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Spirituality and the Law Enforcement Professional

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was two-fold. The author sought to determine if, in fact, there exists some form of relationship between the concept of spirituality and individuals actively engaged in the law enforcement profession. Secondly, if research indicated that such a relationship exists, the project would then examine whether or not said relationship would appear to have an impact on the day-to-day activities of the officer. A review of literature was conducted and both law enforcement agencies and peace officers were surveyed to answer the questions posed above. Findings indicated that spirituality did, in fact appear to have some bearing on officers' use of leave time as well as their recognition for jobs well-done. Results of this information may be applicable to agencies in their hiring and recruiting processes.

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INTRODUCTION

“Why on earth do you do what you do? There isn’t enough money in the world for me to do that job!” Have you ever heard that statement, or one similar to it? Perhaps you have asked yourself that question. This research paper will attempt to define one of the myriad reasons that people choose to join the law enforcement profession. It may also provide information that will be beneficial in the area of police/community relations.

Police agencies have found themselves in difficult situations lately. The issue of recruitment has become more complicated due to the competition that comes from the private sector. Also, men and women seek employment at police agencies for many different reasons. Motivations are not the same for all. Some believe that their job is their calling, their vocation. Others may just see a decent paycheck and good benefits. However, once hired, the benefits tend to outweigh the desire to go to work and leave time is abused. A few officers may develop psychological or physical illness from the various stressors, bacteria, viruses and other pathogens they may encounter while on the job. Still, additional officers may see the existence of “less than honorable” opportunities. The media has a tendency to become involved in the latter types of situations mentioned above, thereby causing the attention of the community to focus on the so-called “bad” officer or officers, thereby damaging relations between all of the parties involved.

This paper will focus on an intangible motivating factor: spirituality or faith. It cannot be seen or heard, but exists only if someone believes that it does. It has a tremendous effect in the lives of its adherents. Effort will be made to find out the role it

plays, if any, in determining an officer's success in law enforcement and his or her decision to remain in this occupation.

Various research methods will be conducted to try and answer this question. Those methods will include research of periodicals, journals, and books. Officers will be given personal surveys in which they will be asked about the weight they place on spirituality or faith in their personal lives. Research will be conducted into the use of leave time, the number of complaints received, and respondents' overall satisfaction with the career choice they have made. Some studies have noted an affirmative link between a person's level of spirituality and his or her mental, physical, and emotional health. Recruiting offices will be contacted to determine whether or not job fairs have been conducted at locations associated with religious activity. If fairs have been held at these locations, further research will be conducted in order to find out if these recruits were hired and if these individuals are still employed as peace officers.

While some may think that this issue is subjective, an officer's perception of his or her faith may itself shed some light on the motivation for the tasks that he or she undertakes. It is hypothesized that a positive relationship will be found between an increased level of spirituality and an officer's overall satisfaction with his or her job. As a result, it is also believed that this analysis will reveal a lower incidence of disciplinary action and less use of sick leave, thereby improving the effectiveness of the entire department.

The findings gained in this study have varied implications within the law enforcement community. If officers are psychologically and physically healthy, they are less likely to use or abuse leave time. As a result, police presence would be increased.

Recruiters may be able to work with churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples to find applicants that are less likely to change professions if they consider law enforcement to be their calling. The relationship between the department and community has a tendency to improve with increased interaction that does not involve violator contact. If law enforcement agencies see religious sites as viable recruiting bases for qualified applicants, overall community relations could improve.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order for one to discuss the aspect of spirituality in any setting, one should have a basis from which to work, whether that basis is a definition, theory, or other point of focus. While there may be as many differing definitions for this term as there are people, the Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse [CASA] (2001) used the following definition in a study that they conducted: "... a deeply personal and individualized response to God, a higher power, or an animating force in the world" (p.5). As such, that definition will also be applied in this project. Just as there are differing points of view regarding this concept, there are also a multitude of differences in religion, even within the same denominational lines. With that in mind, the author has chosen to avoid focusing upon one specific religion or religious practice in order to avoid overlooking factors from other religions that may otherwise affect decision-making processes and choices of those faith practitioners.

