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The Influence of Police Training and Social Learning on Racial Profiling

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Abstract: *The project explored the question of how do police training, which promotes technically correct police procedures and social learning, which promotes common sense problem solving approaches intersect, and influence police officer racial profiling.*

Conceptualizing an Adult Educational Motif for Police “Racial Profiling”

Problem Statement

Police officers legally may, can and will choose those of us of whom they intend to enforce the law and the United States Supreme Court (USSC) in a unanimous decision called *Whren* (1996), ruled this to be legal. It is legal for police officers to select minorities (*pretextual encounters*) over whites for certain enforcement objectives, as long as they can articulate *probable cause* for the stop--first. This means the ulterior or subjective motivation(s) of police officers are not legal issues. The USSC explained with *Whren*, if anything “racial profiling” is a diversity or training problem for police management. “Racial profiling” is also an adult learning problem because people can only learn how to do this when they become officers. Therefore, to understand the problem of “racial profiling,” it is necessary to know what knowledge is acquired when people become cops, which supports their discretionary pursuits when they *pretextually* select minorities over whites for enforcement purposes.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project is to expand the understanding of the adult learning experience of police officers who formally learn the proper legal methods to construct *pretextual encounters* or “racial profiling.” For reasons we do not know, they also socially learn to utilize that learning to achieve other purposes only they themselves understand. It is also important for us to understand these issues so that we can view what its police officers learn in formalistic training concerning the legalities of “racial profiling” and then what they learn from each other to legitimize their “racial profiling” through legal *pretextualism*.

Research Questions

The major question is how do police social learning and police training intersect and influence police officer racial profiling? The minor research questions are: (a) What is the police social learning component of the officers’ racial profiling; (b) what is the formal (training) component of the officers’ racial profiling; lastly; (c) what role does the officers’ personal learning play in racial profiling?

Research Methodology

This project emphasized the human being as the primary research instrument while rejecting mathematical modeling of phenomena upon which the quantitative paradigm depends so heavily. Constructivism as its philosophy reflects the belief that humans individually and collectively construct their reality. Interpretivism as a tradition stresses the need to put analyses in context, presenting the interpretations of many, sometimes competing, groups interested in the outcomes

of the matter under investigation. This project assumes “racial profiling” exists and to examine it, it used a constructivist-interpretivist methodology. Data collection was done with purposive sampling and interviews of ten full time, (9-male, 1-female/1- black, 9-white) patrol grade police officer interviewees with three to thirty years of police experience. Participants were interviewed, using semi-structured guides which followed a three phase Seidman (1998) interviewing model. Data were analyzed using classifications, coding, categorization and finally thematic analysis.

Major Findings

The two major findings of this research supported that (a); the white officers have “cognitively modeled” minority culture as socially inferior to their majority culture. Accordingly, the white officers socially learned to view black people as people of inherently bad character and (b); they were trained and had socially reinforced by peers and mentors that minorities were by nature prone to criminal activity and worthy of selective police interventions.

Personal Learning and “Whiteness.” Social learning suffuses the officers’ racialized identities. For instance, they came to policing with personally learned white racial identities, or “whiteness.” (Chisholm & Harrington, 1997) Learning from parents and peers they “cognitively modeled” their racial identities while growing up (Goldhagen, 1996). Powell (Powell, 1996) argues as white people fail to see their “whiteness,” accordingly “whiteness” to the white officers is “perceived as both neutral and normative.” As a result, white people “experience ourselves (*themselves*) as nonracialized individuals” (Scheurich, 1990). The combination of denying “whiteness” and the significance of race for people of color serves to obscure their understanding of racism. Consequently, they will disparage and avoid first hand contact with minorities and they will withdraw physically and emotionally from blacks as Officer Nelson depicts:

It seems that whenever black people move into an area, the area turns bad. When people’s cars were being broken into, people’s garages being broken into, and then you know...we moved out and everything was fine, we were back into a white suburban neighborhood and we didn’t have those problems anymore.

In some cases they only discovered the existence of minority people by watching television as did Officer Landers:

Just from watching television from what you see, famous people that kind of stuff. I guess I didn’t really even look at that there was a difference. I don’t recall ever having a conscious thought that...well that’s a black person or...

They also learned fear as Officer Daniels, explained his mother set the stage for his future interactions with blacks;

I remember my Mom warning me at different times not necessarily at where she worked, but when I got home not to go in certain areas and you know, because I hate to say this but she called them jigaboos. You know and she said, “You know the jigaboos will get you.” And I thought...well, so it did...what there was a little bit of fear factor there.

