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Racial Attitudes of Police Recruits at the United States Midwest Police Academy: A Second Examination

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Abstract

Schlosser (2013) discussed racial colorblindness data obtained from one police recruit academy class at the Midwest Police Academy (a pseudonym), USA. The data for this study were obtained from a different recruit class (N= 38) from the Midwest Police Academy and compared to Schlosser's. Schlosser (2013) learned that recruits enter the academy with a high level of racial colorblindness ideology. He also learned that those recruits' levels did not significantly decrease after attending academy training. I obtained similar results even after changing the cultural diversity training for the recruit class. A possible explanation could be the short amount of time allotted for this training.

Keywords: Midwest Police Academy, Race, Racial Attitudes, Police Recruits, Training.

Introduction

Schlosser (2013) discussed data he obtained from one police academy recruit class at the Midwest Police Academy (MPA) (a pseudonym). Schlosser (2013) used the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS) as his questionnaire. The CoBRAS was developed by Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, and Browne (2000) and assesses the respondent's level of color-blindness. To define color-blindness Neville et al. (2000) agreed with Schofield's (1986) definition of color-blindness:

- (a) viewing race as an invisible characteristic (e.g., refusing to notice racial group membership for fear of appearing prejudiced);
- (b) viewing race as a taboo topic (e.g., adhering to a perceived norm that talking about or referring to racial designators is impolite); and
- (c) viewing social life as a nexus of individual relations (e.g., individual circumstances, and not intergroup relations, mostly account for one's social life) (p. 60).

Simply put, colorblind racial ideology refers to the belief that race should not and does not matter (Neville et al., 2000).

One of the biggest issues facing people in the twenty-first century is police-citizen relations, specifically, as it pertains to race and race relations in the United States. One

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does not have to look very long before an incident of racial animosity is on the evening news or on the front page of the newspaper. Since the earliest recorded history in this country there have been negative encounters between the police and members of minority communities. None more prevalent than the racially charged encounters in the 1950's and 1960's during the civil rights movement. Grant and Lei (2001) wrote:

In the United States, the field of multicultural education began in the 1960's and in the midst of social protest over civic and economic equality for segments of the population who have consistently faced structural and cultural discrimination based on their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or disability (p. 205).

There were many instances of overt racism by police officers during this time such as during sit-ins and during the Democratic Convention of 1968. Today, because of laws that have been passed, and a slight change in people's intolerance of overt racism, oppression has taken on a different look. Now instead of overt racism happening on street corners, racism takes the form of colorblindness, tolerance, or in the words of Freire (1970), when a person's voice is stolen.

Racism has taken a huge toll on this country's minority population. People of color have been murdered, falsely accused and convicted of crimes, and oppressed and marginalized for the sake of the status quo. Laws were made to correct inequalities but they did little only to change the society due to lack of proper implementation. The daunting task of changing society has to be continued in open forums discussions and changes have to be made that have true effect.

Police-minority relations have been strained (to say the least) for many decades. Police officers have used excessive force, made false arrests, and beaten and killed members of minority communities. Two nationally recognized incident which occurred in the early 1990 does demonstrate this. They were the Arthur McDuffie and Rodney King beatings. In Miami, Florida, Arthur McDuffie, an African American, was beaten to death by police after a high-speed pursuit. Riots ensued in Miami after the officers charged in McDuffie's death were acquitted. Rodney King was also beaten by police officers. In Los Angeles, California, King was surrounded by officers and beaten with batons. The beating was videotaped by a witness. Officers were again acquitted and riots broke out in Los Angeles.

After the Los Angeles riots police departments started to initiate training for officers to assist them in better serving minority communities. Cultural diversity, cultural sensitivity, or race relations training began to show up in training (Barlow & Barlow, 1993, p. 2). According to Barlow & Barlow (1993), the Law Enforcement Steering Committee (LESC) met in 1992 to discuss policy recommendations to improve police-community relations. The LESL is made up of several police organizations, they are; The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association, the Fraternal Order of Police, the International Brotherhood of Police Officers, the Major Cities Chiefs, the National Association of Police Organizations, the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE), the National Troopers Coalition, and the Police Foundation (p. 2). The central recommendation from LESL was that police agencies should initiate 'cultural bias training' programs 'to enable officers to do their jobs better' (Barlow & Barlow, p. 2). Acknowledging that conservatives often oppose alternative lifestyles and diversity, and that many police departments are ran by

conservatives, Barlow and Barlow (1993), noted that there was support for cultural diversity training because of poor police-citizen relations. Two organizations, NOBLE and PERF also support diversity training because they feel it fits into Community Policing. Barlow and Barlow (1993) also note that the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Rainbow Coalition support cultural diversity training.