Numerous studies have been conducted at one time or another in order to determine whether or not there is, in fact, a relationship between religious practice or spirituality and the impact that it has on the lifestyles of the adherents. Other studies may begin with an assumption of such a link and those researchers attempt to establish

the extent of that link. A review of the aforementioned research has revealed the establishment of that relationship and, additionally, the extent of the effects that relationship may have on one's health, mental and emotional perspective, stress level, and general lifestyle. Gunther (2001) reported that a survey of business executives resulted in a finding that 60% of them had a positive view of spirituality. Furthermore, he stated that some of those who adhere to religious practices report that spirituality will be welcomed into the business world because faith works and some of the core beliefs all dovetail with those other factors that are driving successful companies. As noted in an electronic document pertaining to integrity and ethics, it was also noted that many religions and philosophies recommend the concept of sharing, so that the difficulties, issues, ideas, and problems that develop in work can be viewed constructively, rather than destructively (Integrity, 2002).

This relationship between religion and daily life plays an integral part in the law enforcement profession for a number of reasons, one the most important being the health of the officer, which has a direct impact on his or her ability to perform under intensely stressful situations. This also plays into the aspect of officer safety in areas where patrol coverage may be adversely affected in the eventuality of officers having to call in sick. Several research projects have been conducted and have provided a tremendous amount of information regarding spirituality or religious practices and various aspects of health. A study noted by Cohen and Koenig (2002) showed that the mortality rate is remarkably lower for those who regularly attend religious services. As reported by Culligan (1997), Herbert Benson, M.D., course director of Harvard's Spirituality and Healing in Medicine program, has seen that patients involved in a

meditative style of prayer experience benefits for all manner of medical conditions, including chronic pain, AIDS, hypertension, and cancer. Church and Robertson (1999) described how some researchers showed the need for a comprehensive wellness program including the components of physical fitness, stress management, nutrition and issues related to diet, as well as mental and psychological health. As further demonstrated in this effort, the researchers found that none of the agencies they surveyed had all five of the components in their wellness program, thus possibly allowing for some individuals who may have benefited from the missing portion of the program to “fall through the cracks” (p. 310).

As officers face a greater assortment of issues in their daily work activity, those differences can sometimes cause an increase in stress, due the very nature of the job. A research study conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University in 2001 found that officers sometimes find themselves drawn into habits that have been deemed unhealthy in numerous medical studies. Those habits may include smoking and drinking, both of which have been used to ease tension by many. One’s view of his or her spiritual walk may influence the desire to continue in these habits. One report demonstrated the relationship between one’s decision to use those substances and the decision to avoid such use. It showed that adults who never attended religious services were almost twice as likely to drink alcohol, three times more likely to smoke tobacco, five times more likely to use illegal drugs other than marijuana, seven times more likely to “binge” drink, and almost eight times more likely to use marijuana. In other research projects, Koenig, et. al. (2001) cited that religious individuals were less likely to engage in high levels of alcohol consumption due to a

number of factors, including their selection of associates, the instilment of moral values, and an increase in the ability to cope with stressful situations. In the eventuality that an officer has to respond to a traumatic call; his or her belief system may help to work through the situation. It was reported that crisis responders who held to a faith in a higher power or the future helped them endure their experiences (Stress Reactions, 2001).

A peace officer's outlook toward his or her family and the society in general may also be influenced by the degree of spirituality or religiosity he or she holds. This issue was noted by Schumaker (1992), who reported that there were affirmative correlations between high self-esteem and positive concepts of God, while those who viewed God as penalizing reported lower self-esteem. He also stated that there was a relationship between one's religious views and the levels of anxiety and self-control that he or she felt. Koenig, Larson, and McCullough (2001) stated that various systems of religious belief encourage optimistic attitudes among their adherents and those adherents tended to be more hopeful, and also a finding that people with stronger religious beliefs tended to show fewer propensities for depression than those with weaker beliefs. These same authors reported that there was a positive correlation between levels of religiosity and marital stability as well as marital satisfaction. This finding may have a bearing on one's work habits because of the issues that may arise in the midst of a dysfunctional marital relationship.

Regarding an officer's outlook pertaining to death, one study cited by Wenz (1979) found that officers who participated in more religious activities had less fear of death than did other officers. Furthermore, another article, also by Wenz, reported that

one's spiritual beliefs would not have that great of an impact in his or her feelings or attitudes regarding death. The article did not indicate whether or not those feelings and attitudes were related specifically to the officer's own death or the death of another. In consideration of this question, it is interesting to note that Kenney and McNamara (1999) noted in a research study McNamara himself had conducted, along with Maria Tempenis that 78% of officers surveyed expressed little personal conflict in having to take another life in the course of their duty.

