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**Race Relations and the Occupational Socialization of African
American Men in Law Enforcement**

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ABSTRACT

This review is written to bring awareness to some of the disparities located within police departments and society that limit the occupational socialization of African American men. What must be asserted up front is that the purpose of this review is intended to promote responsiveness at all levels in law enforcement agencies on how a lack of trust, lack of social-political capital, and other repressive structures work to strain and limit how African American men are socialized within police agencies and how the strain of that socialization process has an effect on the relationship between the police and the minority community.

It is confirmed that police departments are becoming more diverse than in the past. What must be taken into consideration is the fact that the diversification of police departments is an area of study that must be more critically examined. Police departments are entrusted by all members of their communities to protect and serve in a fair and impartial manner. In some communities across the country the trust that the communities has of their police departments has deteriorated tremendously. It is important for police departments to promote diversity and inclusion at all levels within the organization to improve relationships between their officers and the communities they serve, particularly between the police and the minority community. The diversity of law enforcement has changed, however, not as much as some might have expected. How much the diversity of law enforcement has improved varies from department to department, and yet still, there is a long way to go.

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INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement is becoming more diverse than it has been in the past. More minorities are applying for police positions accepting jobs into the law enforcement field. While minorities are entering into the field they have to navigate through the occupational socialization process. Occupational Socialization is defined as the adaptation of an individual to a given set of job-related behaviors, particularly the expected behavior that accompanies a specific job (Webster's Dictionary). Race relations play a major role in the adaptation and socialization of minority officers. Minority applicants have to find ways to gain acceptance into a white male dominated field. Recruits are encouraged in the police academy to develop teamwork and identify with fellow recruits (Britz, 1997). After graduation from the academy, new hires gain information on acceptable behaviors that is expected of them from officers that are already working in the field.

In police departments, the expected behavior of officers are developed from the traditional values and norms of the majority group in the field, which has been and continues to be in most areas that of the white male. When minorities enter into this role, some of their experiences are often at odds with what they have been taught by their environment. At a very young age, some African American men are taught that the police are a group that they should not trust. In some African American environments, lessons are taught that there is an adversarial relationship that has sustained itself over time between the minority community and the police. What is important is that there must be an understanding that when African American males identify themselves with the experiences of discrimination through slavery and the civil

rights era, they are provided with a framework of the social progress of their group (Cornileus, 2012). The police were one group used during these times to enforce the interest of those in power. To some African Americans the police are still used today to enforce the interest of those in power.

In some opinions of the African American culture, there is a perception that the police and the criminal justice system are a direct threat. This problematic situation has become a legacy of the African American culture that they are the group to be “policed” (Dulaney, 1996, p. 1). We must work to change that perception. Barlow and Barlow (2000) mentions that the very first municipal policing activity in the United States was constructed mainly to regulate the activities of African people and catch runaway slaves. The history of African Americans in the United States has “been so integrally connected with the history of the police in this society” (Barlow & Barlow, 2000, p. 290).

Minority officers enter into an environment that places demands on them that are new to them, and often those demands conflict with some of their own experiences. Some demands require new officers to side one way or another on a particular topic. For example, political party affiliation is often divided along racial lines and is quite often the topic of discussion within departments. In most police departments African American men are in the minority and some of these discussions place them in a very stressful and alienated position because they do not agree with the opinion of the majority group. Some of these demands are passed along through the subculture that is developed by police officers in departments. Officers, at times, are unconcerned about others in their presence who could be offended by their conversations, which can

add stress to minority officers to choose to conform or not conform or challenge the status quo.

A police subculture is nothing more than a social group that holds characteristics and behaviors that can separate it from a larger culture or society (Webster's dictionary). African American police officers challenge parts of their cultural identity to be accepted by the police sub-culture. Sklansky (2006) mentioned that the police subculture has been known to be a factor in the severed relationships that minority officers experience with their community and roots and how the black officer was placed in "a doubly marginal position" (p. 1229). Sklansky (2006) asserted that the black officer is "a man exposed to the shame of his race, because his occupational role was perceived as antagonistic to the interests of the ghetto" (p. 1229). In the police subculture, there is a certain acceptable way to think, speak and act that is, at times, different than anything the African American has experienced in his culture.

