

Policing: Social Control and Race

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Abstract: This is a reflective piece on the impact of the police presence in a community on a young African American child after the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A discussion of social control and race are presented. Recommendations for social justice efforts are offered.

Keywords: African American men, policing, social justice, criminal justice

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination was the most visible attempt to dismantle the organizational efforts of the civil rights movement through the eradication of its leader. The assassination publicly revealed the vulnerability of African American men in a society that professes to the world the right to express beliefs and ideals through freedom of speech. I spent my young years in West Garfield Park, an area on the west side of Chicago, Illinois. I loved my childhood. There were children in every gray stone on the block. We played together on our street riding bikes, jumping rope, competing in hopscotch, and playing strike out. We visited each other's homes and eagerly awaited for the musical sounds of the ice cream truck. There was a feeling of connectedness among us. We watched out for each other as if we were blood related. I came and went without fear. No one would have foreseen that the peaceful calm of my neighborhood that kept me close and protected would be changed forever in one day.

It was April 4, 1968. The day Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. I can still feel the uneasiness, the fear, and the chaos. I can sometimes remember the smells and the racing heartbeats of my parents in their protective silence. The events of that day will always be etched in my memory. The day began as any other. I awoke, washed my face, brushed my teeth, got dressed, and ate breakfast. My sister and I ran to the television, locked our hands around the knob and together turned to whatever station was the clearest. After a while, we went outside to play. Everyone was outside. We knew each others names and families. We walked throughout the neighborhood with ease. We talked to each other. We visited each others homes. It was a community. As the street lights signaled the end of day, the block retreated back into their homes looking forward to the next time we would see each other.

My sister and I were fed dinner, bathed, and sent to our room. Shortly after, my mother came to our room and ushered us to the living room. The front door was open, which was unusual. My dad was running from the front to the back of the house as if he was looking for something or someone. My mother pulled my sister and I tight. My sister was sitting on my mother's lap and I was standing by my mother's side as she sat on the arm of the living room couch. It was so dark everywhere. My mother kept peeking out of the window. It was so dark. I asked my mother what was going on. She told me that Dr. King was dead, that someone killed him and everyone was upset. Now, although I remember so much of that day, I couldn't wrap my young mind around the connection between Dr. King's assassination and why it was so dark. As soon as my mother loosened her grip of me I ran to the back porch and looked out. People were running everywhere. There was turmoil.

While I was standing in all of my confusion, I became mesmerized by a beautiful orange and yellow sky with giant billows of black clouds, fire, and things burning. I could hear my father screaming "Get away from here! Don't come over here!" There was furniture, clothes, and all sorts of other items in the streets and in peoples yards. There were police everywhere. My mother, sister and I couldn't leave the house. My father would periodically go out to make sure our home was secure. The police presence was known and felt by everyone. Everyone in the community did not participate in looting and burning of stores and buildings but as a whole the community felt the repercussion. I saw people who were bloodied and beaten trying to make it to their homes. Many of whom charged (informally) police for their injuries. You could hear loud voices giving warnings to others that the police were coming. And although it was never said, we knew, even as children, to stay out of the way of the police.

There was an unspoken consensus that the police were

not our friends and we had to be wary of them. Most of the people in our community were from a southern state and had come north in the hopes of a better quality of life. Their previous experiences exasperated the level of fear and mistrust of the police. My neighborhood was never the same after April 4, 1968. I was no longer fearless. I no longer felt safe.

Social Control

The criminal justice system functions to control crime and reduce recidivism. The training of police is steeped in social control theory. While government control is essential to the functioning of a society, the extent of control and power is important. If too much control is given, those in control will be self-serving (Peak, 2007). This approach within itself is dangerous and leaves those who are vulnerable at the mercy of a system whose focus is punitive.

The legal and historical basis for the criminal justice system finds its roots in the Declaration of Independence which states that people have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and that governments are instituted to secure these rights. While the terminology is conceptually broad, the assumption is that governing bodies are established to protect people's acquisition of these rights and those inhibiting these rights are in violation of this social contract. However, the relationship between the histories of the treatment of African American men by police cannot be ignored or treated separately when examining policing practices today. Since and before slavery, African American men in this country have been emasculated, brutalized, and criminalized. The anger, frustration, and helplessness of any man not fully recognized for his worth in any community creates a volatile situation between those who are policing and those who are policed. Brutal acts toward African American men continue within our communities and happen every day with undesirable outcomes of beatings, deaths and riots.

