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An Analysis of Post-Ferguson Black Law Enforcement Work Experiences

by

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AN ANALYSIS OF POST-FERGUSON BLACK LAW ENFORCEMENT WORK EXPERIENCES

This qualitative study of the opinions of African American law enforcement personnel in Louisiana aims to paint a more comprehensive literature on the demands of minority officers following the national media coverage of high-profile police incidents. This pilot study found law enforcement personnel’s introductory experiences with police have an impact on their initial perceptions of the law; the discussion on effective police reform should be centered on police-community discussions before changing police policies; and the increase of minority law enforcement showing career mobility is reflective of both progress made and future progress to come. The sample size of this study is limitation to the described findings, but the preliminary findings are indicative of the value of furthering the study.

Keywords: community policing, double marginalization, black law enforcement
AN ANALYSIS OF POST-FERGUSON BLACK LAW ENFORCEMENT WORK EXPERIENCES

Despite enjoying the same occupation, law enforcement officers experience the duties of their occupation differently along distinct racial lines (Morin et al. 2017). Following the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, there was a national media surge in covering police brutality victims, of whom were overwhelmingly Black and male. Morin et al. (2017) found robust evidence that White and nonwhite police officers differ in their perceptions of high-profile deadly force incidents against Blacks of the post-Ferguson period (Morin et al., 2017).

Indeed the history of African American integration and experiences within the career have been documented (Kochel 2020; Morin et al. 2017; Woodson n.d.). However, literature attempting to examine these experiences too often confine their analysis to double marginalization as the major factor shaping the black work experience. This is typically defined as minorities experiencing social isolation in multiple social groups; this results in the individual experiencing suspicion or rejection from other group members (Campbell 1980; Kochel 2020). The phenomenon of double marginalization is exclusively used to describe and characterize the actions of black law enforcement (Campbell 1980; Jordan 2021; Williams and Murphy 2013). The issue in this application is that researchers use double marginalization as a scapegoat instead of further analyzing the responses of black law enforcement. For example, previous research explains white and black law enforcement experiences with work-related stress as similar, yet personal mistreatment is the main complaint of black participants (Repasky et al. 2020). This proposes a question into the study of which factors make this finding the common experience for black law enforcement.
This study seeks to add to the current literature on black law enforcement. While many studies have shown how race has played a role in the impact of the post-Ferguson period on law enforcement, no studies have sought to hear directly from Black law enforcement personnel in Louisiana. Louisiana has experienced several high-profile issues related to race and policing in almost the past decade alone. Specifically, in 2016, the death of Alton Sterling was also followed by a mass shooting targeting law enforcement. Recently, the death of Ronald Greene has led to a Department of Justice investigation into the Louisiana State Police (Anon 2022; Laughland 2022). Thus, Louisiana represents a cite ripe with an opportunity to hear about the experiences of Black law enforcement officers during this time. This study looks to address this gap by conducting a series of interviews. Using these interviews, the paper will conduct a thorough analysis of the common themes and findings through a comprehensive lens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

*Black Law Enforcement Experience*

Recent studies document the experiences and effects of minority law enforcements in their police departments well, but much of this research has been conducted by examining double marginalization within Black law enforcement. The discourse on double marginalization among black law enforcement suggests that the black experience, of being marginalized, makes these officers more capable of handling psychological trauma and workplace harassment (Campbell 1980). Within policing literature double marginalization is typically conceptualized as a measure of how well accepted African American police officers feel in their personal and professional communities (Kochel 2020; Wilson 2018). Feelings of exclusion, harassment, and “othering” contribute to black law enforcement’s ability to empathize with different communities and their coworkers (Kochel 2020).
When minority officers began to break through the white male hold on the police force, their presence was met with workplace harassment, increased scrutiny and penalties, and limited workplace mobility (Rojek and Decker 2009). Indeed multiple studies find that African American law enforcement officers are targeted by their white counterpart for harassment and discrimination in the workplace (Lasley et al. 2011; Raganella and White 2004; Rojek and Decker 2009). Until the twenty-first century, the harassment of minorities in law enforcement was public but has now become more subtle and less likely to result in proper administrative discipline (Morin et al. 2017; Rojek and Decker 2009; Wilson and Henderson 2014). A recent study finds that while over half of white and Hispanic police officers say that minorities and whites are treated the same, 53% of black police officers say whites are treated better (Morin et al. 2017). The same study finds that half of white police officers say their disciplinary process is fair, while less than half of Black and Hispanic officers say the same (Morin et al. 2017). Another study finds minority police officers are more likely to receive a complaint and for those complaints to result in a disciplinary outcome more than their white counterpart (Rojek and Decker 2009).

