dominant ideology that upholds societal inequalities, we asked the following research question:

RQ: How did the mayor of Minneapolis, the Minneapolis interim police chief, and the three activists act and react during the press conference regarding the police killing of Amir Locke?

The principal investigator and the student researchers independently watched the YouTube video of the press conference and read the transcript several times to identify the power discourse using CDA methods. All possible discrepancies were noted and discussed. Final coding decisions were determined by consensus.

Analysis and discussion

Discursive moment 1: the mayor's speech

The mayor has the responsibility of assuring the public that police wrongdoing does not put their well-being in jeopardy. Further, during the press conference, Mayor Frey showed concern for his constituents. The speech had two main parts: the first aspect was meant to appeal to people's emotions and expressed empathy. Parts of his speech used descriptive words that conveyed emotion, such as “unsettled feeling,” “gut-wrenching,” and “grieving.” He empathized with the people of the city and acknowledged that the emotions and sorrow many felt were justified.

The second aspect of Mayor Frey's speech was an appeal for reason. He mentioned that while he understood the public's grief and anger, his first duty was to his responsibilities as mayor. The mayor shared the bodycam footage to the family before releasing it to the public. He promised to continue the investigation to uncover the truth. His words

reflected responsibility, using terms such as “swift transparency” and “truth and justice.” His speech was meant to set a tone of respectfulness and assurance.

The mayor expressed understanding for the situation, saying, “Our city has been through a lot of the pain that we have been experiencing ... [and it] is only compounded by the complexities of the circumstances that we face.” He continued, “These issues are complex, and I know there are so many here that are grieving and don’t care as much about the complexity because—let’s face it: a man has lost his life.” “I know that many people are grieving and gathering with their friends and their family. They want to process; they want to reflect on the tragic events from the last few days ... Take care of each other.” Each of these statements was an appeal to emotions. Mayor Frey’s remarks appeared to be informed by similar incidents that had recently happened in the city. His ability to acknowledge recent wrongdoings by the police department implied that he and the police chief were sympathetic toward the victim.

The mayor acknowledged the need for accountability for the sad turn of events. He said, “We intend to get answers as quickly as possible and transparently, recognizing that as of tonight, not all those answers can be provided.” “It is our job—it is my job as a leader to figure it out. I do not want to put the public or our officers in harm’s way because these two principles are not mutually exclusive.” “Truth and justice must be our guiding principles, and make no mistake that they will be.” These statements signaled his responsibility as mayor and stated his job. He expressed understanding for the emotions that come with the situation, while drawing a line, insisting that he must still perform his duties. He addressed the public’s questions about what was being done for the case, stating that nothing was officially concluded. He ended his part by saying that they were still searching for answers. These statements were intended to give the public the impression that the situation was considered urgent, and that something significant was being done.

Discursive moment 2: the interim police chief’s speech

The main discourses that dominated the police chief’s speech were “togetherness,” and “defensiveness and self-interest.” The chief started her speech by reminding the public about the importance of community. Throughout, she evaded specific questions about the footage of the killing of Locke.

Even though Chief Huffman’s speech sounded less empathetic than Mayor Frey’s, she aligned with the mayor by acknowledging the community’s long-lasting trauma and pain. She used the word “community” six times in her speech. They include: “loss and pain in our community,” “community members are in pain and have questions, and rightfully so,” “community trust,” “our community safety,” “community conversations,” and “commitment to building public trust and rebuilding community safety.” She used these words to remind community members of the unifying experience of a trauma that should be healed amicably. She used the word “community” to ensure that every community member had a stake in the incident.

According to Silverii (2014), American police procedurals offer perspectives on how officers must treat one another concerning poor behavior, citing the “blue wall.” This term references the police culture’s code of silence, discouraging officers from bringing one another’s dishonest conduct to the public, and from holding them accountable.

