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From Hero to Zero: Policing the Police in Canada- How the Current Culture of Hero Worship Perpetuates Corruption and Dysfunction Within the Canadian Criminal Justice System

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The Canadian criminal justice system prides itself on its adherence to the rule of law and unbiased justice for all within a framework of integrity and tradition. Law enforcement is an integral part of the criminal justice system, the current principles of which were created within a structural functional framework in the 1950's era that considered social order as the most valuable norm to society. The structural functional framework works within the ideology that if one part of the system is broken, then the system as a whole is dysfunctional. Structural functionalists believe that in response, the system will morph into a new, improved version that will resolve any apparent dysfunctions. It is clear that society's norms and values have changed since the 1950's, as evident in evolving gender roles, increased cultural acceptance, and tolerance. Why then has the criminal justice system, well documented in its continued support of white male domination, been so slow to catch up with new social norms? This essay will examine the systemic structural problems inherent within the policing system of Canada and the pervasive inequality and corruption that it perpetuates. I will examine the variables of public perception, along with police deviance and culture to outline a framework response around the issue of structural deficiencies and its prevention of social equality within the Canadian criminal justice system.

Public Perception

The matter of public perception provided a surprising element of control in the continuation of police deviance within the current structure. Parnaby and Leyden (2011) identify the "North American social system as promoting a value system that equates successful policing

with fighting crime” (p. 253). As a society, we are obsessed with police culture and its allure of mystery, danger, and glorified masculinity as evident from the copious media coverage on violent crime, to the success of television, book, and film mediums. The reality of policing is less glamorous, filled with noise complaints, traffic stops, and reports – not the hero in blue with bulging muscles we seem to idealize. Where is the disconnect that allows for society’s acceptance of police misconduct, corruption, and criminal behaviour in an age of increased social responsibility and accountability?

Part of the answer lies in the organization’s efficient management of their persona. By perpetuating the hero image and covering up structural deficiencies with the occasional individual officer sacrifice, the public feel assured that the institution is intact with only a few “rotten apples” (p.1) that are dealt with swiftly (Dean, Bell, and Lauchs 2010). Dean et al. (2010) identify several “graduated responses” (p. 13) by a police organization during the public relations process when a police force has been accused of misconduct. These range from denial, deflection, to controlled co-operation, which generally result in the end of media coverage, public inquiry, and disciplinary action (Dean et al. 2010:13). Dean et al. (2010) go further in their analysis revealing research that if the public persist in the issue, government institutions will step in at all political levels to offer their support for the police executive (p. 13). This results in an individual officer sacrifice in the name of “damage control” (p. 14) to protect the entire criminal justice system’s reputation (Dean et al. 2010).

White males, who dominate law enforcement employment, use their power of influence to create a fear culture that teaches the public to shun marginalized people, which cleverly creates a justification for the power and influence embedded within our police organizations

(Perry 2011: 66). As a society, we are convinced that we need the police to protect us from the ills of society and without them, and any methods they deem suitable, society will tumble into chaos. The upper echelons of power within our legal structure have molded this perception through its manipulation of the public to ignore its misdoings in exchange for protection and order. The public appear to have accepted this deal in Canada, as there are few examples of police organizations brought to justice, despite confessions from criminal officers and evidence of corruption. In fact, in the process of research for this essay, researchers cited the inability to collect concrete, meaningful data on the secretive police culture as the largest obstacle to structural change.

Police Deviance

The fact that empirical data for police organizational practices remains hard to obtain and investigate, speaks to the “*us*” versus “*them*” culture that pervades law enforcement institutions. Dean et al. (2010) identify a global trend amongst police forces to enact the “code of silence” (p. 16) which encourages deviance amongst officers and is further instilled by the collective “brotherhood” (p. 16), who use implied threats to careers and reputations for those officers who may try and resist. Parnaby and Leyden (2011) refer to research that describes the police subculture’s perception of itself as hyper- masculine, above the law, and superior to the civilians it serves – values and rationalizations taught to rookie officers by senior officers who are shunned if they do not participate in the culture’s norms (p. 251).

