An Exercise in Fire Safety: Readying Ourselves for the Unintended Consequences of Traditional I-O Approaches to Diversity Management

Alison V. Hall
Agnes Scott College

This commentary elaborates on the position taken in the focal article, "Baltimore Is Burning" (Ruggs et al., 2016), that partnerships between industrial–organizational (I-O) psychologists and law enforcement agencies could offer valuable insight and practical tools that help to alleviate long-standing and ongoing conflict between police officers and communities of color. I fully support this stance as well as many of the recommendations proposed within the focal article. I-O psychologists indeed have knowledge and resources that could prove useful for supporting police reform efforts. However, although I-O psychologists have much to contribute to the conversation, a recent review by Hall, Hall, and Perry (2016) draws attention to several ways in which law enforcement as a context and police officers as a population are distinct from many of the workplace environments and civilian employee populations that have informed current I-O knowledge and best practices. As such, our traditional methods may be wrought with unique challenges when implemented in law enforcement contexts. If we fail to give serious consideration to this, the role of I-O psychologists in preventing future fires in Baltimore and throughout the United States may be accompanied by unintended consequences. As I-O psychologists prepare to help law enforcement extinguish the flames between police and communities of color, we must anticipate and prepare to safely combat these dangers so we do not add fuel to the fire or get burned in the process of rendering aid.

In this commentary, I extend the conversation of one specific recommendation proposed by the focal article: diversifying police personnel. This recommendation is among the most commonly offered solutions to mitigating the tensions between police and racial minority communities, and the focal article highlights many merits of increasing racial similarity between officers and the communities within which they work. As the American police

force is approximately 73% White, this solution ultimately equates to hiring more minority police officers. Although I agree that a diversified workforce often positions the traditional organization to better meet the needs of its external stakeholders and that a diversified police force has the potential to do the same, I caution that the assumptions we make in mainstream I-O diversity management research may not hold as true within law enforcement. As such, I do not intend to critique the recommendation itself. Rather I aim to illustrate some ways in which I-O psychologists' tried-and-true diversity management practices may fall short if we do not adapt them significantly for implementation in law enforcement contexts and police officer populations.

Accordingly, I highlight how diversifying the police occupation involves special considerations and suggest that I-O scholars and practitioners be uniquely attentive to the nuances of increasing minority representation within law enforcement. If we fail to do so, our efforts could do more harm than good. In the remainder of this article, I explore three potential unintended consequences of increased racial diversity in the American police force and highlight how failing to prepare for these possibilities could impede our sincerest efforts to extinguish the fire between law enforcement and communities of color.

We Spray the Flames but Ignore the Source

Before we recommend greater racial diversity within police forces, I-O psychologists should engage in further exploration of the various assumptions on which this recommendation is based. The recommendation to increase representation of minority officers as a means of quelling conflict between police and minority civilians relies primarily on the assumption that minority officers will demonstrate relatively less racial bias in their interactions with minority citizens. However, we may not have sufficient evidence that this is the case.

Unique features of police culture and police officers may greatly neutralize the potentially positive impact of racial similarity on police–civilian relations. For example, police culture explicitly promotes a uniquely strong and salient collective—a "brotherhood"—that binds employees together and overrides many of the apparent dissimilarities among individual officers (Crank, 2014). As such, police officers tend to share similar values and traits that are distinct from the average Americans on whom much of our research is based. For instance, evidence suggests that police officers value conformity and power to a greater extent than the typical civilian (Bardi, Buchanan, Goodwin, Slabu, & Robinson, 2014). Evidence also suggests that relative to the average adult civilian, the average police officer has a more pronounced social dominance orientation (SDO) and stronger right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) beliefs (Gatto & Dambrun, 2012). These characteristics have

been consistently linked to prejudice, and it would be premature to assume they are less pronounced in the typical minority (relative to White) cop.