The white officers learned white culture is the “norm” or neutral. The officers learned to view black people as culturally inferior and abnormal and it is these natural characteristics that predispose blacks to having inherent bad character. It was largely from personal experiences that they acquired racist attitudes such as Deputy Patterson and brought those to his practice:

Blacks, they are on the government assistance, they are lazy; they don’t seem to have any initiative and I think this comes from economic problems. They have a lack of initiative

to, go to school, or even to get jobs. It appears to be a lot of, alcoholism, a lot of illegitimacy, two and three generations, there is a grandmother living over here that's had a daughter and then that one's had a daughter, and all the daughters have had kids and nobody is ever married nobody even knows who's the father.

Personal learning and "blueness." However, as cops their "whiteness" is ratcheted-up into what is referred to by this researcher as "blueness." This means they came to policing and while there experienced more social learning, this time to racialize even deeper. Now they discount minority people not only as socially abnormal but naturally bad. Officer Thomas explains:

When I hear these studies about the eighty percent of the prison population is black men, I am going well so fucking what? That is usually because they have to be there because of some abnormality that they have caused or they have done themselves. You don't send somebody to prison if they don't need to go to prison.

Thus, "blueness" ironically "whitens" them even more. "Blueness" takes its form with the officers, as pervasive discourse they engage in, that underscores implicit whiteness messages that blacks are not only abnormal but also amoral, disreputable, and dishonorable. Officer Sullivan clarifies this affect with vigor:

When I see a black guy or stop a black guy driving around in car that I can't afford on my salary, who has enough money to buy his drugs and alcohol and cigarettes and do whatever else he needs to do, you know he has all his toys that I can't afford as a police officer, and his kids...you know he has all these toys...all these drugs...whatever...and his kids are probably running around in shit filled diapers and in a crack house that is falling apart, you cannot tell me that that's part of their culture, y'know as a copper you do gotta wonder who he robbed to get all that.

By imputing and sharing with others that minorities as minorities are inherently bad people, these notions will affect their attitudes as Officer Roberts explains:

So, I get sick of seeing the same people arrested over and over because it's just it's just further increasing the image I have of those people (*blacks*), that these are the ones that are committing all the crimes.

as well as and their patrol oriented discretionary pursuits concerning minorities; for instance, Officer Hilton captures this point clearly:

If I am on patrol in an area of my city, that has multimillion dollar homes, and I know from my experience there are no people of other than white race living there and I see a black gentleman walking in that neighborhood, I am going to stop and talk to that guy.

Police Training and "Copness"

The cops learn to view minorities as inherently criminal people. The officers learned to make bad character and bad people inferences of minority people due in large part to their personal backgrounds and experiences. For instance, Officer Sullivan explains:

Their emphasis (*blacks*) is on drinking and getting high and, you know, go and sire a couple of kids with who ever it is, male dominance over the female species and you put together all of these factors of drugs, and the party attitude, I need to get drunk all of the time well, that's going to have its toll on society because other people don't want to be victims of that.

However, from their socializations with others in training, the cops now understand that it is the inherently bad character of minorities, which drives them by nature to commit crimes, and as

cops they are dedicated, duty-bound and trained as professionals to do things about that. Officer Thomas offers some insight:

I don't think the citizens might think that we are racially profiling people, but when day after day, arresting the same age group and race, where violent crimes and drugs, if that's your experience you are always dealing with the same people. You will glance at him like that, but you know from training, after all your years of experience that certain types of races are out there committing crimes.

Police trainers are usually fellow and senior police officers as Officer Jackson explains:

I think mostly through everyday experiences and dealing with complaints and the training I get from fellow officers. And it's not formal training but just, you go, as you work your way through the years, you run into situations and you can only turn to other officers with more experience who are, maybe somebody has dealt with that kind of situation. And you learn from that. All of that just kinda gets put into your memory bank and you kinda know where you can go and where you can't go.

The officers learn from trainers and share amongst themselves notions that minorities as minorities are "up to no good" and should be selected for enforcement purposes, if for no other reason than that, as Officer Daniels explains:

I mean as far as I am concerned, they (*police trainers*) just said you get a bunch of blacks, in the city, you didn't have that much business or reasons for them to be coming into the city. Lot of times they were just up to no good. I didn't stop them just to stop them for no reason. But, it was just kind of a known fact that they may be up to something no good, because they are in the city and so, I always felt there should be a reason to stop them though.

