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**The Strained Relationship Between the  
Police and the American Black Community**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The relationship between law enforcement and the American black community is strained. Historically, law enforcement was utilized by the majority to monitor and control black communities. Both law enforcement and blacks have been programmed through the use of various forms of social conditioning. This research examines how conditioning can influence how members of one culture perceive another. The Group Position Model or Social Dominance Orientation influence the perceptions of police officers who work in minority communities. The research also addresses how past discrimination affects the perceptions and beliefs American blacks possess concerning the police. The vicarious experiences of some blacks effect or influence how the police will be perceived by other blacks within the community. The strained relationship between law enforcement and the black community is a product of years of mistrust, false perceptions, and social conditioning. This research is designed to identify and correct the conditioning which ultimately influence and motivate the thought processes of law enforcement and the black community. Major ideas include; The Group Position Model, vicarious experiences, past racism, and perceptions. The chasm between the American black community and the police is reparable. The black community and the police share culpability for the current (troubled) relationship. Until rectified, negative perceptions and mistrust will continue to erode the relationship.

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## INTRODUCTION

Citizens cannot predict the perceptions or thoughts that inhabit the minds of police officers who serve in predominately black or brown neighborhoods. Officers often encounter citizens who represent cultures of which he or she may have little or no understanding. Uniformed officers bring more than patrol units, guns, tasers, and other issued equipment into minority neighborhoods. They bring frustration, fear, false perceptions, misinformation, mistrust, and sometimes prejudices. Many minority areas are viewed as dangerous and sometimes referred to as a war zone. The desire to complete a shift and return home safely is the main goal of many officers who work these areas. Citizens who live in these communities are often confronted with police officers who do not look, speak, or act similar to themselves, their neighbors, family, or friends. Often, officers patrolling these communities do not reside in or interact with the citizens who live in those particular communities. Police are viewed as occupiers or an occupying force sent into the neighborhood.

Citizens living in many minority communities have what could be described as a “strained” relationship with the police who are assigned to protect and serve. Decades of mistrust and lack of communication create an environment where many black and brown citizens do not trust or depend upon their police departments. These problems, along with a historical perspective, original to the American black community, shed an unflattering light upon the men and women who wear the uniform of police officer. Officers enter these communities with the stigma of the past hovering over their head. Similarly, many American blacks, when confronted by the police, harbor frustration, fear,

false perceptions, misinformation, mistrust, and sometimes prejudices directed at police officers.

Enforcement action, as simple as arresting a juvenile or as serious as a police shooting, taken by police in minority communities, is perceived differently by American Whites and American Blacks. Incidents, similar to the two listed above, when occurring in black communities, have the potential of spiraling out of control, resulting in violent confrontations between the police and angry citizens. Attempts by officers to explain or communicate with black citizens concerning police actions or procedures, are often received with skepticism.

On those occasions when police are required to use force (specifically deadly force), citizens of black communities often examine the event with anger and suspicion. Any police action taken in minority communities is scrutinized more closely than action taken in white communities. Whites tend to trust and have faith in the police. Blacks often question and are suspicious of police actions (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004a. p. 305)

Law enforcement cannot effectively serve any community without the trust and confidence of the citizens of that community. The lingering question of why similar police action taken in white and black neighborhoods receive different responses, based on the race of the people living in that neighborhood, should be examined by both the police and the community. American whites trust the police and fail to understand when blacks criticize the police (Wietzer & Tuch, 2004a, p. 305-306). Both questions can be addressed by examining the social psychology of how the police have been conditioned to think about and relate to American blacks as well as the conditioning blacks have received in reference to the police.

Several factors fuel the lack of understanding and undermine communication between police departments and American black communities. Historically, American blacks were the victims of an unjust legal system (particularly in the southern United States) which failed to protect or serve citizens of color. The police, who were viewed as representative of the legal system, were viewed as the guardians of that unjust legal system. Perceptions, based in past events, media manipulation, and years of mistrust have hindered or blocked any attempts at honest dialogue between police and the black community. Perceptions, experiences, and past incidents shape how both sides view the other. Many old perceptions, beliefs, and prejudices still exist in both the black community and law enforcement agencies.