**Black Law Enforcement Experience: Post-Ferguson Era**

Following the national response to the police killing of Michael Brown in 2014, law enforcement was pressured to reexamine its efforts to maintain positive relationships with the communities they police. Specifically, it required another reformation of law enforcements relationship with minorities, and specifically black males. To address these pitfalls, hiring more minority officers was seen as a potential solution to aggressive police-citizen encounters (Nicholson-Crotty, Nicholson-Crotty, and Fernandez 2017). The initial push for reliance on increasing minority hires and relying on black-on-black policing to solve police-community
relations was criticized by police administrative figures as an ineffective solution (Nicholson-Crotty et al. 2017). Supporting this solution, one study finds that when police forces employed more African American and Latino officers, they are more willing to repair police-community ties and increase community involvement (Lasley et al. 2011). Nonetheless, multiple studies have shown the impact of police force demographics to have an insignificant effect the frequency of police killings (Nicholson-Crotty et al. 2017; Smith 2003), and can result in increases in arrests (Nicholson-Crotty et al. 2017). Because police culture has been dominated by white leadership and values that protect and serve a white community, placing minority police officers in their positions can cause conflict between police and the communities they serve. The ways in which this can occur include white citizens questioning the legitimacy of minority police officers, African American police officers targeting minority communities to avoid a question of loyalty to the police culture and duties, and minority hires perpetuating the status quo of police behavior without the proper reformations at the administrative level (Carbado and Richardson 2018; Moon 2006; Zhao and Hassell 2005).

Recent studies have expanded on the difference of opinion towards law enforcement as an occupation. A nationally representative survey on law enforcement finds that most white police officers experience frustration from their work and many become emotionally scarred or numb to some extent while African American officers are less likely to report these feelings (Morin et al. 2017). Further, it found racial differences in perceptions of high profile incidents. Finally, while the majority of police officers polled stated there is no discrimination against minority police officers, black law enforcement survey responses directly contradict this (Morin et al. 2017). These racial differences in the perceptions of policing and is stark and bears further examination. Kochel describes the effect an officers lived experiences have on their ability to
deal with the psychological consequences of patrolling the front lines at protests over Michael Brown’s death (Kochel 2020). Some of the experiences of these officers include public harassment by protesters, through social media, and by their family and friends (Kochel 2020). Researchers describe the effect of these experiences as a magnifier of feelings experienced with double marginality (i.e., frustration, isolation), but these experiences do not have a long-term effect on black police officers or their ability to empathize with marginalized communities (Kochel 2020; Lasley et al. 2011; Morin et al. 2017).

**CURRENT STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to update police literature on the experiences of African American law enforcement. This analysis aims to better understand the motivations of African American police officers entering the work force and explain their experiences during their career, and to discuss what changes may be necessary to improve police culture harmony for African American police officers.

