IJCJS

Racial Attitudes of Police Recruits in the United States Midwest Police Academy: A Quantitative Examination

Michael D. Schlosser[1]
University of Illinois Police Training Institute, USA

Abstract

This study provides insight into the racial attitudes of police recruits when entering the Midwest Police Academy (a pseudonym) *in the United States and after completion of academy training. It draws upon data collected from N=33 recruits, enrolled in the Midwest Police Academy, through administering the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS) (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Brown, 2000) to measure racial attitudes and survey questions in the first and last week of training. Results indicated that recruits enter the academy with a high level of color-blind racial ideology and there was no significant change in racial attitudes after completing the academy training. This study suggests that the current diversity training offered in the academy is not making a positive impact on racial attitudes of recruits. The results of this study indicate a need for changes in the current diversity training curriculum.*

Keywords: Police Recruits, Color–Blind Racial Ideology, Racial Attitudes.

Introduction

Historically, racism has been a defining characteristic of U.S. society (Parker & Villalpando, 2007), and racism is a defining characteristic of policing in the United States (Schlosser, 2011). To set context, in this section, this argument is defended by providing a brief history of policing in the United States, including a brief timeline of important accounts from a range of periods including the colonial era, the civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, the get-tough-on-crime era of the 1980s and 1990s, and the current era in which police are often viewed as racially biased.

During the colonial era, the colonists' understanding of community did not include American Indians or African Americans, and the criminal justice system was a tool for maintaining a racial order (Walker, 1998). For example, there were special laws forbidding American Indians, African Americans, and mulatto slaves and servants from being away from their homes after 9 p.m., unless they were running an errand for their master (Walker, 1998). The maintenance of the racial order continued into the late 1800s and early 1900s. Whites were in control of the criminal justice system and would routinely ignore and allow vigilantes to lynch African Americans. In 1900, more than 100 African

[1] Director, Police Training Institute, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1004 S. Fourth Street, Champaign, IL 61820, USA. Email: schlossr@illinois.edu

Americans were lynched (Walker, 1998). This White power and dominance continued well into the 1940s, and there was a race riot that erupted in Detroit in 1943 which was perpetuated by Whites roaming the streets and attacking African Americans (Walker, 1998). In the 1960s and 1970s, most White Americans viewed the police as protectors, while the racial minority community had a more skeptical opinion, believing that different standards applied (Carter, 1995). The crisis of the 1960s came about due to the civil rights movement's challenge against deeply entrenched inequality, including discrimination in the criminal justice system (Walker, 1998). There were many race-related riots triggered by police activity during the 1960s, including shootings of African American men by White police officers in New York City in 1964, and San Francisco and Atlanta in 1966. There were routine traffic stops in Philadelphia, Watts, and Newark in the mid-1960s, and a raid of an after-hours bar in Detroit in 1967 (Walker, 1998). In 1968, the Civil Disorder Commission singled out the police as the activating cause of the urban riots, indicating that most incidents featured White police officers arresting African Americans for minor offenses (Fyfe & Skolnick, 1993).

The civil rights movement during the 1960s and early 1970s slowed down with the emergence of social and economic crises, which brought about a growing shift at all levels of government from an emphasis on social investments to an emphasis on public control, social containment, and the criminalization of social problems (Giroux, 2003). The 1980s began an era in policing and the criminal justice system that emphasized "getting tough on crime." In 1989, President Bush announced a new "war" on drugs, which included intensive street-level anti-drug enforcement, tougher sentencing laws, and a new campaign against marijuana on the grounds that it was a gateway to more dangerous drugs (Walker, 1998).

There have been several well-publicized incidents in recent history that signify continuing problems between the police and racial minorities. In 1979, police beat to death African American Arthur McDuffie in Florida and then tried to cover it up by making it look like a motorcycle accident (Fyfe & Skolnick, 1993). In 1991, police officers used excessive force in the beating of African American Rodney King (Fyfe & Skolnick, 1993). Incidents like these, along with complaints from racial and ethnic minority citizens, led to racial profiling laws requiring police officers to document whom they stop and the results of the stop.

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Americans' fear of other terrorist attacks became apparent. In the post-9/11 period, policing began to demonstrate greater racial profiling, which included the deportation of Arab and Muslim immigrants (Bornstein, 2005). This led to many current immigration laws that actually enhance or encourage racial profiling (Su, 2010).