Cultural differences between the black community and specifically, white officers, often lead to miscommunication and misunderstandings. Historically, the majority of police officers were white, therefore cultural differences created major stumbling blocks to communication. Police officers still struggle with understanding the cultural norms of black society. Stories and first-hand accounts of police mistreatment have been passed from generation to generation of American blacks. These accounts, or vicarious experiences, are often shared with family, friends, and other members of the black community (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004a, p. 308). These accounts affect how the police are perceived in many minority communities.

The relationship between American blacks and the police began during the era of black slavery. Groups nicknamed (by slaves) “Pattyrollers or Paddy Rollers” (runaway slave patrols) were groups of white citizens who “policed” the movements of slaves between various slave plantations. These groups patrolled the area looking for runaway

slaves. Later, laws enacted in support of Jim Crow and segregation, were established to control newly freed slaves. (Bond & Ely, 2008, p. 129). The police were utilized by the “establishment” to further control black communities. The early experiences with “policing” left most blacks suspicious of police as well as the American criminal justice system. Additional experiences with police, specifically in the Jim Crow South, have contributed to negative perceptions of the police which remain with American blacks. (Keese, 2009). These historical injustices have left American blacks and the police staring at each other through “lenses” fogged with misperceptions and misunderstandings.

Law enforcement alone cannot repair the strained relationship; however, they should take the first step, with the understanding that past law enforcement officials were instrumental in destroying trust in the black community. Although the police were merely doing their jobs, their actions created and fueled mistrust in the black community. Acknowledgement of past incidents related to historical injustices should be the starting point of any discussion. The ultimate goal of these discussions should be a mutual understanding between law enforcement and the American black community.

There are two important issues, the attitudes that officers often hold about minority communities and the perception that minority communities believe concerning Law enforcement. Police agencies can easily point to previous generations of law enforcement officers as the source of mistrust and deception aimed at the American black community. The assertion of this paper submits that the work that must be done to repair the relationship between law enforcement and blacks must be done by

individuals who currently serve as police officers. The responsibility to repair the relationship falls with the police because the problem originated within the ranks of many early police agencies. The strained relationship between law enforcement and the black community is a result of years of mistrust, false perceptions and conditioning.

## **POSITION**

The racial beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions promulgated by American society has an effect on how most police officers view American blacks. Historically, the majority of police officers assigned to minority communities were white and male. Reasonably, it can be assumed that these (mostly white) officers grew up in an environment where negative perceptions and stereotypes attributed to American blacks were common. The relationship between police and minority communities can be explained by examining The Group Position Model or Thesis (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004a, p. 305-306). This theory suggests, "Dominant group interests are predicated on member's beliefs that they have proprietary claims to scarce resources, any challenge to which is viewed as a threat to the racial status quo and may be resisted" (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004a, p. 306). The desire to accommodate the "group interest" of the majority white community has created tension between the police and minority communities. The fear of possible loss of resources or privilege, represent negative consequences to the dominant group. Members of the dominant group view the police as serving their best interest and therefore they fully support the efforts of the police (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004a, p. 306). In essence, the police are utilized to maintain the advantages afforded the dominant group.



Police officers often enjoy the full support of the dominant community when confronted with minority group criticism. Descriptions of “driving while black or brown”, given by black and brown citizens are often dismissed as unrealistic or merely fabrications by white citizens. Officers are encouraged and empowered by the support they receive from the white community. Within the dominant group, American blacks are perceived as violent or prone to committing criminal acts (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004a, p. 306). Therefore, the police are justified in taking affirmative action to ensure that control is maintained in minority communities.

The majority of police officers are members of the dominant group. The views and attitudes of these officers reflect the views and attitudes of the communities or environment they grew up in. The results are intentional conditioning relating to how police view or perceive American blacks. A General Social Study conducted in 2000 revealed that roughly, “48 percent of whites believe that blacks are “violence prone” (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004a, p. 306).

Police officers also have perceptions about the American black community. Police officers share the opinions of the white community and often suspect American blacks of being more violent than American whites (as cited in Decker, 1981. p 8). Several factors including previous experiences with black offenders and media coverage of local events have helped shape the perceptions of the country and police officers as well. Each of these factors have negatively affected the relationship between the police and American blacks. Additionally, the behavior exhibited by police in the era immediately after the civil war, combined with decades of ignoring or failing to address racial injustices also contributed to serious minority mistrust of the police.