This pattern is evident when Chief Huffman becomes defensive when asked specific questions about the bodycam video of Locke's killing. She mentioned "video" eight times in her speech. Some of her comments about the video included: "The decision that we made to release this footage is not necessarily common among local governments, but I believe it is the right decision. My initial priority, like Mayor Frey's, was for the parents of this young man to see this video before it was released to the public, and they had the opportunity to do so this afternoon." "I'm under no illusion that processing this video will be easy," "these are wrenching videos to watch."

This situation highlights the tactics Minneapolis authorities use to protect themselves and their own interests. Moment two demonstrates how interim police Chief Huffman follows Mayor Frey's agenda. Her speech confirmed what Mayor Frey stated concerning the release of the bodycam footage, explaining the footage in terms that protected the officers involved. Language such as "assess the circumstances" to "make the best possible decision" to avoid "great bodily harm or death" is used to absolve the officers of any mistake by letting the public know that they were doing it in self-defense. Chief Huffman's speech protected the officers' actions and evaded answering related questions. Compared to Mayor Frey's speech, which was more of a call for understanding about what happened and who was responsible, the chief's speech was defensive of the police officers' actions. Chief Huffman said that Officer Mark Hanneman had to make a split-second assessment of the circumstances and determine whether he felt as if there was an articulable threat: He had to decide if the threat was of "imminent harm, great bodily harm, or death, and that he needed to act right then to protect himself and his partners." She continued, "as you saw in the video, the team approached the door, and they used a key. There was no need to force entry there ... their job was to make entry deliberately to assess any threats that were inside." Chief Huffman justifies what happened, arguing that the officers were doing their job correctly and that they made the best decisions they could under the circumstances.

Discursive moment 3: activists' engagement

During the press conference the activists were disappointed about the power relations between the authorities and the community because of the lack of transparency regarding Locke's death. In response, they demanded accountability and argued that the mayor and police chief were using their power to protect officer negligence.

Armstrong interrupted the press conference briefly to mention how there should be more accountability by the two leaders. After her remarks, Mayor Frey and Chief Huffman were barraged with more questions. This flurry caused the mayor and chief to leave abruptly. The audience and activists remained. In Hussein's remarks he mentioned the lack of transparency, including how leaders were running from the problem and the number of discrepancies in the facts of this case. Gross came to the podium, mentioning that the government's response was a "sensationalistic, demonizing picture" of Locke and the gun he had. The mayor and chief did not address the actions of the officer responsible for his death. Gross lamented:

Why they released those pictures of his gun, though they never made an allegation that he fired it. And you can clearly see in the video that it was never fired. In fact, he never even

pointed it at an officer. But yet, they will not answer the question of why they released that sensationalistic, demonizing picture. But yet, they did not release anything about the officer except his name until finally now, and they certainly did not release a picture of his gun.

Gross was very disappointed by the elected officials' lack of transparency and their refusal to answer specific questions about the police killing of Locke. She expressed her frustration:

Why would they release a picture of this man's gun? What was the sole purpose of that? Well, we know what it was. It was sensationalistic demonization of a victim of police murder, plain and simple. And I'm disgusted by it. I'm disgusted by the fact that these elected officials and appointed officials cannot actually answer a simple question.

She highlighted that the police were portraying Locke negatively in the media and had concealed the officers' actions.

Authorities have power over the public. This power can be used to promote community unity and build peace, or be misused, leading to community discord. Armstrong was disappointed about the cover-up by the Minneapolis department. She reacted to the chief's refusal to answer specific questions: "This is what I would call the anatomy of a cover-up. This is unacceptable." She identified that there had been a sensationalistic video, and no picture of Locke's gun released. She highlighted that Locke has never been convicted of a crime and asserted that the Minneapolis Police Department had portrayed Locke as a dangerous man by releasing a video clip of him with a gun that he is licensed to carry. They never released the photos of the officer's gun. Hussein asked, "How is walking out of a press conference transparent? This is a shame. This is what we have been fighting against. This is what we have been fighting against since George Floyd was killed—running away from accountability and transparency. This is a shame." Gross continued, "Why would they release a picture of this man's gun for the sole purpose of what? Well, we know what it was; it was sensationalistic demonization of a victim of police murder. Plain and simple."