Racism can be defined as particular attitudes, beliefs, and practices that are used to justify the inferior or superior treatment of another racial or ethnic group (Kendall, 2007). Racism has to do with a category of people who have been determined to be inferior or superior on the basis of real or alleged physical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, eye shape, or other subjectively selected attributes (Feagin & Feagin, 2003). Two racial groups most commonly associated with racially biased policing are African Americans and Latino Americans. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the 2010 census indicated this state includes a population that is 15% African American and 15.8% Latino American. Park and Burgess (1924) argued that race relations could be seen as merely the cultural difference between a dominant and subordinate people. Bonilla-Silva (2003)

argued that race operates in political, social, economic, and ideological realms to establish, reinforce, and maintain social ordering. Bonilla-Silva (2003) explained the creation of a racial order where White supremacy dominates the order and that racism can be conceptualized in structural terms. Even though it was over 100 years ago when W.E.B. Dubois (1903) said, "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line" (p. 29), the problem still lingers today.

The civil rights era brought about a change in how racism manifests in the U.S. Although there may be less overt racism because of laws and a greater intolerance of flagrant racism by many citizens, a new racism has emerged in the form of color-blind racial ideology. This study focused on this particular form of racism by examining recruit officers when they entered and exited the MPA academy. To understand racism in the context of color-blind racial ideology, it is necessary to analyze views that the dominant White culture has developed to explain and justify racism; this new ideology has become the new racism (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick, 2004, p. 576).

This racism takes on forms that are much more subtle, stemming from the theory that police do not look at race but simply do their jobs and treat everyone the same. Color-blind racial ideology includes the widely held belief that racial discrimination is a thing of the past and that everyone who works hard has an equal chance to become successful in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This color-blind racial ideology is a way of overlooking racism and allowing current discriminatory practices of the dominant culture to continue (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, & Embrick, 2004). Color-blind talk is considered neutral and politically correct by most of the dominant culture (Marx, 2006), which perceives itself to be color-blind and asserts that there are no differences among citizens due to skin color. However, this is unrealistic in the United States where racism is an issue in almost every facet of life. Marx (2006) connects color-blind racial ideology to the dominant ideology by arguing that "color-blind language superficially accepts diversity with the provision that it not be significantly different from the White norm and, most importantly, that it not challenge the White norm" (p. 17).

Color-blind talk distorts both the nature and extent of America's race problem and provides cover for the continued operation of racial power in the post–1965 era (Kim, 2008). Color-blind racial ideology is a way of viewing and defining racism as overt acts of prejudice that are suppressed by education and anti–discrimination laws (Kim, 2000).

Because racism is arguably a defining characteristic of policing in the United States today, recognition of this is crucial to improving the relationship between the police and members of racial and ethnic minority communities (Schlosser, 2011). It is critical that police officers become more responsive to all members of the community, which in turn, should make officers less likely to be abusive toward marginalized groups (Barlow & Barlow, 1993). Policing practices and policies have historically perpetuated racism within the police practice (Bass, 2001). The first step in a police officer's career is academy training. Research is lacking that informs academics about the racial attitudes of incoming recruits and whether traditional academy methods and content result in improvement in recruits' racial attitudes and beliefs. This study focuses on that "first step." The significance of this study lies in the fact that it could bring about positive change in current training practices and curriculum changes at the academy level. This study investigates the following research questions: a) what are police recruits' attitudes and beliefs about race and racism when they enter the academy; and b) what are police recruits' attitudes and beliefs about race and racism when they leave the academy? This study focuses on color-

217

blind racial ideology as the form of racism that propagates racism in the police practice. The current diversity training at the Midwest Police Academy (MPA) (a pseudonym) is outlined, though it is not analyzed. Those involved in the curriculum development at the academy level may learn from this study and the current training practices of the MPA.

The diversity training at the Midwest Police Academy consists of a four-hour block of instruction titled, "Police Citizen Relations/Cultural Diversity Training." The purpose of this article is not to outline the classroom instruction in detail, but to simply point out that the course is very basic, short, and has not been updated for many years. The course outline was formatted as a PowerPoint presentation for the instructor's lecture. The instructor lectures from this PowerPoint presentation for the entire four-hour block of instruction. The overseeing board for the state provides the Midwest Police Academy with Student Performance Objectives that they must cover within their curriculum. Student Performance Objectives include such topics as prejudicial behavior vs. non-prejudicial behavior, stereotyping, measures that can be taken to avoid stereotyping, special considerations when dealing with minority groups, and explaining the difference between stereotyping and bias.