Since the 1960's, police departments have attempted to train officers about cultural sensitivity (Blakemore, Barlow, & Padgett, 1995, p. 72). In the 1980's and 1990's police departments renewed their interest in this training and it took on new names like human relations, cross-cultural communication, and cultural awareness training. According to Barlow and Barlow (1993), two basic premises remained the same however:

- (1) on the more conservative side, police officers can be more effective social control agents if they are able to secure community support through better communication skills, and (2) on the more liberal side, police officers will be more responsive to all members of the community and less likely to be abusive if they have an understanding of marginalized groups (p. 73).

I agree with this statement. I believe all police officers should be trained about racism and its history. It is only through this understanding that truly improved relations between the police and the citizens they serve can take place. Birzer (2008) wrote:

The findings (of the research he conducted) suggest that African-Americans viewed a positive contact with the police when the officers utilized human relations traits such as cultural sensitivity, empathy, and fairness. The qualities deemed important by African-Americans for a police officer to possess were congruent with human relations qualities (p. 199).

It seems people of color want to be treated with respect and fairness, or like White people tend to get treated.

The literature on teaching the police is lacking (Cox & Moore, 1992), but there are a few articles that address the issue of cultural diversity. Crank, Kadleck, and Koski (2010), stated that police-citizen relations as it pertains to racism/bias policing is one of the major issues that the police will face in the next ten years (p.235). According to Barlow and Barlow (1993), and Blakemore, Barlow, and Padgett (1995), police agencies have historically done a very poor job at training officers to be effective public servants within minority communities.

Because of this gap in the literature, it is uncertain exactly how cultural diversity training should be conducted for police officers. There are several consistencies, however, that seem agreed upon within the literature. The first is a conceptual change in how cultural diversity should be viewed within the American paradigm. Traditionally, the United States has been called the "Great Melting Pot." The modern version of this is the "Great Salad Bowl." This refers to the need to get away from everyone assimilating and being the same (as deemed by the dominant White majority) and start viewing everyone as being unique but living in one country (Brown & Hendricks, 1996, and Huisman et al. 2005). This is married to the concept of colorblindness. Americans should not and are not all one (or no) race. Police cultural diversity training must educate officers about 'stealing a person's identity' and enabling them to recognize and acknowledge people's uniqueness.

Second, several authors advocate for police to become better communicators within the minority community (Barlow & Barlow, 1993; Birzer, 2008; Blakemore, Barlow, & Padgett, 1995; Brown & Hendricks, 1996; Williams & Murphy, 1990). I would expand on this and add that police need to become better communicators universally, but the need is the greatest in minority communities. Brown and Hendricks (1996), stated, “hence cultural awareness training for police officers has been advocated on the basis of improving service delivery and human relations by providing information that promotes effective communication skills” (p. 56). Freire (1970), discussed dialogue, he wrote:

Dialogue is the encounter between men (and women) mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming- between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them (p. 88).

In addition to communication, a third consistency in the literature is the importance for police officers to acknowledge their biases and stereotypes (Birzer, 2008; Blakemore, Barlow, & Padgett, 1995; Huisman, Martinez, & Wilson, 2005; and Kelly 1992). This is very risky business during a training session. Since statistically most police officers are White males, it is very easy to seem like you are “White bashing.” Two authors gave great strategies to bring this point home in a non-threatening manner. Kelly, (1992) gave an example of what Emily White uses in her cultural diversity classes. White gets officers to picture being at a party. She then asks officers to picture someone asking them what they do for a living. White then gets the officers to think about the feelings of isolation they would feel because people often react negatively towards police officers. White says all police officers can relate to this feeling. These feelings are then associated with those felt by people of color.