**METHODOLOGY**

The study sought to reach out specifically from law enforcement of color. To reach this population the study sampled from a southern non-profit catering to law enforcement of color. A member of the research team recruited the non-profit through a membership email. This study presents primary results from the first interview. The analysis of the interview was performed through a coding process of the transcriptions. The interview was conducted through Zoom and consisted of four portions: screening questions, introductory question, post-Ferguson questions, and questions aimed at potential changes and reforms. The full list of interview questions is detailed in Appendix A. The analysis focuses on finding common themes and goals among the respondents and applying previous literature to them to discuss future policy changes.
FINDINGS

The preliminary findings of the first interview are reflective of previous research but provide a more in-depth glance at African American motivations for joining law enforcement careers, as well as the factors influencing social demands of their police departments. This interviewee grew up with a law enforcement officer as their youth sports coach who provided structure and a positive interaction with law enforcement officers. While the initial findings seem to mirror that of current research, this interview highlights the distinctions African American law enforcement makes between their professional relationships, career aspirations, and professional opinions on improving police and minority community relationships.

A Calling

This participants’ initial experiences with law enforcement were not discussed extensively but were unique in that they were mentored by law enforcement officers in the social setting. Officer 1 stated the importance of their introduction to law enforcement in the following quote.

So, it was the mentors in my life when I was a younger kid, growing up in a one parent household, being involved in sports…I didn't have a ride to practice, and so my coaches would have to fill in and pick me up and this particular team that I was a part of was coached by an inner city police officer, but I didn't know that until one day they picked me up for basketball practice, and we were running late and they picked me up in an unmarked police car. And when they picked me up in the police car, even at that time I was I didn't know that it was a police car, but when we start running red lights and he put on the hideaway lights and sirens, I thought that was pretty cool. And that just coupled with the fact that they were there for me and taught me life lessons and spent time with me kind of put me on the path to law enforcement.

This introduction to the police provided a set of principles for this interviewee to develop in his own career. This is evident in their description of how their perception of their professional work changed overtime. Officer 1 describes himself as more motivated to perform job duties, stating:

Given the climate of circumstances in this nation surrounding law enforcement has kind of motivated me even more to do this job, and it has also pretty much confirmed that I'm doing what I was called to do like it's no longer a job or career it's more of a calling now. And so I would say things that have taken place in the nation has, you know, gave me that that spark to know that I'm in the right profession at the right time.
Officer 1’s reference to the idea of a *calling* is shown to be used as guide for professional importance. The interviewee’s description of being in the “right profession at the right time” is emblematic of feelings of confidence in their career choices. When an individual equates their profession with the emotional weight of a calling, there is evidence of an increase in investment in progressing in the profession (Morin et al. 2017; Woodson n.d.). Based on the responses of Officer 1, this emotional investment is not protective against distressing emotions (i.e., anger, agitation), but the presence of mentors and social support networks help maintain a healthy work relationship.

> I would say I'm comfortable in the job, and I would attribute a lot of again, I will contribute the support from mentors and relationships on and off the job. That helps me, I guess kind of stay focused and know that I'm just as good, or if not better—and there's no cut or shot to any other coworker but it's just a fact, so I would say that.

**Police Reform**

As far as police reform Officer 1 primarily focused on advocating for more intentional training programs, increasing community policing and community involvement, and educating law enforcement on the history of policing and its legacy on present police tactics.

We have to train more, we have to be more culturally aware, we have to be more empathetic, we have to have a better understanding of the history of policing. Something that we fail to do, often we don't teach the true history of policing in academies—at least not in mine, I can't speak for everybody—to really understand where is some of this animosity coming from, as it relates to inner city communities and law enforcement, and not to have a perception that it started when these high profile began to come to light…

Promoting both active participation of officers and the reconstruction of police education to better reflect the history of local communities is an overarching principle in Offer 1’s responses.

Specifically, Officer 1 discussed how to effectively prime officers for training programs.

