Decreasing Law Enforcement Applicants and Racial Profiling – Reversing the Trends

Gregory A. Salters
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: Valuing Polyrhythmic Realities and Critical Theories, specifically Critical Race Theory, is facilitated by Interdisciplinary inquiry. Racial Profiling will be utilized to demonstrate how acknowledging the lived experiences of individuals and viewing situations from the oppressed viewpoint will positively impact the number of Blacks in law enforcement.

The College of Education at Florida International University has a three-part mission statement: “To prepare professionals who have the abilities and dispositions to facilitate and enhance learning and development within diverse settings; the discovery and dissemination of knowledge related to learning, teaching and development; the development of professional partnerships to promote meaningful educational, social, economic and political change” (FIU, 2002, p. 212). Learning has been defined as “a relatively permanent change in behavior or in behavioral potentiality that results from experience and cannot be attributed to temporary body states such as those induced by illness, fatigue or drugs” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Some educators acknowledge the influence power and oppression have on education and vice versa. The only way behavior or behavioral potentiality can be affected is by a multi-pronged approach. This approach will address many aspects of the individual that includes his/her surroundings and individual experiences. To fully understand and comprehend the complexities of power, oppression and the effects they have on individuals and our society, it is necessary to obtain information from at least two departments within the College of Education – Educational leadership and Policy studies and Educational Psychology Studies. This interdisciplinary inquiry exemplifies the theme of this conference, “Supporting Interdisciplinary Inquiry.”

To accomplish the purpose of this paper, the researcher must perform interdisciplinary inquiry of at least two departments within the College of Education--the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies; and the department of Educational and Psychological Studies. Providing information regarding historical, comparative, cultural, social and philosophical foundations of education, the Educational Leadership department assists the researcher in better understanding the learner and the learner’s motivation or lack thereof. When information gained from this department is combined with the training received in Educational Psychology, to assist with meeting the needs of individuals who experience cognitive, academic, and/or social-emotional difficulties that negatively impact their lives, the researcher is better equipped to make a positive impact on our nation’s citizens and Blacks in law enforcement.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that using a “bifocal lens” consisting of Polyrhythmic realities and Critical Theory will allow for better understanding and education of our nation’s citizens and their diverse applications of educational research and address their behavioral, psychological, and cultural viewpoints.

The explosive nature of racial profiling has polarized our nation and impacted individuals’ employability; however, in this paper, it will be used to demonstrate how interdisciplinary inquiry can positively impact our nation and increase the number of blacks in law enforcement. To some researchers this may be of little or no importance; however, if
researchers were to don the “bifocal lens” of polyrhythmic realities and critical theory when analyzing the shortage of individuals in essential career fields such as law enforcement, nursing and even education they would be able to better address the problem. Trends found in nursing and education are beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, I will concentrate on law enforcement trends.

**Polyrhythmic Realities**

“Polyrhythmic realities” refers to the student’s (individual’s) life experience within a sociocultural, political, and historical context (Sheared, 1999). In order for individuals to enter into or participate in anything, the facilitator or educator must develop an understanding and appreciation of the individuals’ lived experiences. These experiences cause individuals to act or respond to various stimuli differently. Once these experiences have been acknowledged, they must be given voice by acknowledging the impact of race, gender and class. Giving voice can be outlined in a four-step approach: (a) one must first acknowledge their perceived power and control, (b) examine how their race, class, gender has either privileged them or oppressed them, (c) be willing to share power and control, and (d) create or welcome others histories and cultures.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory was developed after the civil rights movements of the 1960s and the critical legal studies movement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical Race Theory (CRT) combines critical theory that started in the Frankfurt school and applies it to race. It looks at the movement for equal rights and seeks to re-evaluate the notions of equality that serve to hide important differentiations of power between groups. CRT examines the notions of equality and merit to promote change and all legal fairness. Understanding CRT involves examining the issue of race through the lens of an oppressed people. Most people who have not been oppressed will not comprehend the issues before them. Only when an examination of the issue from the oppressed lens is performed can an understanding of CRT be reached. Once an understanding of CRT is reached, then its application to other topics such as the hiring of blacks in law enforcement and human resource development will be done objectively.

