

**The Bill Blackwood
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**Closing the Gap: A Look at Gender Disparity
Among All Ranks in Law Enforcement Agencies**

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ABSTRACT

According to data from the US Census Bureau, women comprise almost exactly half (50.8%) of the population of the United States (US Census Bureau, 2018). However, within the law enforcement profession, women represent only 13% of all police officers (Reaves, 2015). The large disparity in gender representation in the law enforcement profession has been a reality for at least the past four decades, and much research has been conducted in an attempt to identify barriers to women entering into and promoting within the profession. In an era where use of deadly force incidents have driven public perception of police into a downward spiral, agencies and training standards have changed focus to emphasize de-escalation and effective communication skills, understanding personality types, and increasing community engagement efforts. This paper asserts that in continuing these efforts to train officers in developing these soft skills, law enforcement agencies, training divisions, police academies and citizens' police academies should train all officers – male AND female – in gender differences and attributes. This training can positively affect police-citizen encounters and identify situations which might benefit from the presence or involvement of an officer of a specific gender. In doing so, female and male officers will have a better understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses as they relate to police work and peacefully resolving citizen encounters. In addition, female officers may begin to feel more at ease in entering, remaining in, and promoting up through the profession if they are not trained in the academy to fit into the box of the traditional male officer.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Position	4
Counter Arguments	6
Recommendation	8
References	11

INTRODUCTION

Women have long been under-represented in all ranks of law enforcement agencies. While efforts to target recruitment practices to reach more female police applicants have been widely undertaken in recent years, the rate of increase in the number of women joining police agencies as sworn officers has been steady, yet slow (Reaves, 2012; Reaves, 2010; Langton, 2010). In the early 1970s, women comprised just 2% of police officers nationwide, and most of them were assigned to “gender-specific units or clerical positions” (Moraff, 2015, para. 10). In 2013, some 40 years later, women comprised 12.5% of the sworn officer force in municipal agencies in the United States (Reaves, 2015; FBI, 2014). An analysis of personnel in supervisory and executive ranks of municipal law enforcement agencies in 2013 shows that the percentage of females declined significantly: 10% of first-line supervisors were females, compared to just 3% of executive officers (Reaves, 2015). Sheriffs’ offices show a similar trend, although they boast an overall higher percentage of female officers across all ranks. In 2013, 14% of all sheriffs’ deputies were female, which includes 12% of first-line supervisors (Reaves, 2015).

It is no secret that men and women have vastly different physical, emotional, biological, and psychological traits. Many of the inherent women-specific traits are highly effective and oftentimes preferred over male-specific traits in certain law enforcement related circumstances (Schuck, 2014b). Research repeatedly affirms this, despite the predominant societal ideology of a police officer as a strong, masculine, and assertive male (Breci, 2012). Based upon the various studies affirming the benefits of female-specific traits to the law enforcement profession, administrators and recruiters

have increased and enhanced recruitment efforts, specifically aimed at recruiting more females to join their ranks (D'Arelli, 2014). Despite these enhanced recruitment efforts, however, agencies report a dismal amount of applications from qualified women (Schuck, 2014a).

Several notions that might explain the slow response to targeted recruitment have been hypothesized and studied. One of these notions is attributed to the seemingly impermeable police subculture, which "has been described as a manifestation of the nature of police work" (Rabe-Hemp, 2008, p. 254). The shared experiences of the inherent dangers of the job, the stress of shift work, the witnessing of traumatic incidents, and other job-related stress are only some of the phenomena which define the police subculture. This subculture, it is argued, leans heavily toward masculine values such as the ability to display and use force, an intimidating command presence, physical strength, and indifferent or even aggressive behavior (Rabe-Hemp, 2008). Historically, the police subculture was the root cause of a strong resistance from male officers to women entering the police force - a resistance which has been slow to dissolve and which lingers even in the 21st century (IACP, 1998; Brown, 2005; Franklin, 2007).

Another hypothesis that has been studied and proven is that women often share a lack of confidence that they will be able to physically and emotionally do the job, thrive in the police environment, be accepted by the male members of the department, or be provided equitable and non-discriminatory treatment from co-workers and superiors (Carlan, Nored, & Downey, 2011). Oftentimes, women face other more personal barriers to entering into - or advancing within - the law enforcement profession. Familial

obligations and gender-normative expectations (for example, primary responsibilities for child-rearing), coupled with the innate female tendency to shy away from self-promotion, are common impediments to a significant influx of women entering the profession (Price, 1996; Sandberg, 2013). Likewise, these particular traits often prevent women from seizing the opportunity to advance in rank within their agency (Archibold & Hassell, 2009).