Chief Huffman had been interrupted by Armstrong, a civil rights lawyer/community activist serving on a designated board with Mayor Frey and Chief Huffman to improve community relations with law enforcement. Armstrong argued strongly against how the mayor and chief handled the situation. She stressed that the mayor and the chief have power, and she insisted they should use it. She emphasized that they were not using their power correctly. Rather than addressing the problem directly, they were using their power to cover up and protect the officers. The officials' actions could be perceived as wrong and a misuse of power. As Fairclough (1989) put it, the exercise of power is achieved "more particularly through the ideological workings of language ... [which] has become perhaps the primary medium of social control and power" (pp. 2–3). Hussein and Gross had come to discuss similar concerns, addressing the corruption of power. The activists felt Mayor Frey and Chief Huffman needed to address misleading information and stop avoiding questions with difficult answers.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to use critical discourse analysis to analyze the actions and reactions of Minneapolis's Mayor Frey, Interim Police Chief Huffman, and three

activists: Armstrong, Hussein, and Gross, during a press conference following the police killing of Amir Locke on February 2, 2022. As Foucault (1982) argued, power is exercised through discursive practices, and this was evident in the press conference, where each party used strategic language to assert, negotiate, or maintain power. When viewed through the lens of structural power dynamics, results indicate that the mayoral office and police department used words that benefited their interpretation of the events leading up to Locke's death. The analysis of the three discursive moments suggests substantial distrust between the community of Minneapolis and its officials. Controversial issues highlighted during the press conference included the lack of transparency and accountability by both the mayor and police chief. The mayor and police chief used the platform to assert their authority. Some members of the public who attended the press conference resisted their claims.

The authorities criminalized Locke. Locke was referred to as a suspect in the press release. The police chief spoke but did not explain why Locke was referred to as a suspect. Locke's gun footage was released to the press, but no footage of the officers' guns was released. Armstrong's frustration exemplifies the excruciating emotions experienced by people of color in cities across the United States. Her call for more transparency from police is not uncommon. The pattern of behavior from police officers and the government in Minneapolis is consistent. In the words of Armstrong, "It is business as usual," and is destructive to the public. As a result, challenges continue when addressing the structural power dynamics and ongoing injustices experienced by the Black community and other marginalized groups.

Newburn (2012) found that police chiefs use media to maintain government presence. Our findings support the claim that authorities use media and press conferences to maintain government presence and to manage and control people through the precise information presented. The discourse of authorities' press conferences should be used to build healthy power relationships between authorities and the community by avoiding control and coercion and providing communication transparency. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2010; Fairclough, 1992, 1995) and established scholarship on structural power relations, we maintain that authorities' press-conference discourse should avoid coercive or controlling communicative strategies in order to foster constructive and accountable power relations with the public (Connolly, 1993; Death, 2010). This framework helps uncover how language is never neutral but actively shapes society and reflects power, making it a vital tool for analyzing media, politics, and social inequality.

Some critics have long called for community-policing strategies (Cordner, 2014; Manning, 1977; O'Reilly, 2023; Sutton, 2017), which may help address the problems this study identifies. In addition, this study suggests the need for "Afrocentric policing," which Bent-Goodley and Smith (2017) described as an African-centered approach to community policing. They argue that Afrocentricity can be applied to community-policing practices to address these issues more effectively. By centering the discussion within a cultural framework, an African-centered theoretical approach situates the response within the lived experiences of Black communities rather than relying on a Eurocentric perspective. This study demonstrates that press conferences following police shootings do more than communicate facts, and they shape public understanding of racialized state violence. In the aftermath of Amir Locke's killing, officials framed his lawful gun

ownership and non-involvement in the investigation in ways that recast him as a perceived threat, emphasizing “split-second” police judgment to justify lethal action. Such narratives, coupled with omissions about racially disparate no-knock warrant practices, work to sanitize state violence and deflect attention from structural antiblackness. By identifying these rhetorical strategies, the study contributes to scholarship by demonstrating how institutional discourse normalizes racial harm and reinscribes police legitimacy at moments of public scrutiny.

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