In 1965, the Watts Riots were spurred by an incident in which an African American male, Marquette Frye, was pulled over and arrested by a white highway patrolman for suspicion of driving while under the influence (Cohen & Murphy, 1966). In

1992, Rodney King was at the center of the Los Angeles Riots. (Cannon, 1996). He was beaten by four police officers after a high speed chase. The shooting death of an unarmed African American teenager, Trayvon Martin, by a white man sparked national debate on the stand your ground laws in Florida (Kuo, 2012). Michael Brown, another young African American male with a promising future was brutally shot to death by a white police officer who felt threatened by the unarmed teen (Robles & Bosman, 2014). Eric Garner, another African American male died in New York City after the police officer put Garner in a chokehold for fifteen seconds (Goldstein & Schweber, 2014). And most recently, Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American resident of Baltimore, Maryland, sustained injuries following his arrest by policemen and subsequently died. Four of the five cases mentioned ended in severe physical assault or death. In all of the cases, African American communities were left in an uproar. The outcry was not just for these isolated injustices but for the many who suffer oppressive policing practices on a daily basis.

Past events such as the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Watts Riots, and the riot involving Rodney King; along with recent events such as the shooting deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and the deaths of Eric Garner and Freddie Gray prods my memories to April 4, 1968. That was the day that my sense of security and faith in the criminal justice system to serve and protect me was shaken. That day left me with many unanswered questions. I often wondered if I could trust policemen who I had previously grown to admire. I wondered if the existence of the police was to protect or to control certain populations and races. From that day forward I have held in my spirit an underlying fear of police. I have learned to act, speak and react inoffensively even when stopped by police for a minor traffic violation.

Race

Although we have heard or read about or been victims to unfair policing practices, there are no remedies that seem to directly address the issue of policing in a way that does not make it virtually impossible to prove. The conflict rests within the divide between races in this country. The role of power and its influence on the behavior of those charged with policing our neighborhoods and communities is of great concern.

The power awarded, and duly felt entitled, to police exacerbates the racial divide. According to the Center for Disease Control (2011) between 1968 and 2011, black people were between two to eight times more likely to die at the hands of law enforcement than whites (CDC, 2015). During that same period, a black person was on average 4.2 times more likely to get shot and killed by a police officer than a white person (CDC, 2015).

Historically, the structure of criminal justice institutions/organizations has built into its' foundation views and beliefs that support racial disparity (Jones, 2013). The views and beliefs that, in particular, minority groups have a greater propensity to be involved in criminal behavior has perpetuated feelings of powerlessness among minority groups thus negating social integration into society (Jones, 2013). Even today we are continuing to address racial disparity through research and other ways of knowing in an effort to close the racial divide in the application of criminal justice laws/policies.

Dr. King was assassinated in 1968. At that time, the majority of police officers were Caucasian. The Bureau of Justice Statistics was established in 1976 and does not have data for 1968. However, the earliest data collected in 1987 indicates that nationally white officers made up 87% of all police (Durose, Schmitt, & Langan, 2001). Although, there has been an increase in the number of minority police officers (27%), currently Whites still make up 73% of all police officers nationally (Reaves, 2015). This fact justifiably questions the promotion of racial diversity and institutionalization of racial profiling within the criminal justice system. Policing practices results are evident in how police are viewed by communities and its citizens. Subsequently, when groups feel that they are wronged or subjected to unfair or unjust scrutiny, conflict arises and threatens social integration needed to maintain social order and may result in the rejection of such practices in the form of, for example, protests and riots.

Conclusion

The feeling of uneasiness, the fear, and the chaos that I felt as a child continues today for many children in African American communities. The

National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008) list as a core value social justice. The following ethical principle guides us in our work in this area:

Ethical Principle: Social workers challenge social injustice.

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

As the devastating occurrences of African American men and women being killed by police are highlighted and made known to the world, it is imperative that social workers come together in a concerted effort to promote and stand up for social justice. It is important that we understand the history of the African American man/woman, the African American community, and the criminal justice system. This type of understanding and knowledge can assist in strengthening the foundation from which a framework can be developed to address policing practice issues in African American communities. Sometimes, I wonder if Dr. King's message of employing peaceful remedies during adversarial circumstances has been superceded by the hurt, outrage and anger of a people. The questions are: Can we be fearless, safe, and comfortable in our communities and who really cares? Social workers must stand up for the vulnerable. We are obligated by our profession and humanity.

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