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Improving Policing in a Multiracial Society in the United States: A New Approach

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Abstract

Researchers at the University of Illinois a newly implemented “diversity education” program (Policing in a Multiracial Society Project) at the University of Illinois Police Training Institute which is designed to promote fair and equitable policing practice. The program emphasizes increasing racial literacy and cultural empathy. The research team has adopted a tripartite model of cultural competencies to frame the educational program. The objectives of the PMSP are thus to increase officers’ (a) awareness of their own social identities and racial beliefs; (b) knowledge about theory and research related to police misconduct and the socio-historical experiences of racial minority communities, especially with police and the criminal justice system; and (c) efficacy to apply the communication and basic policing skills learned at the Police Training Institute in a culturally informed way. The program was implemented with two cohort groups and is in the process of refining the educational modules for a third cohort group. The evaluative data collected throughout the process has been instructive in terms of refining educational processes and activities. The team received a wide-range of feedback on the program including pre- and post-program survey data, module evaluation data, and focus group discussions with veteran police officers, police recruits, and community members.

Keywords: Policing, Multi Racial, PMSP, Awareness.

Introduction

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown and Dorian Johnson, two African American teenagers, were walking in the street in Ferguson Missouri, when Officer Darren Wilson had an encounter that significantly impacted society’s attitudes towards policing. After hearing of this incident, most in the policing profession took the side of Officer Wilson, while many in the African American community have been outraged with police. This

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incident has begun an important discussion involving the intersection of race and the practice of policing, as it has highlighted the police need to make dramatic reforms. There is now a spotlight on issues of police practice and conduct, especially in working-class, African American communities. One of the largest issues involves the evident display of distrust racial minority communities have shown in the police following the Ferguson incident. There is no one, simple answer for how police may gain the trust of all citizens, though this should be the goal of all officers and police agencies. However, an important step involves new approaches to diversity training that can assist new officers entering this career for the first time.

In this article, the authors contextualize the importance of police-community relations in culturally informed policing and provide a description of a newly implemented “diversity education” program at the University of Illinois Police Training Institute which is designed to promote fair and equitable policing practice; an emphasis of the program is on increasing racial literacy and cultural empathy.

The Importance of Preparing Recruits Properly

Effective policing requires the trust of community members. The reality, though, is that communities of color are often less trusting of the police and more likely to feel as though they are being policed in a biased manner as illustrated through the national discussion following the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. According to a recent PEW (2014) national survey, 70% of African Americans believed they were treated less fairly than their White counterparts. Historically, there has been tension between the police and African American, Latino/a, and American Indian communities (Balto, 2013, Taylor, 2013). The 1968 Kerner Commission report, for example, highlighted these concerns as the major trigger for the urban conflagrations of the 1960s. The Commission’s report listed precipitating causes by three “levels of intensity”, with police practices reported first under the most significant level.

Although the ongoing tension between the police and certain communities remained in the 1980s, hate crimes committed by private citizens superseded the issues of police misconduct and brutality in the public’s consciousness. The police beating of Rodney King in 1991 forcibly brought the issue of police brutality to national attention. Since the King beating and the subsequent multiracial Los Angeles Riots/Rebellions, the issues of mass racialized incarceration and police brutality have become major topics of scholarly investigation and programmatic intervention. (Cha-Jua, 2014) It is anticipated that exploration of these issues will be intensified in the wake of the killing of Michael Brown.

Given the longevity of these issues, police departments have experimented with some form of “diversity training” for at least seven decades. However, as Schlosser (2011) reported, these intervention programs have changed little since the 1960s and therefore have had limited success. In addition to changing actual policing practices, scholars and police administrators have identified police training academies and regular in-service training programs as crucial for advancing fair and equitable policing (Schlosser, 2011, Bornstein, 2005, Cao, 2001).