In light of the research showing positive results between spiritual practices and police work, it must also be pointed out that some studies have also shown negative consequences when these issues are compared. Koenig, et. al. (2001) declared that people, in order to deal with stress, use religious beliefs, but such beliefs have also been tied to worse health outcomes.

Kenny and McNamara (1999) reported studies where results showed the potential for internal conflict officers may face in performance of their duties and also in the interaction they have with fellow officers. One such study pointed out that police might find themselves losing faith in society and people, even to the point that they lose faith in themselves. Another project asserted that over half of the officers surveyed tended to have problems in the areas of profanity, infidelity, and promiscuity in that, while these actions may be undertaken by other officers, they conflicted with the surveyed officers' beliefs that they should act as examples for the community and avoid such behavior. Kenney and McNamara (1999) also reported that that an officer's religion might cause an exclusion from the subculture associated with police. However, only 20% of those officers questioned reported that they felt excluded, but 47% stated that they felt like

other officers looked down on them because of their beliefs. Even so, 65% of those officers said they did socialize with non-Christian officers.

Problems may also arise in the face of traumatic events. One researcher pointed out that people who believe that their lives are directed by God's will sometimes have to adjust those beliefs in the midst of trauma and include the new belief that God does allow bad things to happen (Homicide, 2000). Some of these same concerns were also noted in a conversation the author had with a lieutenant from a mid-sized police department, where he stated that he thought one's religious beliefs might cause him or her to become disenchanted with law enforcement and society as a whole after encountering people in continued negative settings (D. Johnson, personal communication, July 14, 2003).

The review of literature has shown an affirmative link between one's health and affiliated religious practices. Researchers have shown a relationship between the improvement of physical health and individuals involved in religious or spiritual activity. Private businesses have also appeared to begin to take more notice of the personal lives of employees, including their religious and spiritual observances, and, as such, have begun working more to accommodate time for spiritual reflection, etc. However, the results of research projects have been more varied when those studies focused on this area and its relationship with police work. Some researchers have found that the effects of stress are limited when a religious practitioner uses things learned in connection with his or her faith, but other studies have shown that religious adherents are sometimes more likely than others to become disenchanted with the profession and

society overall because of clashes between beliefs and experiences learned from the street.

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to determine the effects of religiosity and/or spirituality within the law enforcement profession. It was hypothesized that a positive relationship would be found between private religious or spiritual practice and the life of the law enforcement professional. Two different strategies were employed to obtain findings. An attempt was made to contact officials from twenty different law enforcement agencies throughout the state of Texas by telephone in order to determine whether or not they had conducted recruitment drives that were associated with religious or spiritual activities, such as church fairs, open houses, part of the “National Night Out” campaign, etc. The decision was made to contact twenty agencies located in cities across the state. Fourteen agency representatives responded to the following questions:

1. Does your agency have a recruiting unit, or, if not, do you have recruitment drives?
2. Has your agency conducted a recruitment drive in conjunction with any type of religious gathering, i.e.: a festival, conference?
3. If you have conducted any recruitment drives at events like those described above, have you tracked the performance of those officers recruited so that their performance may be linked to those efforts?

An anonymous survey was also conducted by polling forty-nine participants in the Law Enforcement Management program, forty of who responded. Those people receiving the surveys had service times in law enforcement from three years to more than twenty-five. The participants came from departments with less than 20 officers to agencies having more than 500. They fell into the following racial and gender categories:

- 36 white males
- 6 Hispanic males
- 6 African-American males
- 1 Native-American male
- 3 white females
- 2 Hispanic females.

In consideration of the size of the sample, the questionnaire did not ask about ethnicity or gender of the respondents. These questions were avoided in order to gain a more complete response without creating a fear within the respondents that the results would be abused.

1. Do you consider spirituality or faith to play an important part in your life?
2. If you answered yes to the above question, do you attend any form of religious service or activity, ie: time of devotion, prayer, or meditation? How many times per month do you participate? Note whether or not your work schedule prevents you from regular attendance. How long have you actively participated in your faith?
3. Does your faith affect the actions and decisions you make in your profession?
4. How many sick leave days have you taken within the past twenty-four months?
5. How many commendations have you received within the last twenty-four months? Please include letters of commendation from citizens as well as any awards presented by your agency.
6. Have you had any disciplinary actions made against you in the past twenty-four months? If so, how many? Please understand that this information is completely confidential and no identifying information is being requested from anyone surveyed. Do not include the specific nature of any allegations.
7. Marital Status: Single (Never married) Married Divorced Widowed
8. If you are married, does your spouse share in your faith?
9. Tobacco use: Yes No
10. Alcoholic beverage consumption: Yes No

Information gathered from the two surveys was compared to determine whether or not the hypothesized link exists and also whether or not police agencies may be overlooking a potential recruiting venue.