While the law enforcement community has widely come to recognize and appreciate the differences between male and female officers, and many agencies have actively made advancements in efforts to recruit and promote more female officers, little has been done to address the lingering police subculture within the profession (Franklin, 2007). Great care has been taken in developing basic police academy curricula that intentionally do not distinguish or even address any gender differences in male and female officers but that aim to treat police cadets as gender-neutral (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, 2018). While it is reasonable to assume that the intent of this gender-blindness is altruistic in nature, research shows that not only does the male dominant police subculture still exist, it is taught, however inadvertently and unintentionally, to police academy cadets through mere socialization in the training environment (Prokos & Padavic, 2002).

In the past five to seven years, the industry has clearly identified a need for continuing education training specifically designed for the female officer to allow women to recognize and use their own natural abilities with intention within their work (See “Leadership Inventory for Female Executives” at <http://www.lemitonline.org>, “Women in Command” and “Female Enforcers” at <http://www.caliberpress.com>, “Winning Mindset

for Women” at <http://www.jdbucksavage.com>, “Women’s Leadership Institute” at <http://www.theiacp.org>, “Female Officer Survival Skills” at <http://www.safariland.com/training>, and “Survival Pistol for the Female Officer”, “Tactical Rifle for the Female Officer” and “Building Warrior Women” at <http://www.loukatactical.com>). The benefits of these types of trainings are numerous and are gaining in popularity, as the number and frequency of available courses continues to increase. However, again, targeting only women officers with much of this important and valuable education does nothing to affect the police subculture and any resistance to hiring and promoting females that may still be festering within the police culture. In order to drastically increase the number of women entering into or promoting up through the law enforcement ranks, agencies and police academies should train all officers - male and female - to recognize, identify, and utilize the inherent qualities and traits possessed by each gender of officers in appropriate situations. It is through embracing and promoting these differences rather than ignoring them, which inadvertently results in women being trained to fit into the box of an established male officer persona, that the male-dominant police subculture will begin to crumble, thereby closing the pervasive gender gap in the law enforcement profession.

POSITION

Many innate characteristics of females can be tools for all police officers, just as any of the typical tangible tools in their officers’ toolbox. For instance, one widely-recognized difference between men and women is women’s superior communication skills. This includes not only interpersonal communication and conversations, but also listening, observing non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and body language,

empathizing, validating emotions, and collaborating to find solutions (Glennon, 2010; Bennett & Hemenway, 2015). Hormonal differences in men and women also contribute to desired outcomes in certain situations (Bennett & Hemenway, 2015). When under stress, both genders release the hormone oxytocin. Oxytocin is associated with nurturing and protective instincts, such as the nurturing bond a mother shares with her child, or the instinct of a male to protect his family from the danger of attack. It is the gender hormones coupled with oxytocin which may determine the way a stressful situation is handled by a male or a female officer. (Bennett & Hemenway, 2015). Men's testosterone (which is produced in high levels during stress) lowers the effects of oxytocin and contributes to the fight or flight response. Women's estrogen, on the other hand, will work to enhance the effects of oxytocin, thereby kick-starting a protective and nurturing response over a fight or flight response. This response in women has been dubbed the "tend and befriend" response by psychologist Shelley E. Taylor (Bennett & Hemenway, 2015, p. 10). These differences may very well serve to explain why female officers are far less likely to resort to use of force tactics to resolve a volatile encounter (Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2008; O'Neill, 2016) and why women have such fewer overall citizen complaints and fewer sustained citizen complaints than their male counterparts, particularly for excessive force (Lonsway, 2002).

As mentioned in the introduction, many women who may have an interest in police work do not follow through with applying for and entering the profession. Likewise, many women who do join the profession do not (or will not) take opportunities to advance to higher ranks. Lack of confidence in ability, fear of not being accepted by male officers, and family obligations have been shown to be the main reasons for their

decisions not to promote (Archibold & Hassell, 2009). Gender differences are also at play in the decision to go for a promotion opportunity: men have a tendency to feel more confident in their performance, abilities, qualifications and leadership style, so much so that they will apply for a promotion even if they are lacking in up to 40% of the listed job qualifications. Conversely, women are likely to be less assertive and instead wait for their hard work to pay off and get them noticed and recognized. Women will generally not consider applying for a promotion position if they do not meet 100% of the qualifications (Sandburg & Scovell, 2013). Again, female-specific continuing education classes have become more popular, as a need for teaching women how to promote themselves, be more assertive and gain confidence has been identified. Several of the female-centered classes cited above specifically focus on key concepts of leadership and advancement for women.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

It could be argued that women must be just as capable as men to perform the job functions of police officers and, therefore, should receive the same exact training. This is a true fact: women *should* be just as capable as men in police work. And studies show that they are. A Gallup survey of 800 police chiefs showed they overwhelmingly agreed that females are capable of performing the job functions of the officer position, and only 28% stated they are concerned that women lack size, strength, capacity for confrontation and force capability (IACP, 1998).

