

# Cultural Diversity in Contemporary Policing: Understanding Why We Care\*

Attending training seminars in cultural diversity has become a mainstay of contemporary police professional development. Although many officers have received such training repeatedly, we often lose sight of the underlying issues that led to such efforts in the first place. Ultimately, awareness of cultural differences can improve relations between the police and the communities they serve as well as relations among officers themselves.

In 1990, fully one-third of the United States population consisted of people who were not of European descent. Demographers anticipate that persons of European ancestry will be a statistical minority in the United States just over five decades from now. Focusing on the work force reveals even starker figures. Women and minorities already make up over half of the work force and white males will represent only 15% of American workers within the next ten years. These changes will radically redefine who we are as a people - whether by "we" we refer to policing professionals or the communities served by them.

One of the reasons for focusing on cultural and other differences is that different people can have profoundly different experiences of the same event. There is no single, monolithic "truth," but rather, widely varying perceptions of reality. These perceptions are influenced by a number of factors; cultural background is one of them. As but one example, consider the vast racial divide that separated opinions about the O. J. Simpson trials.

Differences in perceptions about the police go to the very core of the role of the police in our society. Particularly before the Community Era of policing, most people asserted that the police were responsible for preventing crime and apprehending offenders when those prevention efforts failed. Barlow and Barlow (2000), however, argue persuasively that the police are not primarily in the business of crime prevention and control, but rather, maintenance of the social order. To be sure, the contemporary social order is very different for affluent, heterosexual, white, Christian males as compared to women and ethnic and other minorities.

That different people may experience the police differently is clearly evident from the history of the South. Samuel Walker, a leading policing scholar observed that slave patrols-pre-cursors to modern United States police agencies-were "a distinctly American form of law enforcement" (1999, p. 22). This American, made institution was rife with all manner of abuses. Closer to home, one of the primary duties of the Texas Rangers was to intercept runaway slaves attempting to flee to Mexico (Samora, Bernal, & Pena, 1979). Addressing the so-called "Indian problem" was another important duty.

Of course, slavery and wagon trains were a long time ago. Nothing can be done to change the past. Contemporary realities should be of considerably more concern than events of well over a hundred years ago. Although the precise reasons are largely unknown, the fact of the matter is that the criminal justice system does not affect minority members the same way it affects people in the majority. African Americans are eighteen times more likely to be arrested for a drug offense than are whites. Hispanic men are half again as likely as White men to be under some form of supervision (1 in 10 versus 1 in 15) and Black men are three times as likely (1 in 3). Whether these disparities result, as some say, from systematic biases in the administration of criminal justice systems or, as others say, from differential rates of criminality among different groups or, as is more likely, some combination of the two, the fact remains that the system results in different experiences for different people.

As important as it is for police to understand the cultural experiences and dynamics of the communities they serve, these concerns go further. Increasingly, police agencies are trying to hire officers who are more representative of their respective jurisdictions. As Barlow and Barlow (2000, p. 205) observe, "Inclusion on police forces has been a dominant political and social mission of people of color, women, and gays and lesbians seeking social justice through a more responsive police force." As historically marginalized groups achieve greater access to jobs, including those in policing, perceptions on both sides may need to be addressed. It is always difficult for two groups to work together when one (or both) views the other as the enemy. The benefits, though, may be substantial. In each case where new groups have been assimilated into the police rank and file (e.g., racial minorities and women) relations between the police and those groups have improved. "I'm one of those people who think that as an adult, you need to be held accountable for your actions. This man shot and killed somebody. At any point, he ' could have come out. We asked him to come out, put your weapon down and your hands up,' in English and Spanish. And he refused to do so. And when he decided to reinitiate fire, then to me, he forced the issue and action had to be taken," West said. "I feel what we did out there needed to be done."

Tr. West, the ninth trooper to accept the Medal of Valor, will forever be remembered as part of an elite class of officers. Other troopers that have received the Medal of Valor include Jeff Hudson, 1999; Bobby Winslow, 1998-1 Tom Lambert, 1997; Carey Matthews, 1996; Lewis "Buddy" Wald, 1995; Ronnie Shank, 1994; Stephen Boyd, 1993; and Curtis Brown, 1992. 0

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