"*Copness*" and activity. Activity is quantifiable police enforcement product, or stops, tickets and arrests. These cops are trained how to get enforcement activity, as Officer Thomas explains:

Yeah, they (blacks) drive the beater cars, you are trained to look for those beater cars I mean, let's face it who drives those things? All of this it's so all encompassing into one subject.

However, they learn from each other that minorities are valuable, handy, and exploitable sources for that activity than are whites, because minorities are known to be "up to no good" and whites generally speaking are not, Officer Daniels remarks:

It's not like I am going out hunting for them but they (*blacks*) do stick out like a sore thumb. You know, I mean, they do, if you see these fucked up cars go through the city. You know, I will see like bad mufflers, or you know expired plates, you know one of my best stops was a carload (*several blacks in a car*) with only one plate, if it's an older beat up car, I ran (*rolling registration check*) the rear plate and lots of times it won't come back to that car.

The officers say they select minorities by evaluating and rapidly economizing legal patrol interventions on the probability that the stops of black violators will yield more in terms of quantifiable police activity. Activity is regarded as good and generally pleasing to police management. The officers say they are driven by management to produce ever-increasing levels of quantifiable activity in their departments. Therefore, the officers in this study say they do not like to stop people without finding something to show for it. They say it is a waste of good time if they do not yield activity with stops. Therefore, choosing minority people over whites will normally allow the officers to mount activity.

Social Learning and "Amalgamation" Barlow & Barlow (2000) depict a new police racism, or a contemporary policing milieu steeped in an "accumulation of fears" of minorities, in that white cops do not assume white people to be criminals but they do blacks. Amalgamation is born in discretionary police actions legitimized by training while first guided by the unreflected-upon influence of their racial identities, or "whiteness." Secondly, this combination leads the white cops to assume black people to be inherently bad or "blueness." Next, formal training when filtered through peers informs officers about the legal and extralegal alternatives they have at hand to deal with inherently criminal minorities or "copness." Taken together, officers desire to--and know 'how-and-what' institutionalized actions to take, when minorities are preferentially selected for enforcement. This fusion is "amalgamation," or a motif of "racial profiling" and Officer Thomas perfectly describes it:

If I have a Lexus coming down the street and I have a 1982 somewhat fucked-up beater, Chevy...Cavalier...coming down the street at the same time, which one of the two would you think that you would want to stop? It wouldn't be the Lexus would it? But if you got a carload...I mean you got bunch of black people in it and it's riding a little low and they look a little leaky and...you know they are kind of like looking back in the mirror, you know all these things are like...what's this person thinking...naturally, it's just human nature that you are going say, well, you know, I better find something to stop these people for...find out what's going on here.

How Police Social learning and Police Training Intersect

The white officers came to policing with racialized attitudes, socially learned through contact with parents, school, and friends and indeed, through the mass media. The officers described the attitudes as those in which they were first challenged by their early life social learning models to differentiate between minority groups, which lead and leads them to view minorities as being socially abnormal. The influences of their significant others then and still now, plays a large role in their evolving learning about race as Powell (1996) would say they live in "little white bubbles." As officers, they socially learn "blueness." It takes initial form with the officers as the pervasive discourse they engage in with trainers and peers that underscores implicit "white culture is best" messages, that blacks are not only abnormal but also amoral, disreputable, and dishonorable. Next in training with "copness," the cops ratchet-up racial awareness with a terminal connection, in that they now impute minorities as minorities, are as people--prone to crime. As such, minorities will become an immediate focus; they stick out like a "sore thumbs" according to the observant officers, as being by nature suspicious individuals. Lastly, "copness" engenders the cops with the technical and procedural knowledge of what they can legally and extra legally do, when they are driven to take enforcement action or "amalgamate" under the stimulus of the "whiteness, blueness and "copness" fusion.

This means the white officers of this study actively select minorities for enforcement purposes, or they "amalgamate," blacks over whites because minorities simply do not appear to respect the officers' interpretations of the white social order. Problematically speaking, the officers have acquired in training--the procedural legal acumen and technical skills to gin-up a "criminal case" from the most innocuous of minority infractions, to cover themselves when they do. Lastly, if they are challenged for inappropriateness from anywhere or anyone, they have learned from trainers and reinforced by peers how to legally sanitize, or make "bullet proof" what they do, at any point in the enforcement encounter with minorities, before, during and even after.

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