In an attempt to explain the consequence of police culture on individual officers, Parnaby and Leyden (2011) use Robert Merton’s theory of social structure and anomie with its four

modes of adaptation: innovator, ritualist, retreatist, and the rebel (p. 255). The innovator officer uses deviance for noble ends with the objective of arrest and imprisonment of the perpetrator by any means possible, for example planting evidence, falsifying reports, and illegal searches (Parnaby and Leyden 2011:255).

The ritualist accepts the institutional standards and procedures without question, as these officers feel little hope in their achievement of traditional goals of the profession: glory, power, and respect. A good example is female officers or visible minority officers that can never live up to the “ideal” model of a white, male “crime-fighter” and therefore, do not allow themselves to aspire to a higher goal (Parnaby and Leyden 2011:257).

The retreatist is the most self-destructive of the adaptations and includes officers who find their moral compass impedes their ability to fit into the ideal set forth by the organization. As a result, posttraumatic stress disorder, addiction, suicide, and complete isolation from the brotherhood results in an identity crisis and a possible mental health breakdown (Parnaby and Leyden 2011:258). A recent article by a CBC investigative journalist exemplifies this concept as former police officer, Derek Huff, recounts his moral inability to cover up the police brutality by colleagues that he witnessed. The result was a stress-related resignation after he was deemed a “rat” by colleagues and “pushed out” of the Edmonton police force by members from the top-down (Tomlinson 2013:1-14).

The last adaptation, the rebel, disdains the formal protocol of the organization and will take justice into their own hands from the frustration they feel for a criminal justice system they view as ineffective and unjust. The rebel, who has given up on institutional goals and means,

will utilize street justice for those they deem worthy of punishment, which includes police violence and brutality, theft, bribes, and self-interested corruption (Parnaby and Leyden 2011:258).

The illustrations above show an immense amount of pressure, stress, and unrealistic attributes that the system of policing imposes upon its individual officers at the structural level. It is only natural then that the public suffer the consequences of a burned out, disenchanted, morally corrupt police culture in the form of police misconduct and brutality, but the real problem lies with the power this system has over citizens lives – literally life and death.

We have seen how the power of public perception, police culture, and the systemic normative of entitlement and hero worship have allowed the bureaucracy of law enforcement to continue unfettered in its deviant misconduct and unequal treatment of the public and its own members. The main concept one must understand to understand the police world is conformity. The system relies on an unquestioned belief by its members that they are an elite group forged together against the rest of society by the noble practice of fighting crime. The problem with this ideology is that over 80 percent of a police force is white male dominated, and almost without exception, the top of the hierarchy is white, older men. Any women officers who have found their way to the top have done so, as Perry (2011) describes in her text, by having to “reconstruct her femininity” (p.69) to fit the male dominated role, or be subordinate and take on the traditional role of caregiver in the form of community service roles or domestic violence investigations. Minority officers are no better off, with many reports of racism, discrimination against promotion, social isolation, and bullying by white, male officers (Perry 2011:68-69). Most officers will not report misconduct under the current system as whistleblowers are shunned

by other members of the force due to the fear of courtesy stigma. As shown in the example of ex-officer Huff, the system shuts the rogue officer out systematically until the stress, fear, and anxiety result in a resignation or sacrificial termination. The system protects itself at all costs and this concept rises to the top of the criminal justice system in Canada, as we observed in the research of political systems backing criminal activity by police organizations to allow the continuation of the current model.

Some may argue that the system in place is effective as Canadian crime rates are lower and there are more officers on public streets, ensuring further public safety. I argue that while older crime statistics have dropped, we need to look to future crime not currently recorded, namely cybercrime that our legal system so far has failed to contain. I would also argue that the Canadian government's 57% increased spending on police resources from 1997 to 2012, has done little in the sense of promoting tolerance and equality education amongst current officers, or for the recruitment of higher calibre police personnel (Statistics Canada 2013). In fact, media reports of RCMP, OPP, and local forces misconduct and brutality seem to be increasing, yet one study showed that only 2% of internally investigated cases (a first step for all police complaints), were found to be guilty, and none of those recommended "serious sanctions" (Dean et al. 2010:13).