> You have to put your officers in the in the right mindset prior to the training, or when they get to the train. In the very beginning, you have to try to set the stage, and have them open minded to put--to let the blinders down--let the block the roadblocks down, and really just listen to what the training is and all about…

The training programs described by Officer 1 (i.e., implicit bias training, use of force training, ABLE training courses) focus on bringing unwritten policy rules to the forefront of police
behavior. In response to being asked about their professional opinion on the effectiveness of these trainings, Officer 1 stated “the more officers are held accountable for the misuse of force, the less likely people are to use it. The more we see police officers going to jail and being held accountable for the misuse of force or the excessive use of force, the more it's going to go down.” It is important to note that while technological advances were praised by Officer 1 for promoting accountability and awareness of law enforcement, he suggested that the impact of technology on police behavior may not be significant enough to influence cultural changes.

I do think those policies and those advancements in technology has made officers more aware and more accountable. Although we still see it happening, I don't think we'll ever get to a point to where we have totally gotten rid of bad policing or—let’s be honest, some of these incidents are tragic on video but fit in the parameters of police policy and procedure. And so, you know that kind of leads us to the question, then, should we be looking at some of the State laws, which is not a police function or not a police issue when it comes to the laws on the books.

Community policing strategies were discussed in relation to Officer 1’s jurisdiction and initiating the conversations between the police and the community. Increasing involvement in communities with tenuous police relationships is described as a necessary catalyst to those conversations according to Officer 1.

I would like to see us more active in every community across the state and not just the communities that we know accept us. We have to be willing to go into environments that we know we are not liked, we know we're not respected, and oftentimes, at least in my department, we kind of stay away from that because we don't want the confrontation, but I think that's the only way that you win over all citizens, is when you go and have hard conversations and deal with issues.

Attending community meetings and events with community leaders where the misconceptions and issues over police responses to high-profile cases and incidents of police brutality, as well as the community’s current needs are discussed fully. There were self-reported improvements of policing relationships through the establishment of these conversational spaces.

Women in Law Enforcement

The importance of administrative minority leadership was another prominent theme throughout the interview. Specifically, African American women are discussed by Officer 1 as
change within police culture, by increasing minority career mobility and pursuing cultural police changes.

I do believe I'm optimistic about the future and I do believe that departments are getting better and have gotten better. And that's evident by the amount of African American police chiefs with us and around the nation with, like, it's almost 100% increase in African American females leading police departments in this nation, for the first time ever. And so I do think we've made progress, but we're not where we need to be. So, when I see and hear some of those incidents it just lets me know that we still have work to do as it relates to training, hiring, and promoting in the police department, but again I do believe we've made some progress.

There were also self-reported increases by Officer 1 in minorities receiving promotions and raises that are emblematic of shifts in access and reception of minority police officers.

Maybe the latter part of 2020, for the first time in the history of my department we've had an African American female captain that was promoted to that rank, and my department has been in existence since 1932. So, it's a very white dominated department. And it has been in a spotlight recently for high profile incidents and the lack of minorities within a department, and in its ranks, and the hiring of minorities as well.

The responses of Officer 1 represent the recent breakthrough of minority law enforcement into the higher levels of the occupation, placing them in a prime position to begin cultural changes. The recruitment of more male and female minority police officers demanded by Officer 1 is reflective of the changing view and value of minority police officers.

DISCUSSION

According to some recent research, the motivation of black law enforcement officers to remain in the police field and withstand work and public harassment stems from personal motivations to improve the relationship between law enforcement and the black community. This is reflected in the preliminary findings of the first interview in this study. Despite enduring chronic stressors from unnecessary occupational expectations, private and public criticism from family members and peer support groups and withstanding physical and verbal harassment by protestors demanding police reform, African Americans have maintained a presence within law enforcement and have shown evidence of some career mobility (Capstick 2018; Carbado and Richardson 2018; Kochel 2020; Lasley et al. 2011). Much of the current pushes for police reform
by police departments are spearheaded by minorities in administrative positions of power previously held out from minority police officers.