Administrative personnel in many departments are white males, and some of them have been raised in majority white suburban neighborhoods. They are separated by social boundaries when they are raised. Administrators expect minority officers to fit in and assimilate with their co-workers, which is a reasonable expectation; however, the transition is not as easy as some administrators believe it is to be. In many departments, African American officers are one or two individuals working with many white male officers. Administrators should be more concerned with the transition that the minority officer experiences trying to understand the conflicting views that he has of himself and opinions of his white co-workers and the minority community to which he belongs. It has been recognized that all police officers are marginalized somewhat by

society; however, “black officers are further marginalized as members of the minority race” (Britz, 1997, p.131).

This research paper will show that there are structures that work within some organizations that limit the socialization of African Americans. The research will also discuss how race is a determining factor in the level of trust provided to individuals. It is important to understand that in organizations, there will be conflicts, and race relations play a major role in many of the conflicts experienced by members of organizations, just as they play a role in the community. Law enforcement agencies have had a long-withstanding negative relationship with minorities. It has been argued that the police cannot be comprehended without understanding how they were embedded in a criminal justice system that supported slavery, segregation, and discrimination against minorities (Crank, 2004). This is one of the historical perspectives of the relationship between minorities and the police that keeps many minorities from even considering applying for positions within law enforcement.

There has to be a mutually concerted effort on behalf of all law enforcement officers, regardless of race, to create a discrimination-free work environment. By working to diversify law enforcement agencies, at all levels, the relationships within the organization will be improved, which will directly impact the relationships within the community. Understanding that there are barriers to hiring minority officers, like the image that the police has in minority communities, agencies have to work to overcome them (Dunham & Alpert, 1997). For workplace and community relations to be improved in law enforcement, there must be some form of intervention (Cornileus, 2012). In an effort to improve the negative relationship with the minority community and support of a

truly color-blind workforce, law enforcement organizations should become more aware of the impact that race relations has on the occupational socialization and career development of minorities within their departments.

POSITION

In order to create a more inclusive work environment in law enforcement, there must be recognition of some of the habits that affect the promotion of diversity within the field. Racism has been identified to be well institutionalized and systemic. Studies show that African Americans still have to deal with racism, which impacts the development of their career (Cornileus, 2012). At some point in time, many departments will face workplace tension and conflict; it has been found that many of these conflicts are caused by cultural differences (Cornileus, 2012). African American men have to find a balance between the historical culturally relevant identity that has been passed along to them since birth and the occupational identity that is created and maintained by such a white male dominated field as policing.

Racism is no longer just an issue of the identified bigot or racial slurs and attitudes of whites against blacks (Bolton & Feagin, 2004). There are structures in place that constrain and limit the career development and advancement of African-American men in the workplace especially in upper level positions (Cornileus, 2012). These structures are identified as repressive structures, and some of the most identifiable repressive structures are the stereotypes that are attached to African-American men, subjective and disparate career development practices, and differentiated opportunities for the acquisition of sociopolitical capital (Cornileus, 2012).

Cornileus (2012) mentioned that stereotypes serve as a basis for discrimination in the career development of African American men. Some of the stereotypes identified were the following: not smart enough to handle responsibility, not able to manage people well, not able to suppress anger, and laziness (Cornileus, 2012). All involved usually understand that those stereotypical beliefs should not be displayed outwardly; however, those beliefs still exist in some places and are carried out in more private settings through racist comments made with family and friends (Bolton & Feagin, 2004).

Law enforcement agencies must promote positive career development opportunities for African American men. There has to be more transparency and accountability in hiring and promotional practices and a commitment to create diversity. There are career development opportunities that are created not based on objective performance but relationships and mentorships that create unequal opportunities for African American men (Cornileus, 2012). Career development opportunities are gained through interpersonal relationships and access to members at the highest levels in the organization. There are practices that constrain career development for African American men because they are subconsciously not granted as much access to the members at the highest level as other officers. There must be more objectivity, transparency in organizational policies in regards to strategic assignments, leadership development, and promotion (Cornileus, 2012).

Organizations like police departments become places where gaining sociopolitical capital (information, influence, and opportunity) gives a person something of value (Cornileus, 2012). Research has shown that individuals tend to interact with members of their own social group more than they do with members of other social

groups (Cornileus, 2012). What is relevant here is the fact that most social groups tend to be made up of members of the same race (Cornileus, 2012). This leads to the second position point and that is the intersection of race and trust.