Although police academies have experimented with numerous forms of diversity training for six decades, it appears the situation today is not much different from the 1940s; in fact, the tension between police and minority groups appears to be even more pervasive than ever before (Haberfield, 2002). Barlow and Barlow (1993) argue that during the 1970s sensitivity training, although remnants remained, was displaced by the hard, more technological police innovations. Goldstein (1990) and Blakemore, Barlow, and Padgett (1995) argue that the professional agenda of this era constrained serious efforts at developing culturally competent agencies that were responsive to the entire community, especially the lower SES minorities. Due to critical events, like those involving Arthur McDuffie and Rodney King, urgent demand for the revitalization of sensitivity training emerged (Blakemore, Barlow, & Padgett, 1995).

Most cultural diversity training has seen very little change since the 1960s. This training largely consists of teaching officers cross-cultural communication and conflict resolution skills (Blakemore, Barlow, & Padgett, 1995). While there are some advantages to this type of training, disadvantages include profiling a particular group of people, and perpetuating stereotypes (Blakemore, Barlow, & Padgett, 1995).

As a starting point, examining policing in a historical context helps us understand why there is tension between police and the racial and ethnic minority communities, especially communities in poor neighborhoods where crime is likely to be high, and why this is an important discourse within the police practice.

Research Questions

This study contributes to the literature by evaluating the racial attitudes of recruits prior to the start of the police academy training and post-academy training. This study attempts to answer two research questions: a) What are the police recruits' attitudes and beliefs about race and racism when they enter the academy; and b) To what extent, if any, do the recruits' attitudes and beliefs about race and racism change over the course of the training?

Methods

Data Source

The Midwest Police Academy (a pseudonym) has been in existence since the mid–1950s. It was created by an act of the state's legislature for the purpose of training police officers in the methods of maintaining police services at a level consistent with the needs of the community. The Midwest Police Academy is a 480-hour, 12-week academy, which provides recruits with the basic training needed to prepare them for field training. It is associated with a major university.

Sample

Recruits for each class consist of municipal officers and county deputies from throughout the state. The data source for this study included 33 police recruits from around the state. Seventy-six percent of the recruits were White males (n=27) ranging from age 22 to 42 with a mean age of 27 (SD 4.93); 9% were White females (n=3) ages 22, 28, and 43; one male (3%) who described himself as Mexican American (n=1) age 28; one African American (3%) (n=1) age 32; and one male (3%) who described himself as biracial (Latino/White) (n=1) age 22.

Data Collection

This study used a pre-experimental one-group pretest-post-test design. Surveys were administered to recruits on the first day of class after consent forms were completed. During the final week of the recruit's training, surveys were again submitted to recruits. All 33 recruits agreed to participate in the surveys.

One of the survey instruments was the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS), administered to measure racial attitudes of recruits entering the academy. The CoBRAS, developed by Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, and Browne (2000), assesses cognitive aspects of color-blind racial attitudes. The 20 items are each rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of color-blind racial beliefs. The CoBRAS consists of three subscales: unawareness of a) racial privilege; b) institutional discrimination; and c) blatant racial issues. Neville et al. (2000) suggest that higher CoBRAS scores on each of the factors and the total score are related to greater (a) global belief in a just world; (b) sociopolitical dimensions of a belief in a just world; (c) racial and gender intolerance; and (d) racial prejudice.

During Week 1 training, recruits were asked in a survey about their expectations related to diversity training while attending the academy. They were asked, "What information do you think you might receive about diversity related topics at the police academy?" At the end of training, recruits were asked about their views of racism in the police practice. They were asked, "Have your views on the existence of racism in the police practice changed after 12 weeks of training, and if yes, how?"

Results

Recruit Racial Attitudes and Beliefs When Entering the Academy

CoBRAS scores on the subscale "Unawareness of Racial Privilege" had a grand mean of 4.5, "Unawareness of Institutional Discrimination" had a grand mean of 3.99, and "Unawareness to Blatant Racial Issues" had a grand mean of 2.84. These scores indicate a high level of unawareness of racial privilege and unawareness of institutional discrimination. Recruits were more aware of blatant racial issues than the other subscales. A recruit's lower score indicated they were more aware of blatant racial issues.

The initial recruit survey showed indications of racism in the form of color-blind racial ideology. Recruits were asked, "What information do you think you might receive about diversity related topics at the police academy?" Two common themes were extracted from their responses: a) dominant/subordinate relationship between law enforcement/racial minority citizens; and b) an assumed association between racial minorities and crime. The terminology in some responses was such that they (recruits) were the police and part of a dominant group that must "deal with" or "handle" racial and ethnic minorities. The answers also indicated the majority of recruits (79%) enter the academy with an "us against them" mentality or an expectation of a dominant/subordinate relationship between police and racial and ethnic minority citizens. These comments suggested most recruits likely did not understand the concept of racial privilege because they freely expressed their feelings that the police are at a higher level than racial minorities and must find ways to "deal with" the problems associated with these racial and ethnic minorities. They also indicate an unawareness of institutional discrimination by the police practice and criminal justice system in general. Following are some responses from this question in regards to the theme of dominant/subordinate relationship.