The mistrust and suspicions of blacks directed at the police remain problematic. The issues that were prevalent during the past remain relevant today. Modern policing, particularly in southern states, can be traced back to attempts to control the black population in eighteenth century America (Lersch, 2002, p. 29). Forerunners of modern police were citizen patrols often hired to watch for and apprehend runaway slaves. These patrols served as a deterrent to slaves who desired freedom. These patrols were given the authority to beat, torture, and sometimes kill runaway slaves.

After the civil war, many cities used their police departments as a tool to ensure racial superiority for whites (Coates, 2004, p. 32). The majority of police departments, similar to the rest of society, subjugated American Blacks throughout Slavery, Reconstruction, the Jim Crow Era, and the Civil Rights Movement. Law enforcement was utilized by state and local governments to enforce laws that were racist and unequal for blacks. Additionally, law enforcement has been used by local and state governments to enforce an unjust system. Ultimately, law enforcement became the symbol of oppression to American blacks. In many locations throughout the nation, the police actively participated in acts of terror, or stood idle while others committed these acts (Lersch, 2002, p. 29). These early actions, committed by police, diminished the level of credibility most blacks afford law enforcement. Detailed accounts of these injustices were passed along from generation to generation in the black community.

Law enforcement, during the period shortly after the civil war and ending in the late 1960's, effectively ignored the needs and concerns of American blacks. Police were not obligated to protect the rights or property of black citizens. The only mandate

that most law enforcement agencies followed was to control the populations of black communities and protect the white population.

Those past police indiscretions currently plague the relationship between police and the American black community. American blacks who have negative interactions with police often share their experiences with neighbors, family, and friends. The repeated description of supposed mistreatment at the hands of law enforcement often lead to vicarious or shared negative police experiences within the community. Research indicated that “blacks are more likely to leave an encounter with the police upset or angry, and they are also more likely to feel that they have not received procedural justice from the officers, which lowers their overall opinion of the police” (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004a, p. 307).

Vicarious negative experience can influence how minority members view all police actions. Any contact with the police can be viewed negatively and perceived as police mistreatment or discrimination. American blacks are also aware of and understand the “group interest” displayed by the dominant group or white Americans. Experiences with the police being utilized by whites to control black efforts to gain equality remain fresh in the minds of many blacks. The police represent past social institutions that advocate maintaining racial inequality. Research has identified three (3) factors which can affect the perceptions or attitudes toward the police. Those include; witnessing an interaction (between the police and a citizen), learning of the situation through newspaper, radio, or television coverage, and if an individual is already predisposed to suspicions of the police (Weitzer, & Tuch, 2004b). Basically,

American blacks tend to view or perceive police actions differently than American whites.

Strained relationships, created hundreds of years in the past, continue to contribute to fear and mistrust many blacks hold for the police, as well as the white population in general. Fear and mistrust were the main reasons most blacks could or would not call local law enforcement for protection. Some of those attitudes are prevalent in many black communities today.

Reminders of past injustices remain fresh in the memory of most American blacks. White society basically ignored the concerns of blacks and justified the use of the police as a force to maintain order. Past mistreatment at the hands of law enforcement created a lack of respect for the police as well as the law (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011).

Equally important are the personal encounters with police officers that many American blacks describe. Blacks, unlike whites, describe unfair and often racist treatment from law enforcement. The President's Commission on Law enforcement and Administration of Justice referred to white police officers as an unwelcome force in black communities (Weitzer, 2000, p. 313). Many blacks view law enforcement through a prism shaded by past acts of disrespect and mistreatment. Lack of respect and a history of unfair treatment is ultimately the nexus of the strained relationship between law enforcement and the American black community. Many American blacks remain suspicious of all police actions. The experiences described by blacks who interact with law enforcement are often combinations of their own experiences combined with knowledge of incidents that have occurred previously in their community. These

interactions with police often result in many blacks becoming hypersensitive to any encounter with the police. A simple traffic or pedestrian stop can be viewed as harassment. Many blacks believe they are singled out by racist officers who are looking to arrest innocent blacks. American black author and commentator, Granderson, writing in a March 2012 CNN opinion article, summed up feelings that most blacks have concerning the police, he wrote, "I don't trust cops and I don't know many black people who do, I respect them, I sympathize with them, I am appreciative of the work they do" (Granderson, 2012, para. 1). Granderson (2012) goes on to describe being pulled over, handcuffed and surrounded by police vehicles for no apparent reason. Events similar to his experience are repeated numerous times within the black community and contribute to mistrust of the police.