Huisman, Martinez, and Wilson (2005) compared training police officers about domestic violence with training police officers about cultural diversity. The authors made the claim that domestic violence and racism are similar in their societal causes. Police officers are not “trained to see how domestic violence intersects with other hierarchical systems of domination such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism” (p. 793). Similar to the exercise that Emily White uses, Huisman et al. (2005) uses an exercise involving both police officers and domestic violence advocates as instructors. The police officer instructor gets the class (made up of in-service police officers) to list the stereotypes often associated with police officers. The domestic violence advocate then does the same for the stereotypes associated with domestic violence advocates. The officer trainer then does the same for battered women. The common police stereotypes are that they are all brutal and violent towards suspects. The advocates’ stereotypes are usually that they are feminist lesbian man-haters. The battered women’s stereotypes are that more often than not these women falsely accuse their partners of abuse and use such allegations to manipulate the man and the system (Huisman et al., 2005). During a group discussion, the students were led to the conclusion that some stereotypes may be true of some members of a group, but not all. After acknowledging that the actions of a few people within a group are often generalized to the whole group, the discussions that follow are usually rich and led to a lowering of the barriers between the groups (Huisman et al., 2005). Cultural diversity training should be experiential in design to get the learners

involved. Blakemore, Barlow, and Padgett (1995), state that cultural diversity training should be “interactive and dynamic” (p. 75).

A fourth and final consistency is what the cultural diversity training should hope to accomplish. Training should be designed to change the officers’ behaviors not their attitudes (Blakemore, Barlow, & Padgett, 1995; and Kelly, 1992). Kelly (1992) states that it is “naïve to think that you are going to change a police officer’s attitudes with four hours of training... Instead of spending precious time teaching cultural awareness, [Emily] White teaches self-awareness and hopes the attitudes discussed in class will be remembered when the officers deal with people on the street” (p. 9). Blakemore et al. (1995) list several principles that should be present in police cultural diversity training. The second principle states “the goal of the training should be to encourage behavioral changes and not attitudinal adjustments—attitudes are not likely to be altered in limited training blocks” (p. 75). The long-term goal is that officers will change attitudes over time after becoming more sensitive to racial issues. There are also some limitations I have noted in the literature. One of the key limitations is funding (Birzer, 2008; Huisman, Martinez, & Wilson, 2005; and Kelly, 1992). In these days of economic recession, police departments have to do more with less. Police departments may be forced to lay off officers and other personnel, stop offering certain services, and delay buying equipment (just to name a few). It is likely that police department training budgets are also being cut when officers are being laid off. This is one of the reasons I advocate cultural diversity training occur in the academy. At least officers would be trained before they start working in their communities.

Another limitation in policing as it pertains to cultural diversity is the overall lack of people of color in the profession (Huisman, Martinez, & Wilson, 2005). In their 2005 article, Huisman et al. noted the following issues that impeded training, “lack of racial diversity within the department and a deficit of interracial contact in nonhierarchical settings...” (p. 799). Police departments have traditionally been dominated by White males. That tradition lives on still today even though police departments have been trying for years to increase minority hiring and retention.

The final limitation discussed here is the need to implement change at the department level not the individual officer level (Blakemore, Barlow, and Padgett, 1995; and Kelly, 1992). Often issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia are seen as individual officers’ problems and not problems present in police departments and society on the whole. Often police agencies think they can “train away their problems.” This is usually not the case. When institutional racism, sexism, or homophobia is present, changes need to be made at the institutional level not just the officer level.

Research Questions

This research was an attempt to improve how police recruits are prepared to work in a racially and culturally diverse society. This was also the continuation of another research completed by a colleague of mine, Michael Schlosser (2011, 2013). That research was an evaluative examination into how the Midwest Police Academy (a pseudonym) prepares new police recruits to work in a racially diverse society. The questions I attempted to answer were, (a) What are new officer’s attitudes and beliefs about race and racism when they enter the academy, and (b) To what extent, if any, does the training this academy provides change new officer’s understanding about race and racism (Zimny, 2012)?

Methods

Data Source

Data were collected from one recruit class at the Midwest Police Academy (MPA) from July 10, 2011 to September 29, 2011. The MPA has been in existence for over 50 years and is one of several State sanctioned police academies. Recruits who attend the MPA come from all parts of the state and are diverse in race and ethnicity. The training was 12 weeks in duration.

Participants

The class was made up of 37 males and 1 female (n=38). There were 36 White recruits, one African American/White (bi-racial) male, and one Hispanic male. They ranged in age from 22 to 46. These data were obtained from the participant's answers to the demographic questions on the CoBRAS. All 38 recruits who entered the academy graduated 12 weeks later.