"How to deal with people from different cultures."

". . . to better react when dealing with the diverse public that I will be dealing with on an everyday basis."

". . . dealing with a person from a different background."

". . . how to handle different groups of people in different settings."

". . . dealing with individuals from other racial and ethnic groups . . ."

Many recruits' expectations of the diversity training demonstrated an assumed association between racial minorities and crime. This is significant because it indicates the potential for racial profiling, as they will unconsciously (and perhaps consciously) make stop, search, and even arrest decisions based on race. Following are some responses from this question in regards to the theme of assumed association between racial minorities and crime.

". . . info about gangs and various ethnic groups . . . how to gain compliance."

". . . different types of gang relations."

". . . how to react to verbal abuse by other races and cultures."

There were very few recruits (21%) entering the academy with some positive expectations of training in regards to diversity as an "important topic." The following comments indicate these recruits had a better understanding that racism does exist within the police culture and it is important to understand others as well as themselves.

". . . awareness, cultural difference, customs, language barrier . . ."

". . . being aware and sensitive to other's differences."

". . . identify personal prejudices."

After this initial CoBRAS survey and other survey questions, recruits received a four-hour block of diversity training. This diversity training approach is very traditional and similar to that of most academies across the United States. The purpose of this paper is not to devote great detail to the diversity training, but rather to investigate if the academy's diversity training brings about changes in the racial attitudes of recruit officers.

Recruit's Views on Racism in the Police Practice after Training

Week 12 scores indicate no significant changes from Week 1 scores. Week 1 scores on the subscale "Unawareness of Racial Privilege" were 4.5, and for Week 12 they were 4.52. Week 1 scores on the subscale "Unawareness of Institutional Discrimination" were 3.99, and for Week 12 they were 3.91. Week 1 scores on the subscale "Unawareness of Blatant Racial Issues" were 2.84, and for Week 12 they were 2.98.

A t-test for paired samples was performed using SPSS Version 17 to compare Week 1 and Week 12. When comparing the grand mean for the three different subscales (unawareness of racial privilege, unawareness of institutional discrimination, and unawareness of blatant racial issues), there was no significant difference from Week 1 scores to Week 12 scores as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. The Significance of Recruit Officers' Change in Racial Attitudes

Category	μT_1 (SD)	μT_2 (SD)	t–value	df	P(2–tailed)
Unawareness of racial privilege	4.50 (.83)	4.52(.76)	−.213	32	.832
Unawareness of institutional discrimination	3.99 (.78)	3.10 (.82)	−1.55	32	.878
Unawareness of blatant racial issues	2.84 (.67)	2.98 (.59)	−1.394	32	.173

When recruits were asked in the final survey if their views on the existence of racism in the police practice changed after 12 weeks of training, nearly all recruits had no change in their attitudes. Two common themes were extracted from their responses: a) a belief that they do not see color; and b) changes in views were associated with use of force against racial minorities. Five recruits responded to the question of their views changing with, "not really." Eight recruits responded with, "My views have not changed." Nine recruits simply responded, "No." Following are some responses from this question in regards to the theme of the belief they do not see color.

"I don't think they have changed much. I have never been a racist person."

"My views are mostly the same. I don't really see racism as a big issue."

"I still believe racism exists but not at a high level."

"I believe that most people earn what they get in life regardless of race."

Interestingly, some recruits associated their change in attitudes about racism with use of force. This suggests that their training, combined with their attitudes about race, made them perceive that, though they would be fair in interacting with racial minorities, it had more to do with arrest situations than other interactions. Some recruit comments about the theme of change in views were associated with use of force against racial minorities.

"Honestly I don't think of different racial groups when things start moving fast."

"Sometimes I felt like officers did express racism when making arrests. Now I feel like I have to look at this resistance and physical force given to make the arrest. In my opinion I feel that there are more parts of the situation than the media shows."

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, recruits' CoBRAS scores and answers to interview questions indicated racist attitudes in the form of color-blind racial ideology. This study suggests that the current generation of MPA police recruits and graduates of the academy have a color-blind racial attitude and, secondly, shows the importance of further research in preparing recruits to successfully police in racially and ethnically diverse communities. One of the most important issues in police training is preparing police officers to successfully work in racially and ethnically diverse communities, and creating a positive relationship between police officers and the citizens they serve.