Furthermore, cultural differences or misunderstandings contribute to additional friction between police officers and members of the black community. Kirkland describes in his article, *Straight Talk About Racism: The Road to Racial Healing*, the channels of communication between black America and white America are non-existent (Kirkland, 2000, p. 11). Police face many challenges to successful communication within most black communities including, overcoming past experiences that individual blacks have endured such as driving while black and racial profiling.

Perceptions play an important role in any relationship. Simple facial expressions, gestures, or tone of voice are often misunderstood when police and blacks interact. False perceptions often lead police officers or blacks to misjudge the intentions of the other. Cultural misunderstandings often limit or destroy communication between the police and the black community. The police view blacks as loud and uncooperative

while the citizens perceive the police as disrespectful. The perception of disrespect can undermine any relationships that have been established between the community and the police (Mastrofski, Reisig, & McCluskey, 2002, p. 2).

Many officers fail to communicate with blacks because they appear impatient or uncaring. Most police officers and blacks recognize and acknowledge the difficulties of communicating with individuals of a different culture. The problem intensifies when police action is misunderstood or questioned by the community. Most law enforcement agencies have attempted to bridge the communication gap by recruiting and hiring more black and Hispanic officers. Departments also instituted community policing efforts that have officers assigned directly in black and Hispanic communities. Despite those efforts, the lack of relationship still remains in most minority communities.

Finally, prejudice and racism cannot be dismissed from this discussion. Most officers in the past were white and they held many of the same beliefs and opinions that many whites had for American blacks. Blacks were viewed as unequal to whites and therefore underserving of the same rights and privileges of white citizens (Kirkland, 2000, p. 1). Any discussion concerning the relationship between blacks and law enforcement would be incomplete without mentioning the racial history of the United States. The struggle to overcome the effects of racism has been a long and unending battle for law enforcement (Tamper, 2005, p.104). The failure of law enforcement to communicate truthfully with blacks concerning past racism will prolong problems between blacks and law enforcement.

Each of the problems listed above should be addressed and discussed with the American black community. The key to repairing any meaningful relationship requires

honest communication and understanding. The first step should include acknowledging that serious harm was inflicted upon the black community. Both law enforcement and the black community have on-going issues related to negative perceptions. Both are required to acknowledge misperceptions and work to repair the relationship.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Law enforcement cannot be blamed for acts performed in the past. Times have changed and society has progressed. Police agencies have made a concerted effort to find, recruit, and hire qualified black officers. Most departments have community based programs designed to develop relationships with the citizens living in minority communities.

Law enforcement has developed training designed to inform officers of the necessity of treating all citizens fairly. Policies and procedures have been adopted to identify and correct illegal behavior that might lead to discrimination. Each day police officers interact with citizens all over the country, most without citizens complaining (Lersch, 2002, p. v). The police are often judged by the entire community, many of whom, base their attitudes on information received (vicariously) from family, friends, or acquaintances. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported as recently as 2001 that, "most Americans seldom interact with police, suggesting that their views are largely rooted in other sources" (Weitzer, & Tuch, 2004b, p. 395). Individuals living in minority communities often do not have personal or direct knowledge of police misconduct. Many of the beliefs of minority members have also been influenced by situations they might have viewed through mass media sources. Vicarious experiences and

sensationalized media coverage are not reasons to criticize or jump to conclusions concerning police misconduct.

However, law enforcement should not be excused from their past actions. For example, the tactics police utilized against civil rights workers in the 1960's still influence how American blacks view law enforcement (Sigler & Johnson, 2002, p. 2). Images of police dogs and water hoses, documented on network television and in photographs, continue to haunt the relationship between the police and blacks. All those images are examples of past incidents that should be learned from and forgotten.