Building on Strengths and Encouraging a New Commitment to Fair Policing

It takes special qualities to pursue a career as a law enforcement officer. Potential recruits should care about people and the community, be good communicators and problem solvers, be strong both physically and mentally, and be willing to approach danger when others might run from it. Clearly, being a law enforcement officer carries with it a huge amount of responsibility. The Law Enforcement Code of Ethics states that the fundamental duties of an officer are to serve humankind; to safeguard lives and property; to protect the innocent against deception, the weak against oppression or intimidation, and the peaceful against violence and disorder; and to respect the constitutional rights of all people to liberty, equality, and justice.

The majority of police officers have chosen this career for honorable reasons; they are brave, compassionate, and caring people who believe in the Law Enforcement Code of Ethics. So why have some officers betrayed the code of ethics by employing biased policing practices and why is there so much mistrust from communities of color? Policing policy and practices exist within a larger society permeated by racism. Police officers, like others in the United States misunderstand racism, believing it is a matter of individual prejudice. Racism or racial oppression, however, operates on the individual and societal levels. It permeates the culture and functions throughout the society's institutions. Racism has been socially constructed and deeply rooted in the U.S. since its beginning. Racism is quite plastic. Over the years it has changed and adapted to new situations, so that today in numerous areas it appears more covert than overt, implicit rather than intentional, and perhaps even more dysconscious, based on color-blind racial ideology.

Given the persistence of racism within US society, it is not surprising that certain intended "race-neutral" practices such as stop and frisk actually result in reinforcing racial disparities. In 2013, District Judge Shira Scheindlin ruled in the *David Floyd v. City of New York* case that the "stop-and-frisk" practices of the New York Police Department violated the constitutional rights of racial and ethnic minorities in the city. Judge Scheindlin referred to the practices as "indirect racial profiling," which resulted in discriminatory stopping of Blacks and Latinos. In addition, some officers are consciously or unconsciously influenced by the larger racial subtext and this in turn manifests itself in biased and sometimes abusive policing. Incidents reflecting biased policing may on the surface seem "non racial," but upon further critical examination are revealed to be grounded in existing race relations. The differing perspectives of incidents exemplify the racial undertones in the strained police – community relations. For example, many African Americans across the country argue that Eric Garner's death was the result of a police inflicted illegal chokehold and the failure of a group of New York officers and paramedics to provide medical attention. From this perspective, Garner like many African American victims of police brutality was being arrested for a relatively minor offense, allegedly selling "loose cigarettes." Some police in turn have varying opinions, and believe that the control hold used by the officer was legal and other factors contributed to Garner's death. Interestingly, even among our research team we diverge in terms of our perspectives and understanding of these incidents on the basis of our social identities.

Though a challenge, the leadership qualities of police recruits, officers, and administrators suggest that through intervention programs the culture of police departments can be changed and reoriented toward gaining the trust of all citizens, reducing biased policing, and helping curb overall racism within police culture and practice. Making this change requires a paradigm shift; if we are to eliminate bias policing

we will need to obviate the “blue code of silence”. This article highlights a newly implemented training program designed to reduce biased policing and promote community relations.

Policing in a Multiracial Society Program: Pilot Program

Building on the insights of Schlosser (2011) and other researchers a team of educators at the University of Illinois is developing, implementing, and evaluating an educational program designed to increase the culturally responsive policing of new recruits in the state of Illinois. The “Policing in a Multiracial Society Program” (PMSP) aims to intervene at the local level in order to address some of the systemic concerns about police misconduct across the country. Working across disciplines, the team has assembled collaboration between a police training institute and faculty in African American Studies, History, and Educational Psychology. Members of the team understand that in order to produce a meaningful and successful program it is crucial to evaluate the degree to which the program is having the intended effect. As such, the team is using a formative evaluation method to assist in the further development and revision of the intervention.