Kane (2005) identified the public's perception of police integrity as paramount for communities, especially disadvantaged neighbourhoods, to follow rule of law and co-operate with police, versus criminal activity to solve community problems (p. 470). Sadly, the bulk of police discrimination, racial profiling, violence, and corruption occur in the same neighbourhoods that need proof of police integrity the most. One could infer then, that the

current police system perpetuates the cycle of crime as neighbourhoods that experience the most social inequality also experience the most police corruption. This cycle further erodes citizen confidence in police, which will result in higher criminal activity in the form of gangs and street justice meted out by a population who no longer believes in the criminal justice system (Kane 2005:474).

As expressed by Dean et al. (2010), individual officers that are the current focus of police watchdogs in criminal or conduct investigations are not the answer to fight police misconduct and deviance (p.13). Rather, focusing on the “formal system [of] police organization[s], the criminal justice system and the broader socio-political context” (p. 6) is the answer to the question of how to resolve police corruption and misconduct (Dean et al. 2010). Research suggests that relations of authority, modes of supervision, methods of training, organizational limits to creative thinking, promoted use of violence, and an attitude of police superiority, all coupled with the lack of public enforced accountability have allowed modern day police forces to exist in a bubble of historical inequality by a white male hegemony (Parnaby and Leyton 2011:252). A significant systemic problem of police organizations is the lack of training for officers, who are responsible to navigate ever increasing complex social, political and cultural problems in communities, which would be better served with a proactive policing model, yet outdated, ineffective reactive policing principles are taught (Parnaby and Leyden 2011:252).

There appears to be a consensus among scholars that a shift from traditional police values of machismo and a closed culture, to open, inclusive values would break down the barriers of discrimination, racism, inequality, and corruption that currently permeate Canadian police forces.

From personal experience in this environment, I would argue that police deviance and misconduct comes from the top of the hierarchy, promoted by two concepts – power and fear. The many forms of power and control a police force imposes over its own members and the public, implied or explicit, is all designed to collect and retain the power traditionally bestowed upon it by government sanctions. Like any social change involving formal institutions, the white male dominated criminal justice system is reluctant to change for fear of losing its power.

Solutions

The following are recommendations based on my research and personal experience for a shift toward a new order police system, built on the principles of equality and integrity:

1. No further internal investigations, audits, or inquests involving police members and organizations. This must include any nepotism as a conflict of interest between police forces who investigate incidents for each other, along with any member of union or legal counsel with personal attachment to the officer or service investigated.
2. A substantial investment into education of *all* personnel with regard to social issues that involve mental health, addiction, cultural tolerance, sexual orientation, gender, and marginalized populations. Goals of proactive and community policing with a focus on rehabilitation, education, and public collaboration should be implemented, versus the current goals of power and control, reactive, and enforcement police tactics.
3. Public and personnel complaints investigated and adjudicated by appointed members of the public, as it is our democratic right to hold accountable those who govern us – for the people, by

the people. The goal is for all police members, no matter the rank, to be held accountable for criminal or deviant actions that diminish the public confidence in police integrity.

4. An overhaul of all police policies with regard to workplace harassment, bullying, and other such tactics used to perpetuate the thin blue line mentality that prevents a healthy, open work environment where officers are free to report criminal behaviour and misconduct.

Conclusion

These suggestions begin to address the structural problems associated with the public perception of police, both negative and the unrealistic “*hero*” role imposed onto the police culture by public expectation. Further, they address immediate problems of police deviance and corruption by holding the organizations accountable with open books and external investigations into misconduct. Finally, they address institutional goals and systemic structural problems through education and a shift from traditional discriminatory and elite values entrenched within the current system, to a progressive community/client based structure that involves police and public working together to solve our nation’s ills.

While there may be some that are skeptical this system will ever change, I argue it has to, ironically to keep the power it is so afraid to lose. Our social world has changed and increasingly reflects a Marxist critical theory, not the bygone norms of Talcott Parson’s structural functionalism in which our current criminal justice system’s principles are entrenched. With the increase of immigration, marginalized societies fighting for their rights, and a social media that records every moment, the current police system is akin to an autocratic government ripe for revolution. However, as history has repeatedly taught us, those in power hold on until

those with none decide to achieve class-consciousness, rise up, and take back their power. In conclusion, I hypothesize the current discriminatory structure of the white male dominated criminal justice system will change, but only when public perception of its police organizations shifts from hero to mortal.

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