Citizens in black communities continue to complain about police officers and the tactics they utilize in black neighborhoods (Sigler & Johnson, 2002, p.3). Citizen perceptions of unfair or unjust treatment by police still indicates that problems still exist. Citizens who live in black communities deserve the same respect afforded to other citizens. The police have taken steps to correct past problems by hiring and promoting qualified black police officers. Police officers are trained in cultural diversity and racial profiling.

While it is true that law enforcement officials participated in past acts of discrimination, American blacks should get over the past. American blacks should examine all the progress that society has made in the past few years. Blacks should dismiss past injustices and judge law enforcement on how well they currently perform. Dwelling on past situations is not productive and merely stifles the growth of current relationships. The mission of law enforcement is to protect and serve all citizens and they should not focus on catering to one group. Making special concessions to the black community might create the perception that other citizens are not as important.



Therefore, creating a greater gap between the black community and white citizens, many of which have not done anything that might be perceived as racist or prejudicial.

The black community is also culpable for the current state of relations between themselves and law enforcement. American blacks consistently call for police services in their neighborhoods, and then criticize the police for taking action. Perceptions held by blacks against the police are an attempt to transfer responsibility for black criminal behavior from the black community and onto society. Law enforcement cannot be responsible for perceptions held by individuals. When most Americans think of crime, they think of blacks. They also believe that blacks by nature are dangerous (Levinson & Smith, 2012, p. 47-48).

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Although the blacks share some responsibility for the current conditions in the black community, the behavior of law enforcement cannot be excused. Also, many who encourage blacks to disregard perceptions of police mistreatment are themselves influenced by negative stereotypes. Stereotypes relating to the violence prone natures of blacks often explain police support in the white community (Barkan & Cohn, 1998, p.1).

Law enforcement must acknowledge that problems exist between the police and citizens who reside in predominately American black communities. Law enforcement should acknowledge their role in past racial injustice. The wounds created by past deeds will not heal until acknowledgement of harm is given to the victims. Today's law enforcement must work to repair relationships with the American black community. The previous work done by law enforcement agencies is commendable, but they have not

addressed the psychology that fuels misperception and mistrust among dominate group officers.

The key to developing trust and a true relationship with the black community should include acknowledgement of harm. Communities throughout the nation are plagued with past incidents that document the failure of police agencies to protect individuals in the black community. Police agencies must find the courage to acknowledge past failures in this regard. Otherwise, law enforcement will continue to scratch their collective heads and wonder why black communities are difficult to police and blacks will continue to blame current police for past injustices. The police should work to mend the relationship between themselves and the black community. Acknowledgement of harm caused by generations of injustice is a first step to repairing the relationship with the community. The development of a meaningful dialogue is beneficial to both parties.

American blacks must realize and acknowledge that all police officers do not hold negative or racist views. Also, blacks must understand that past experiences and conditioning have influenced how the police are negatively perceived in the present day. Perceptions held by both the police and the black community fuel mistrust and miscommunication by both parties. The police and the community must work in concert to dispel myths. Cultural differences should not prohibit the community and law enforcement from developing and maintaining productive relationships. Cultivating relationships will aid in the development of trust between the police and the community. Positive relationships will make working in minority communities easier for officers.

Prejudice and racism cannot be tolerated in today's society. The police have a mandate to protect and serve all communities. Law Enforcement should work tirelessly to eradicate all evidence of racial intolerance. Development of a meaningful relationship will help curb racial animosity in the black community. Law enforcement cannot continue to ignore the obvious problems between themselves and the black community. Years of denial and minimization have fueled a widening gap between the police and many black citizens.

The police as well as black communities must recognize the psychology at work on both sides. The police must acknowledge the negative conditioning they have received concerning blacks. They also must recognize how the social dominance theory or group position theory has influenced how blacks were historically viewed. Blacks must recognize that they too have been influenced by perceptions and negative conditioning concerning police actions. Also how vicarious experiences influence and cloud the perceptions of blacks.

The culture of mistrust resulted from a long and checkered history between the police, who worked to protect an unjust system of laws, and American blacks who viewed the police as guardians of that system. The effort to change long held perceptions will require hard work and the commitment of both the police and American blacks. Understanding that mistrust, false perceptions and conditioning are psychological factors that influence how each party perceives the other, is an initial step in developing any relationship. Historically, the police were used to maintain division between blacks and whites. The police can now be used to heal and repair a major injustice that has plagued this nation for far too long.

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