FINDINGS

Fourteen agency representatives responded to the questions posed during the telephone survey. Of those fourteen, only two agency representatives indicated that

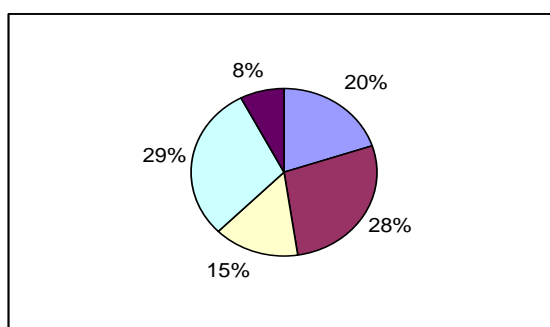
their agencies had conducted a focused recruitment drive at a religious gathering. The respondents both indicated that they had not tracked performance of the officers hired as a result of this type of drive, but one of them indicated that the majority of those applicants who applied for employment had completed the recruitment process and were successful in gaining admittance into an academy. It would appear, based on this information, that further focus should be given to tactics used by agencies in their recruiting efforts so as to maximize the time and efforts of their staff. Such study could be especially valuable in this day of government budget cuts.

The results of the officer survey were varied. Of the forty respondents, only two indicated that they did not consider spirituality or faith to play an important role in their lives. One individual indicated that he or she did not have a formal religious or faith practice at all; this area of life was considered to be important. Attendance at, and participation in, some form of religious or spiritual activity was indicated by thirty-one of those surveyed while four did not answer this question at all. There were three individuals who responded that they had no such participation. Nineteen people interviewed responded that they attended or participated at least four times per month, with eight of those indicating participation six or more times. One respondent said he or she participated daily. The question pertaining to one's schedule interfering with regular service attendance was the least answered of the survey. Twenty-five people did not answer this question and the remaining thirteen were split fairly evenly, with seven reporting that their schedules did conflict with their attendance. Approximately one-third of the survey participants indicated that they had participated in their faith for eighteen years or more. Seven individuals indicated that they did not believe their faith affected

their actions and decisions they made in the workplace, while four responded that their decisions were occasionally affected. The remainder indicated an affirmative link between faith or spiritual practice and workplace decisions.

Regarding the issue of sick leave, five people responded that they had used 10 or more days within the past twenty-four months and two indicated using between seven and nine days. When asked about commendations, there were seven people that stated they had received five or more commendations within the past twenty-four months, while only five stated that they had received none. There were three respondents who reported that they had been the recipients of disciplinary action within the preceding two years, but none of them reported more than one such incident. Four officers reported that they were single, never married, while only one indicated that he or she was divorced. When asked about their spouse's participation in their faith, every married officer indicated that their spouse did share in their faith.

Twenty-six respondents stated that they did not use tobacco products but they did consume alcoholic beverages and two indicated use of tobacco but no consumption of alcohol. Only four respondents stated that they neither used tobacco or alcohol.



20%- Participation 6 times or more per month
 28%- Participation 4 times per month
 15%- Participation less than twice per month
 29%- Participation 2-4 times or no response to question 2(b).
 8%- Does not actively participate or no response to question 1.
 (Figure 1.)

Analysis of the findings from the officer survey presented a few interesting notes. Of the twenty percent of individuals reporting participation in religious services or spiritual practices at least six times per month (*see figure 1*), none of them reported more than three days of sick leave use within the previous twenty-four month period. All of them indicated that their faith was a factor in their decision-making processes while at work. Furthermore, 60 % of them reported having received at least three commendations during this same time period. One of the eight was involved in a disciplinary proceeding. Each of them reported that they consume alcoholic beverages and three of them report use of tobacco products as well. It was also noted that that these same three individuals who use both tobacco and alcohol were among those reporting no use of sick leave during the preceding twenty-four months.