**Racial Profiling**

The shortage of police applicants is just as alarming as the shortage of teachers and nurses. However, this is only one trend in law enforcement, the other being the number of allegations of racial profiling. In the interests of improving our communities, we must educate individuals about the opportunities in law enforcement and the negative effects of racial profiling.

If these trends continue within law enforcement departments, citizens could experience a decrease in their quality of life. Tremendously understaffed police departments could possibly lead to increased crime. This could cause our property values to decline, our insurance rates increase, and our safety to be imperiled; therefore we become virtual prisoners in our own home. As educators and human resource professionals, we must both educate and motivate individuals to improve our society.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of the United States was 281,421,906 in 2000: of this number, 194,552,774 (69.1%) are White; 33,947,837 (12.1%) are Black; and 35,305,818 (12.5%) are Hispanic (US Census Bureau, 2000)) Historically, dominant cultures have systematically limited the power of minorities in their social, political, and
religious institutions. (Guy, 1999) Those persons who enjoy material and social privilege based on race, gender, or ethnicity often suffer from fear of crime and violence at the hands of minority group members (Guy, 1999). In 1997, the Bureau of Justice reported that of 326,968 full-time sworn law enforcement officers, Whites comprised 81%; Blacks, 10%; and Hispanics, 7%. The disparity between the population and those in law enforcement is contrary to the Community Policing philosophy, which indicates that personnel of the police agency should mirror the demographics of the community that it serves (Goldstein, 1990).

Racial profiling is defined as the law enforcement tactic of stopping individuals while walking or driving only because of the color of his or her skin and a fleeting suspicion that the person is engaging in criminal behavior (Meeks, 2000). Discussions of racial profiling increased in popularity after the 1999 revelation that the New Jersey State Police had an explicit policy of racial profiling (Alter, 2001).

The effects of racial profiling such as traffic citations, arrests, an overall distrust of law enforcement and the various subjective areas of the hiring process (i.e. oral board and background checks) have resulted in Blacks being underrepresented in the law enforcement profession. Some traffic citations and arrests are totally left to the discretion of the officer. If the officer is abusive with his or her discretion, the resulting citations and/or arrests will negatively impact the persons ability to hired as a law enforcement officer.

As a Black male and a police sergeant in a large metropolitan police department in South Florida, I can appreciate and understand the necessity to include Sheared’s polyrhythmic realities of African Americans in law enforcement.

Due to my life experiences and my profession, I can understand two sides of the racial profiling issue: victim and law enforcement/crime prevention. My assignment in the Department of Internal Affairs and serving on the hiring oral board afforded me the insight into the hiring process for law enforcement officers. These positions exposed me to the hurdles that racial profiling creates for individuals when applying for law enforcement careers and other careers.

Based on my contact with Blacks and my familiarization with the various stages in the hiring process, racial profiling has a direct negative impact on Blacks in the field of law enforcement and has caused other Blacks to think negatively about police officers and not seek employment in this very rewarding career. If human resource development professionals would like to increase the percentage of Blacks in law enforcement, they should consider the positive impact community policing has had on bridging the gap between law enforcement and the minority community; recognize and begin to deconstruct the privilege that White males, especially White male police officers, possess; and strongly emphasize in adult and general education the areas of diversity, cultural sensitivity and law enforcement procedures. Supporting interdisciplinary inquiry and utilizing the “bifocal lens” to view all situations will allow the College of Education to be better suited to address the needs of our nation’s citizens and their diverse applications of educational research. Further, we will be able to give voice to otherwise voiceless groups of individuals and ultimately reduce or eliminate oppression and its negative impacts.

References


Florida International University Graduate Course Catalog, 2002-2003.