Smith (2010) stated, "Race is the life experience that has the biggest impact on trust" (p.454). It has been asserted that the racial gap is the largest between the African American and White population groups (Smith, 2010). Members of minority groups are believed to trust less because of the racial discrimination that they have experienced (Smith, 2010). Minority officers are finding, at best, marginal acceptance into law enforcement organizations, especially in mid-management and upper level positions. It should not be surprising that there will be instances in law enforcement organizations where a lack of trust can create distance between members of the organization. Recent studies have indicated "that people are more likely to trust in and act trustworthy toward, those they perceive to be like themselves" (Smith, 2010, p. 463). Members of the same group will allocate greater resources within groups and expect greater fairness in treatment from members of their own race. Administrators will validate this theme by assigning officers to certain situations within the community based on race or gender.

Black officers, after graduating from the academy, are more likely to socialize more frequently with black officers than white officers (Hodgson & Orban, 2005). Information is passed along from other minority officers within the department to new minority officers, and some of the messages describe a negative experience from the viewpoint of other veteran minority officers (Hodgson & Orban, 2005). What is important here is that organizations must recognize that the messages passed between

minority groups are often messages of survival within the organization, not messages of insightful sociopolitical capital valuable for promotional success within the organization.

New officers are more likely to trust the information they receive from the social group that they identify with the most. An officer's attitude about work and their behaviors are formed before entering into the workforce. Those attitudes are reflected by the values, norms, and the personality that they have developed throughout their lifetime (Hodgson & Orban, 2005). There must be strategies in place to foster communication between all groups at all levels within the department. The invaluable sociopolitical capital must be received in the same context and timing by all groups to be equally valuable.

Officers within the organization must believe that they will be treated equally by the members of administration in regards to access to promotion opportunities and the passing along of key information that affects the mobility of the officers. Trust is very important in law enforcement because by creating an environment of trust within the organization officers will cooperate with each other and solidarity will be improved (Smith, 2010). More support from the minority community will result because of the trust that the minority officers put into the organization will be passed along into the minority community. Departments will likely see an increase in minority interest in law enforcement as a result.

COUNTER POSITION

Past research has suggested that individual characteristics, such as race, are not a reliable measurement in determining the occupational socialization of officers because the subculture of police is so interwoven (Britz, 1997). The subculture still

operates through identifying individual characteristics. Britz (1997) mentioned that some believe, traditionally, that all new police officers go through stages in the same way and adapt the same. However, Britz (1997) stated further that more research is needed because the demographics in police forces are changing. Much of the research that supports the homogeneity of the police subculture fails to account for the changing demographics in law enforcement. Furthermore, scholars must take into account the changing demographics within the community as well. Britz (1997) suggested that some scholars argue that the racism in police organizations is just a reflection of the community that produces the officers.

Some individuals argue that discrimination is not a factor in occupational socialization and that the solidarity of the officers is so strong that all officers are equally recruited, socialized and promoted regardless of any other characteristic. There must be an uncovering of the way that discrimination is no longer carried out in the open. Discrimination is carried out off stage, no longer out for everyone to see. There are identified social barriers, such as negative images of minorities by the police departments themselves that discourage minorities from applying to departments (Dunham & Alpert, 1997). It has been argued that the life chances of blacks have more to do with economic class affiliation than with race (Wilson, 1980). However, Wilson (1980) mentioned himself that it would be wrong to assume that racial segregation and discrimination had disappeared in America.

Another argument is that some minority officers who are recruited, hired, and promoted are not qualified for the position; they are hired and promoted to show diversity (Dunham & Alpert, 1997). Steven Cox asserted that race, ethnicity, and

gender should not be considered when hiring police officers or in promotional decisions (Dunham & Alpert, 1997). When African Americans are able to occupy some of the positions, they have to perform very well because if they fail, their situation may be attached to the capabilities of others in their racial group (Bolton & Feagin, 2004).