Data Collection

I used a pre/post survey format. Recruits were given informed consent letters and the first questionnaires during orientation on their first day at the academy. At that time participants were given the choice to participate or decline to participate in the study. The recruits who agreed to participate were given and completed CoBRAS. CoBRAS were again issued and completed during week 12.

Results

My CoBRAS

The following section will address the numeric outcomes from the CoBRAS. Although this was not a quantitative study, some statistical analyses were also conducted. According to Neville, Lilly, Lee, Duran, and Browne (2000), the CoBRAS assess cognitive aspects of colorblind racial attitudes. Based on this tool the participants responded to twenty questions by using a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher endorsement of colorblind racial beliefs. The CoBRAS consists of three subscales: Unawareness of Racial Privilege, Unawareness of Institutional Racism, and Unawareness of Blatant Racial Issues. Neville et al. (2000) suggested higher CoBRAS scores indicate greater: (a) global belief in a just world; (b) sociopolitical dimension of a belief in a just world; (c) racial and gender intolerance; and (d) racial prejudice.

T-tests were completed using SPSS version 17. Analyses showed no significant change between the first CoBRAS score (week one of training) and the second score (week fourteen of training). Of the 38 recruits who agreed to participate in this study, all completed the first CoBRAS. In second round, I received 37 CoBRAS (one respondent less) that were distributed in the final week of the academy training.

Table 1. Individual CoBRAS scores for each individual recruit

	CoBRAS- 1	CoBRAS-2
Recruit-1	4.45	4.15
Recruit-2	3.5	4.3
Recruit-3	3.95	4.3
Recruit-4	2.35	2.7
Recruit-5	3.85	3.5
Recruit-6	3.85	3.9
Recruit-7	4.4	4.35
Recruit-8	4	4.25
Recruit-9	3.8	4.35
Recruit-10	4.5	4.25
Recruit-11	3.55	3.7
Recruit-12	3.8	3.95
Recruit-13	3.2	3.45
Recruit-14	4	4.2
Recruit-15	4.05	4.6
Recruit-17	2.85	Did not submit
Recruit-18	3.65	3.45
Recruit-20	3.8	3.65
Recruit-21	4.5	4.7
Recruit-22	3.15	3.35
Recruit-23	3.7	4
Recruit-24	3.65	3.3
Recruit-25	3.85	3.7
Recruit-26	3.65	3.4
Recruit-27	4.2	4.1
Recruit-28	4.75	5.25
Recruit-29	4.4	4
Recruit-30	4.45	4.2
Recruit-31	2.85	2.8
Recruit-33	3.45	3.65
Recruit-34	3.3	3.1
Recruit-35	4.6	4.1
Recruit-36	3.85	3.9
Recruit-37	3.3	3.2
Recruit-38	3.1	3.03

Table 2. Overall mean for each individual question on the CoBRAS

	CoBRAS 1- Mean	CoBRAS 2-Mean
Question 1	4.71	4.84
Question 2	2.79	2.70
Table 4 (cont.)		
Question 3	4.61	4.39
Question 4	2.50	2.54
Question 5	3.76	3.51
Question 6	1.61	1.81
Question 7	2.45	2.81
Question 8	2.24	2.39
Question 9	3.08	3.19
Question 10	2.97	2.85
Question 11	3.71	3.65
Question 12	2.89	2.94
Question 13	3.66	4.32
Question 14	4.816	4.86
Question 15	2.605	4.19
Question 16	3.95	3.86
Question 17	5.16	4.97
Question 18	3.21	3.68
Question 19	2.71	2.92
Question 20	2.13	2.27

As stated earlier, there was no significant change in means between CoBRAS 1 and CoBRAS 2. Some means were higher in CoBRAS 2 when compared to CoBRAS 1. Questions 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, 20 had higher means in CoBRAS 2 than CoBRAS 1.

Table 3. Overall mean for the three subscales across both CoBRAS

	CoBRAS-1	CoBRAS-2
Institutional Racism	3.9586	4.0734
Blatant Racism	2.7500	2.9077
Racial Privilege	4.6353	4.5405
Total	3.8434	3.8872

Of the subscales Unawareness of Institutional Racism, Blatant Racism, and Racial Privilege, the participants scored on the higher end for Institutional Racism and Racial Privilege, and lower for Blatant Racism.