The results of this study are concerning on many levels. The majority of those entering the field from the MPA believe that police officers are a dominant group in our society that is needed to help maintain the racial order. Expectations expressed about diversity training included the view that it was meant to train officers how to "deal with" racial minorities because racial minorities are more likely to represent the criminal element in society. When exiting the academy, recruits believed they learned from the diversity training how to properly implement use of force when arresting a racial minority citizen. Finally, recruits demonstrated, overall, that they do not understand the concept of racial privilege.

In order to bring about positive change in policing racially and ethnically diverse communities, those within the practice must realize their own racism and recognize that racism is a normal facet of life and not unusual in the police practice. It will be helpful to set aside the status-quo training methods in racial and ethnic diversity courses, and take a more proactive approach, which challenges this dominant ideology. Police training must incorporate strategies that will increase the recruits' understanding and recognition of the more subtle varieties of racism. It will be helpful to consider criminal justice and social justice in the same conversation, and initiate a collaborative effort between community members and law enforcement to eliminate racism and empower subordinated racial and ethnic minorities.

Though it would be a good first step, changing the curriculum at the academy level is only a small part of the challenge. After successful completion of the academy, each recruit will go into a Field Training Program, where veteran officers will continue to train recruits on the policing practices in that particular community. These new officers will likely be influenced by the culture of that entire department as they become more experienced officers. It would be beneficial for the aforementioned type of racial awareness education to continue at these later stages of training and throughout the profession. Providing research and training for field training officers, as well as research and in-service training for veteran officers, will play an essential role in the quest for social justice. This study indicates that it is important to address color-blind racial beliefs when designing police recruit diversity courses, specifically incorporating topics related to racial privilege, institutional discrimination, and blatant racial issues.

References

Barlow, D. E., & Barlow, M. H. (1993). Cultural diversity training in criminal justice: A progressive or conservative. *Social Justice, 20*(3–4), 69–84.

Bass, S. (2001). Policing space, policing race: social control imperatives and police discretionary decisions. *Social Justice,* 28, 156–176.

Blakemore, J. L., Barlow, D., & Padgett, D. L. (1995). From the classroom to the community: Introducing process in police diversity training. *Police Studies, 18*(1), 71–83.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003). *Racism without racists: colorblind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2006). *Racism without racists.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Bonilla-Silva, E., Lewis, A., & Embrick, D. G. (2004). "I did not get that job because of a black man. . . ": The story lines and testimonies of color-blind racism. *Sociological Forum, 19*(4), 555–581.

Bornstein, A. (2005). Antiterrorist policing in New York City after 9/11: Comparing perspectives on a complex process. *Human Organization, 64*(1), 52–61.

Carter, R. A. (1995, December). Improving minority relations—law enforcement agencies. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin.*

DuBois. W. E. B. (1903). *The soul of Black folk; Essays and sketches.* Chicago, IL: A. C. McClurg & Co.

Feagin, J. R., & Feagin, C. B. (2003). *Racial and ethnic relations* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Fyfe, J. J., & Skolnick, J. H. (1993). *Above the law: Police and the excessive use of force.* New York, NY: The Free Press.

Giroux, H. A. (2003). Racial injustice and disposable youth in the age of zero tolerance. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 16*(4), 553–565.

Goldstein, H. (1990). *Problem-oriented policing.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Haberfeld, M. R. (2002). *Critical issues in police training.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Kendall, D. (2007). *Sociology in our times* (7th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Kim, C. J. (2000). *Bitter fruit: The politics of Black-Korean conflict in New York City.* Chelsea, MI: Sheridan Books.

Marx, S. (2006). *Revealing the invisible: Confronting passive racism in teacher education.* New York, NY: Routledge

Neville, H. A., Lilly, R. L., Duran, G., Lee, R. M., & Browne, L. (2000) Construction and initial validation of the color-blind racial attitudes scale (CoBRAS). *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 47*(1), 59–70.

Park, R. E., & Burgess, E. W. (1924). *Introduction to the science of sociology.* Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Parker, L., & Villalpando, O. (2007). A racialized perspective on education leadership: Critical race theory in educational administration. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 43*(5), 519–524.

Schlosser, M. D. (2011). Evaluating the midwest police academy's ability to prepare recruits to police in a diverse multicultural society. Unpublished PhD Dissertation submitted to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Retrieved on 15th August 2013 from https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/26225/Schlosser_Michael.pdf?sequence=1

Su, R. (2010). The overlooked significance of Arizona's new immigration law. *Michigan Law Review, 108,* 76–79.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). Retrieved from http://www.fctfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhmt?pid=DEC_10_PL_GCTPL

Walker, S. (1998). *Popular justice: A history of American criminal justice.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.