Shapiro (2004) stated, “similar achievements by people of similar abilities do not yield comparable results” (p. 9). Shapiro (2004) implied that there has to be an understanding of the hidden costs of being African American. There are some members of society who contend African Americans are provided the same set of rules to compete for success. However, there are accounts of black and female leaders who “describe patterns of disrespect, insubordination, and attempts to undermine their authority” (Bolton & Feagin, 2004, p. 156). Minority supervisors have identified situations where their white subordinates would bypass them to turn in paperwork to white supervisors or delay in carrying out tasks asked of them by their minority supervisor in an effort to make them appear incompetent (Bolton & Feagin, 2004). Shapiro (2004) found that those individuals ignore the fact that, historically, the rules have not been the same. Past discrimination has impacts on African Americans in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

What needs to be said here is that this paper is not intended to point fingers at anyone; it is an attempt to create more awareness of the fact that there are structures in place that limit the socialization of African American men in law enforcement. The negative experiences of African American police officers can have a dramatic effect on the minority community. Of course, when issues of racism and disparate treatment of

any group is confronted, there will be some who contend that racism has all but disappeared. The important fact here is there must be a realization that there are different perspectives based on different life experiences. We must understand that there is more than one perspective and work together to address the problems within the relationships between the police and some communities.

What can help is for all involved to work to reduce the effects of those repressive structures that operate, however hidden, within police departments around the country. We have to commit to a continued effort to diversify our police departments whether small or large and allow that diversification to work within the community. One problem lies in the false perception that African Americans now have the same access and opportunities and in some instances, better access in job opportunities, education, and other social services than whites (Bolton & Feagin, 2004). There have been improvements in the successes of African Americans; however, the plight of African American men in occupations is still worse than that of just about any other group in society. Intervention has to be applied to offset this disparity.

Departments have to promote an environment of trust and inclusion. Racial differences affect trust within departments. People will allow those who they can identify with closer to them than those with whom they do not identify. African Americans will search for mentors that they can identify with to seek guidance on how to navigate through relative situations. Mentorship can also provide African American men with a visual impression that they too can succeed in the department.

Race does matter, and there has to be an understanding from all that race can play a part in the career development of minorities. In order to try to reduce some of the

negative relationships between the police and minorities, all involved must first address that there is a problem. So many people deny the problem because they believe that it is the problem of the past. Within police organizations, there are police subcultures that are developed based on trust and a commonality of ideas. New officers have to abide by the rules and modes of behavior or risk being ostracized from the group (Britz, 1997). Dually, African American men are in fear of being ostracized from the minority group as well. African American men, as they enter into a law enforcement career, are confronted with a double standard placed on them by the position. Some African American officers believe they have to work twice as hard as white officers to excel in white male dominated police departments, and they believe they also have to convince the African American community that they are not sell-outs (Bolton & Feagin, 2004).

As more minorities are employed in law enforcement agencies, workplace tensions within the organization will be evident as issues of trust are compromised (Cornileus, 2012). Officers will have to adapt to working with individuals from different backgrounds. Trust will have to be built among the different groups. Information and different perspectives will have to be shared and accepted by all. As police departments become more diverse, the officers involved will be placed in trust-relevant situations that they will have to overcome.

Members of minority groups trust less because of the institutional discrimination that they have experienced (Smith, 2010). Some African American men will have to learn to trust the environment that they are placed in as a new officer, especially if they have had negative experiences with officers in the past. African Americans will frequently share stories of police mistreatment creating a shared experience, even

though vicariously, that has long lasting effects. Whether through direct experience or hearing from the experience of others, socially marginalized groups create a shared attitude and resentment toward the police which strains the relationship.

Upper level management must be truly concerned about diversity within the department and creating a more supportive image of the department within the minority community, they need to identify opportunities to counteract the stereotypes that work to keep African American men out of the upper management levels within the departments. One suggestion is to create diverse interview boards based on race and gender. Cornileus (2012) asserted that some employers believe black men have attitudes and certain personal characteristics that conflict with the white social atmosphere. A diverse board will create a sense of fairness and commitment to diversity. It is detrimental to departments to exclude minorities from upper level management levels within departments because it is there where diversity is needed. Decisions that affect the department and the department's interaction with the public are created and maintained through the department's upper level management.

The African American policeman may be observed as a black person within the department and a traitor by his neighborhood associates. As a police officer, the African American man should be able to tell and illustrate stories and images of success within their departments. The African American policeman has a dilemma, and it resides in the dual position that he or she occupies and the two essential roles that they play (Alex, 1969). The African American police officer has been, and continues to be, subjected to stress and strain while on-duty and off-duty. The African American officer

experiences a stress-filled environment that is maintained through strained relationships between them and their co-workers.

Once a commitment is made by all to create diversity in one of the most important occupations that needs diversity, there will be better relationships and partnerships developed between the police and the community. This occupation has great power and discretion in affecting the lives of all people, not just one race of people. There has to be a commitment to intervene and change the negative relationship.

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