The team has adopted a tripartite model of cultural competencies to frame the educational program. The objectives of the PMSP are thus to increase officers’ (a) *awareness* of their own social identities and racial beliefs; (b) *knowledge* about theory and research related to police misconduct and the socio-historical experiences of racial minority communities, especially with police and the criminal justice system; and (c) efficacy to apply the communication and basic policing *skills* learned at the Police Training Institute in a culturally informed way. The program consists of three, 3-hour modules in which cultural awareness, socio-historical knowledge, and tactical skills are incorporated throughout. The team works collaboratively to design and facilitate each of the educational modules.

Awareness. One important objective of the tripartite model of developing multicultural capabilities is to increase officers’ awareness of their own social identities and racial attitudes. Making recruit officers reflect and internalize their own personal biases, values, and assumptions is a difficult task. This challenge is overcome by gaining awareness of (a) their own cultural heritages and social identity attitudes; (b) how multiple identities influence their own experiences and life decisions; (c) their biases and assumptions; (d) how discrimination affects their personalities; and (e) the impact of their style on others.

Knowledge. Another important objective is to increase officers’ knowledge about theory and research related to police misconduct and of the socio-historical experiences of racial minority communities, particularly with police and the criminal justice system. It is important that officers recognize the socio-historical experiences of the groups they police and how members of those groups’ collective lived experiences influence of their comprehension of social reality. It is important as well for officers to understand theories and research related to issues of diversity (e.g., implicit bias).

Skills. The third objective of the tripartite model is to increase officers’ efficacy in applying communication and basic policing skills in a culturally informed manner. Even more so, recruits need to exit the training experience with the desire to put this awareness and knowledge into practice. They should demonstrate cultural humility, respect, and empathy when working with others; advocate social change; serve as a leader in modeling culturally responsive policing; and adopt appropriate intervention strategies.

The skills part of the training is an interactive element that focuses on using the analysis of scenarios and videos. These scenarios include incidents involving interactions with racial minorities, issues related to the mistrust of racial minorities, biased policing, and other police misconduct. Tactical communication skills, the S.A.R.A. model of problem-oriented policing, community policing and critical thinking skills using the RED model are also key components. According to the RED model of critical thinking, recruits must learn to Recognize Assumptions, Evaluate Information, and Draw Conclusions in order to create a plan of action. The RED module is incorporated into each module and each session includes all three modules, awareness, Knowledge, and Skills.

Analysis and Discussion

The educational team at the University of Illinois has implemented the “Policing in a Multiracial Society” project with two cohort groups and is in the process of refining the educational modules for a third cohort group. The evaluative data collected throughout the process has been instructive in terms of refining educational processes and activities. The team received a wide-range of feedback on the program including pre- and post-program survey data, module evaluation data, and focus group discussions with veteran police officers, police recruits, and community members. The data have uncovered areas of resistance to the material presented in the program – in part because of the ways in which the message was delivered and in part because of the perspective some of the recruits adopted. The team learned that changing mindsets is a difficult task among young recruits not to mention veteran officers. Officers are proud of their noble careers and defend their profession stoutly, often by rejecting factual evidence. It is necessary to overcome this outlook among police officers in order to find ways to improve police–community relations and to strive for social justice.

The team completed a major revision of the three modules after analyzing the feedback from recruits in the first cohort group. Veteran police officers suggested that the program team strive to “not shut the recruits down”. Scholars have suggested that owing to the danger and social scrutiny that comes with police work, police culture can be insulated and exclusionary. (Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993) Veteran police officers suggested combating the tendency of police culture to resist criticism of the profession as well as creating hands-on training experiences that included real-life stories by veteran officers. Community members on the other hand stressed that recruit should leave the experience with a sense of humility and flexibility. In addition, it was suggested that the curriculum should stress general critical thinking and leadership skills. It was important to community members that recruits reflect on the experience and be encouraged to pass the information and skills onto their peers, including veteran officers.