While it is undisputed that female officers must be able to perform the job at the same level as a male officer, receiving the exact same training is not always a good thing. It has been established in the introduction that police academy training does not

acknowledge any differences between male and female officers, despite visible physiological differences such as stature, average height, and average weight. Each cadet is trained exactly the same way and held to the same standards to pass the class.

However, by historically ignoring gender differences, academies and departments have actually been doing their officers a disservice. Because there are so many more male officers in the profession than females, it stands to reason that there is a similar discrepancy in the number of female police trainers/instructors, especially for topics of physical skills training such as firearms and defensive tactics. Learning to shoot accurately from a male instructor can be intimidating for a female officer, particularly if the instructor is not aware of or does not acknowledge any physical or cognitive differences inherent to females (Burger, 2015). Women officers who have taken female-specific continuing education courses are realizing the value of teaching officers about gender differences, including what aspects of the job female officers excel at and which aspects men excel at. In her 2013 article for *PoliceOne*, Sgt. Betsey Brantner-Smith claims that her female students share the sentiment that they wish their own departments' trainers knew the things that Smith teaches in her classes (Smith, 2013).

Another argument could be that women are too emotional to be police officers or police leaders, and therefore, great efforts should not be wasted on targeted recruitment, training, or mentoring (Schmitt, 2015). Extensive research has been undertaken in the area of gender differences, emotion work, soft skills versus hard skills and the advantage that women have in this area. One study found that women rate higher than men in terms of emotional labor skills, which are skills associated with the

caring perspective, such as nurturing, empathy and compassion. The same study indicates that emotional labor is essential for positive and successful interactions between police officers and members of the public. This research further found that emotional labor plays such a pivotal role in procedural justice and organizational legitimacy, and goes so far as to recommend that police executives train officers on how to use emotion work effectively when working with the public (Schuck, 2014). These emotional labor skills serve women well in positions of leadership as well. Women tend to be better transformational leaders than men, given that they are more prone to display care and compassion for the well-being of their subordinates (Schuck, 2014). Women possess certain traits which can be beneficial in police supervision and leadership, such as collaboration, creativity, intuition, excellent communication skills, emotional intelligence and relationship building. These traits make women highly competent and suitable for leadership positions in the police organization, as they are essential in nurturing and developing subordinates to achieve excellence (Sheetz-Runkle, 2011).

RECOMMENDATION

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal for employers to discriminate against job applicants on the basis of gender (among other things), forcing law enforcement agencies to hire qualified female applicants for the position of police officer. Although it was the law, the damage had already been done within the ranks, as men's attitudes toward women becoming officers was resistive. Throughout the decades, agencies have steadily increased their recruitment efforts with regard to female police officer candidates; however, only very slow progress has been made to

even out the gender representation within agencies. With the passing of the law, police academies took a best practice approach to their curricula, which requires the same expectations of female candidates as male candidates for successful completion of the academy. To date, this equality in training has completely ignored any differences among the male and female candidates, but remained focused on training cadets in the image of a strong, masculine, and police officer-protector; a mold women have been forced to fit.

In the past decade, and most recently with the decline in public approval of the police, it is clear that swift and far-reaching change in the police subculture must occur. In order to more quickly dissolve the dominant, hyper-masculine ideology in the police academy subculture, agencies and academies should remove their blinders to gender differences and begin to incorporate the topic into academy and continuing education curricula. Skills trainings such as firearms, less lethal weapons, and defensive tactics should address the physical, physiological, and psychological differences between men and women and should instruct all officers in these differences. Furthermore, to achieve optimal results, agencies should actively develop instructors of both genders for these courses. This will lead to a more attractive and welcoming employment possibility for women who have entertained the idea of entering the law enforcement profession.

Continued targeted recruitment efforts are also recommended, including “Women in Policing” opportunity events and job fairs. Such events would invite women from the community, who are interested in pursuing a career as a police officer, to an event highlighting the local police department and hosted by both male and female officers of the department. An “Inquiry Program,” in which an interested woman would be

scheduled for an opportunity to ride along with an on-duty officer to better learn the aspects of the job could help the woman get a feeling of whether or not it is something she would really care to pursue.

To create a culture of acceptance and support, agencies should consider implementing a mentorship program, if not already available. A mentorship program would serve a similar purpose to existing officers who desire to advance in rank, by matching them up with a veteran officer to work one-on-one with the officer to prepare him or her for not only the promotional process, but also for the leadership role he or she aspires to. In this way, women promotional candidates would feel less alienated and more encouraged to seek promotional opportunities.

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