Comparison to Schlosser’s Study

One of the restrictions placed on this study by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was that I was prohibited from seeing or using any of Schlosser’s data except for what was reported in his dissertation. This was done to protect the anonymity of Schlosser’s participants. Schlosser did not report all of his participant’s CoBRAS scores; instead he only reported a portion of them. I would have preferred to compare the individual CoBRAS scores from Schlosser’s study to mine. Since that was not possible, the following section will compare Schlosser’s CoBRAS subscales to mine.

Table 4. Schlosser’s CoBRAS-1 mean vs. mine for the subscale Unawareness of Institutional Racism

	CoBRAS-1 Institutional Racism Subscale Mean
Schlosser’s	4.5
Mine	3.9586

Table 5. Comparison for the subscale Unawareness of Blatant Racism

	CoBRAS-1 Blatant Racism Subscale Mean
Schlosser’s	2.84
Mine	2.75

Table 6. Comparison for the subscale Unawareness of Racial Privilege

	CoBRAS-1 Racial Privilege Subscale Mean
Schlosser’s	4.5
Mine	4.6353

Table 7. Comparison of CoBRAS-2 for the subscale Unawareness of Institutional Racism

	CoBRAS-2 Institutional Racism Subscale Mean
Schlosser’s	4.52
Mine	4.0734

Table 8. Comparison for the subscale Unawareness of Blatant Racism

	CoBRAS-2 Blatant Racism
Schlosser’s	2.98
Mine	2.9077

Table 9. Comparison for the subscale Unawareness of Racial Privilege

	CoBRAS-2 Racial Privilege
Schlosser's	4.52
Mine	4.5405

The CoBRAS scores across both Schlosser's study and this one are very similar. Both sets of participants scored higher in Unawareness of Institutional Racism and Racial Privilege and lower in Unawareness of Blatant Racism. Also, the individual means across both groups are similar.

Answers to Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are new officer's attitudes and beliefs about race and racism when they enter the academy, and question 2, To what extent, if any, does the training this academy provides change new officer's understanding about race and racism, were answered from the CoBRAS. The recruits came into the academy and left the academy with roughly the same CoBRAS scores. The recruits were higher in Unawareness to Institutional Racism and Racial Privilege and lower in Unawareness to Blatant Racism. This supports my claim that modern society is less tolerant of overt racism but still ignorant of the less overt forms it takes. This is very similar to what Schlosser (2011, 2013) found in his study. There are many factors that contribute to how recruits respond to questionnaires. Some of these factors are not influenced by the training as much as the culture. Having been an instructor for over ten years, I have seen many recruits come and go. Most are very apprehensive when they first arrive at the academy. This is partly due to police academies being para-military. Most students are still trying to learn the system during their first week or two. I believe this accounted for some of the increases in CoBRAS scores on the second questionnaires.

Discussion and Conclusion

As stated earlier, funding is a serious issue in criminal justice today. To improve cultural diversity training changes need to be made at both the state curriculum level and also the police academy level. Both of these processes take time and time is money. Many agencies are operating with fewer employees, both sworn officers, and non-sworn support staff. To accomplish meaningful change more time must be devoted to diversity training. Adding training that addresses the CoBRAS subscales of "Unawareness of Racial Privilege, Unawareness of Institutional Racism, and Unawareness of Blatant Racial Issues" (Neville et al. (2000) would hopefully inform students about these issues and improve their understanding. A possible solution to the funding issue is to train local "experts" who can provide training for officers at less of an expense than paying for outside vendors. This may also provide more frequent training which is the only way to change racial attitudes as discussed earlier. Another possible solution is to hire more minorities as instructors, staff, and role-players. Increasing the number of minorities in the profession would provide many more contacts for White officers with people of different races. Much of the literature noted poor communications on the police officer's part as contributing to unsatisfactory encounters between the police and minority communities (Barlow & Barlow, 1993; Birzer, 2008; Blakemore, Barlow, & Padgett, 1995; Brown & Hendricks,

1996; and Williams & Murphy, 1990). Combining cultural diversity with effective communication skills is also recommended. Getting academy students involved in group discussions with minority community members while still in the academy will likely improve relations.

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