The implemented changes seemed to have improved the overall satisfaction with the education program from the perspective of the recruits as well as the veteran police and community groups. Some of the changes included incorporating awareness, knowledge, and skills within each of the modules; adding more time for discussion of the content; and incorporating more video clips and a community-police panel dialogue. Several themes emerged respective to materials learned (acknowledging that racism exists, exploring institutional racism, understanding implicit bias, and interacting with community members) and critiques/suggestions for improvement (relevancy to policing, emotional reaction, and interaction style) from the evaluative data after the second cohort. After reflecting on this information and media clips about the stop and frisk initiative of the

NYPD as well as more accurately defining terms such as race, ethnicity, racism, discrimination, and culture, recruits were seen to be thinking more deeply about the social issues of race and racism/racial oppression. One recruit wrote, “Racial issues are more prevalent today than we think. Race is more than just a term.”

After watching a video about the racial cleansing of African Americans in a Georgia community and subsequent attempts to reclaim family land, recruits thought more deeply about institutional racism and its intergenerational effects. A recruit commented, “I appreciated being exposed to the episode of racial cleansing. I had no idea. It’s important to look at the tragedies of the past, so we are not doomed to repeat them”. The idea of implicit bias was also introduced to recruits by using the Project Implicit test created by Harvard University. Recruits noted, “We all have unconscious acts that we are not aware of that can be racist” and “minorities deal with things that whites don’t deal with”.

Finally, recruits spoke with a panel of community members. Many learned from and enjoyed this experience stating, “This was an eye opener. Stereotyping by police puts the burden of a good community relationship on the police” and “It was great to hear community member perspectives. Police and the community have different perspectives and that makes communication essential”.

Recruits commented on their learning processes but also gave critiques of the training and feedback for improvement. At times, recruits found the training redundant or irrelevant to police work. One recruit observed, “I was expecting to see a more relevant discussion about various cultures/races and their cultural beliefs and how those apply to policing”. Further, many recruits had a strong emotional reaction to the material, claiming it felt like a white guilt trip or white hate. One recruit stated, “I was very unnerved at every point. This class is very hurtful to me”. Although the material did not focus on individual racist acts but rather on institutional and cultural racism, several recruits were defensive and resistant.

Recruits also commented on the interactional style of the facilitators, suggesting that they sometimes felt as though their voices were not being heard or their opinions were being dismissed. One of the recruit suggested, “Allow time for every person who wishes to speak”. Another suggested, “The instructors were uninterested when a dissenting opinion was given. Need to slow down a bit and have a truly open discussion”.

After each module, the team attempted to incorporate recruit feedback and address their concerns. Material was omitted or abbreviated to allow more time for open discussion and content and media were honed to make them explicitly related to policing whenever possible. To address the emotional reactions, instructors discussed recruit feedback openly. The overall rating of the training dropped from module 1 (9%=low, 58%=average, 24%=high) to module 2 (27%=low, 60%=average, 7%= high). After module 3, ratings increased (22%=low, 53%=average, 21%=high). It seems as though factors such as the emotional reaction and perceived relevancy contributed to the drop in scores. Following our open conversation about these critiques and the discussion with the panel of community members, overall satisfaction increased somewhat.

Conclusion

The team continues to refine the pilot educational program, “Policing in a Multiracial Society.” The team recognizes that the program challenges recruits’ self-perceptions, racial understanding, and professional efficacy. This is often a difficult dialogue to effectively

engage. Nonetheless, the team continues to strive to develop recruits and leaders who are allies to the cause of achieving social justice in policing; those who are concurrently aware of the existence of racism and its implicit features and cognizant of their power to create change in the departments and communities they serve. Although recruits may be exposed to “eye opening” material that can cause strong emotional reaction open discussion and dialogue with community members can help overcome these obstacles. The team recognizes and acknowledges that much more empirical data, examining the immediate and potential longer-term effects of the pilot educational program, are needed before any claims of successful training intervention can be promoted.

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