There were eleven officers (28 percent, *figure 1*) that said they participated in religious or spiritual activities four times per month (also roughly interpreted as weekly). Their sick leave responses showed one person using four to six days and another using ten or more during the time period in question, while the remainder showed either no time lost or one to three days. Three of these officers reported receiving three or more commendations. It was also this category where one officer reported that he had received ten commendations. No one reported being involved in a disciplinary proceeding. Two of the respondents reported no use of alcohol or tobacco.

There was a category of respondents who reported irregular (less than twice per month, *figure 1*) or no participation in spiritual practices and yet they held that spirituality or faith played an important part in their lives. It was notable that five of the six respondents in this category indicated that their schedules did impact their ability to

participate in religious services. As to whether or not this played a factor in their choice to participate in such functions remains to be seen. This group contained an officer who used more than ten days of sick leave as well as another who used four to six days. One third of the respondents in this category reported having received four commendations. There was one disciplinary proceeding reported. All members of this group reported use of either alcohol or tobacco.

Only two survey participants indicated that spirituality was not an important factor in their lives and a third person did not respond to this particular question although he did indicate in a subsequent question that he did not actively participate in such practices (*See figure 1*). Two of the three reported using between one and three days of sick leave and one of them reportedly received five commendations. None of them reported being involved in a disciplinary proceeding. One of the three indicated that he did not use alcohol or tobacco.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

With the advent of the internet and advances in technology in general, law enforcement has found itself in the public spotlight on a regular basis. Sometimes that light has shone a positive story and, at other times, has revealed issues that had, in time past, unfortunately been left unattended. Stories appear in various media sources of officers being involved in various scandals. While these incidents are usually isolated, seldom does one hear the same media outlet reporting a negative story also making mention of the fact that X number of officers did *not* involve themselves in such activity. It is incumbent upon this profession to police itself more effectively, and reduce the number of such stories.

At the outset of this project, the author sought to establish a link between spirituality and various aspects of a law enforcement officer's lifestyle and the choices that he or she makes in this profession. It was stated that establishment of such a connection could prove to be an asset to recruiters in their search for qualified officers. It was also intimated that such a link might also show a direct correlation in the improved health of the officer and the decreased need for use of sick leave time. This aspect plays a large part in officer safety by ensuring that adequate coverage is available in the various patrol sectors of an agency's jurisdiction.

The research pointed overwhelmingly to a positive relationship between spirituality of the adherent and his or her physical health. Several studies showed the association with spiritual participation and overall health on the part of faith practitioners. Similar studies showed positive relationships between the outlook of the officer and his or her response to stressful situations. However, there were also some projects that indicated one's faith may bring him or her to the conclusion that all they have believed in is false, thus creating bitterness not only in their profession, but also in their profession of faith.

The agency telephone questionnaire revealed that little has been done in the area of recruitment in conjunction with religious functions. This may be resulting from a fear of mixing the concepts of church and state, and then again, it may just be an area that has not been widely considered. With regard to the issue of separation of church and state, proper presentation and an open-door policy with all religious affiliations could possibly ease any resulting tensions.

The surveys conducted of LEMIT participants revealed a number of interesting points. While the majority of respondents indicated a personal faith or spiritual belief system, the decreased relationship between the use of alcohol and tobacco products and faith practice was found to be practically non-existent. This lack of association could be from a number of factors, including but not limited to the particular teaching of the sect on associates oneself with, as well as the level of substance use, i.e.: an occasional mixed drink as opposed to daily consumption. It was noted that sick leave usage was down among the most active participants.

An affirmative link was also noted between the numbers of commendations for those most involved with their faith. The respondents who reported at least weekly attendance in a religious service reported more commendations than any other group of officers. As mentioned earlier in this section, such knowledge of a job well done might be enough to get an agency's officers through a time when it finds itself in a negative media campaign.

The confidential survey results may have been hindered by the author's desire to ensure respondents of their anonymity. Questions asked could have included length of time in the profession, size of agency, location of the state, etc. The question pertaining to disciplinary proceedings could have been more detailed, thus possibly bringing out specific facts of the incident. Such facts could themselves be subjective in that they might be cause for discipline at one agency while not at another. The question regarding sick leave could have asked whether or not the sick leave was for the officer himself or a family member.

While this project was extremely basic in its scope of study, it bears further research. Preliminary results were positive and further development could build a more firm foundation on which to build a new in-road into the concept of community-oriented policing. Interaction between citizens and their law enforcement professionals outside of normal violator contact enables a greater understanding on the part of both entities. Such education can be a powerful tool if the public and the police can show an effort to work together for the betterment of their locality.

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