The initial findings of this study present similar findings to current research but distinguishes itself in detailing how minority law enforcement experiences changes in their police department and their professional opinion of impactful policy changes for community relations. Black law enforcement officers utilize their understanding of both personal and professional communities to properly motivate themselves to execute job duties, maintain personal separation from work issues, and determine policies that meet the community’s needs.

Further research directly inquiring African American police officers about their professional experiences during and following the Ferguson period, as well as changes they would like to see in cultural policies and policing styles is necessary to further understand the feelings, motivations, and perspectives of black police officers.

Limitations

This pilot study is not without its limitations. First, the sample size is small and thus results cannot be generalized. However, the initial interview serves to inform whether changes are necessary to the interview and also highlight initial findings. Furthermore, results are based on one coder. The interpretation of the interview by additional coders is needed to ensure validity. The study is ongoing and future analyses will incorporate additional coders.

CONCLUSION

The negative relationship between black law enforcement officers and cultural cohesion in their profession has been impacted by white cultural dominance throughout police administrative structures and the career aspirations of African American police officers being reformation-based. This relationship has been misunderstood by previous police literature.
discussions because of its overreliance on double marginalization to explain anomalies in black integration into police culture. Double marginality is a tool, rather than a negative experience felt by all black law enforcement professionals meant to maintain cultural relevance in both the personal and professional communities. Some differences in police department survey data between white and nonwhite police officers can be explained by seeing double marginalization this way.

The future place of minority law enforcement officers is seen as key to rehabilitating police-community relationships by this study’s findings. A cultural change in the value of minority officer’s professional opinion and police agendas is beneficial to the development of this relationship. The role of individual officers and their feelings towards their professional duties and public perception in the reformation of police in Louisiana requires further research to understand where the police and community can find common ground.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Screening Questions:
1) "Do you have any questions about the Informed Consent? Do you agree to participate?"
2) Have you worked for a Louisiana police or sheriff’s department from January 1, 2014 and up to Jan 1, 2021?"
3) Do you identify as Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, or any other racial minority?

Introductory Questions
1) How long have you been in law enforcement?
2) Are you in a supervisory or leadership position within your department?
3) What made you want to join law enforcement?
4) Has your motivation to perform your job changed overtime?
5) Have you received strong reactions from those in your personal life for your choice of career?
6) Describe the social environment of your department.
   a. Probe: Do you feel accepted in this environment? Comfortable? Supported?
7) What has been your experience being in your profession as a minority?

Post – Ferguson Questions
8) Lead in: Law enforcement has been under a microscope over the past seven years, and really since the deaths of Eric Garner in 2014 which triggered a wave of other high-profile deaths to come to light including Freddie gray, Eric Garner, and Alton Sterling to name a few. Just recently information about the death of Ronald Greene surfaced as well.
What has been your personal reaction to the events that have unfolded across the country and here in the state of Louisiana?

a. What kind of reaction do you recall happening in your work environment?

b. As a result of these incidents have you seen any changes in the way that duties are carried out within your department? If so, can you describe these changes.
   i. What about your job duties, any changes to how you do your job?

c. In what ways has your motivation changed as a result of events that have happened in the last seven years?
   i. have you thought about quitting as a result of events that have happened in the last seven years?

d. Have these events over the past seven years impacted your health and well-being?

e. What kind of differences, if any, have you experienced in the field when interacting with civilians as a result of these events?

Changes/Reforms

9) Have you received any additional training as a result of events from the past seven years?

If so, what kind of training was it?

a. Probe for specifics about each training mentioned: what are your thoughts about that training? Do you think it helps? Do you think its effective?

b. What other training solutions do you have to address the issues between police and minority groups?
   i. Has your department integrated any kind of cultural sensitivity or race-based training since the events of the past seven years?
      1. Probe: Do you feel these types of trainings are necessary?
2. Probe: If yes, do you feel the training provided is adequate?

10) What changes would you like to see made to your department?
   
   c. Any changes you like to see made to your departments style of policing?
   
   d. Any changes you like to see made to departments culture?