According to system justification theory, members of low status groups (i.e., racial minorities) with high levels of SDO (as is common among police officers) tend to justify and support, rather than resist, the status quo even to the disadvantage of their own groups (Overbeck, Jost, Mosso, & Flizik, 2004). As such, system justifying postures may result in similar behaviors between members of high and members of low status racial groups. This is bolstered by the fact that White officers and non-White officers demonstrate similar degrees of racial bias in shooter bias tasks (Correll et al., 2007, p. 1011, Footnote 3) and that Black participants display significantly more shooter bias toward Black targets who are high in stereotypicality (e.g., darker skin, wider nose) than Black targets who are low in stereotypicality or White targets (Kahn & Davies, 2011). Anecdotally, this notion is further supported by the fact that three of the six Baltimore City Police officers charged for their involvement in the death of Freddie Gray were Black.

We have long recognized that both surface and deep-level diversity have important workplace outcomes. Thus, it is critical to acknowledge that surface-level diversity among officers does not automatically equate to deep-level diversity among officers and to explore the possibility that deep-level characteristics (e.g., high SDO, RWA, power values, conformity values) may be equally significant sources of conflict between police and minority civilians. To the extent that minority officers share value profiles that are more similar to White officers than to minority civilians, efforts to increase racial similarity between officers and citizens may change the face of the American police force but have minimal impact on officer–community relations.

In preparation to partner with law enforcement agencies and diversify the American police force, I-O psychologists should be aware that the lack of deep-level diversity among police officers may warrant our greater empirical and theoretical consideration. If I-O psychologists focus our diversity management recommendations solely on race, we limit our opportunity to make a positive impact. If we fail to look beyond the surface, the fires between law enforcement and communities of color may continue to rage as we devote our attention to the flames but fail to put the fire out at its source.

We Turn Up the Heat for Minority Officers

Further, if I-O psychologists are insensitive to the unique context of law enforcement and the unique positions of the employees within them, we could also create new problems. As we propose increased racial diversity as a resolution to conflict between police officers and minority civilians, we

put minority officers on the hook for righting an occupational and societal wrong. We apply the assumption (and impose the expectation) that their racial group membership endows them with the capacity to reverse a long history of racially biased policing. This is another dangerous assumption that could have significant negative consequences for minority officers.

If we look to minority officers to shoulder the burden of solving racism within the criminal justice system, we may increase the salience of their dual social group memberships and make them more keenly aware of potential conflict between the demands of their racial groups and their work groups. More clearly, minority officers are members of low status racial groups. As such, it is in the collective interests of their racial group that they advance the group's social position and focus on racial justice and equality in policing. However, political psychologists consider police work to be hierarchy enhancing work that is primarily aimed at protecting, serving, or benefiting society's elite (see Sidanius, Liu, Shaw, & Pratto, 1994). As such, it may be in the collective interests of minority officers' work groups to advance the social position of higher status racial groups (i.e., Whites) and deemphasize racial justice and equality in policing. Thus, the collective interests of their racial group and their occupational group may be at odds. For example, criminal justice research suggests that although many officers evaluate racial profiling as an appropriate and integral part of police work, many Black officers (particularly dark-skinned males) report personal experiences with being racially profiled themselves (e.g., Barlow & Barlow, 2002). As such, Black male officers may have to reconcile the job demands of proactively identifying criminal suspects and the life demands of being unjustly stereotyped and targeted as criminals. By increasing the salience of this conflict, we may prompt system justifying motives among minority officers that are psychologically damaging. Evidence supports the notion that system justification is associated with increased depression and neuroticism for minorities (Jost & Thompson, 2000).

To better inform interventions for effectively managing racial diversity within police forces, it is imperative that I-O psychologists explore this line of inquiry in greater depth. While social and political psychologists recognize that some careers have social justice motives (e.g., Sidanius et al., 1994), I-O scholars tend to pursue research as if jobs are neutral in this regard. That is often, but not exclusively, the case. As we offer insights to occupations with inherent social justice motives, we cannot fail to acknowledge those motives and their implications for minority employees. Then, we must adapt our recommendations and interventions accordingly. Otherwise, our efforts to extinguish the fires between law enforcement and communities of color may actually result in a work climate that turns up the heat on minority officers.

We Fan the Flames Between Officers and Minorities

Finally, I-O psychologists should also consider the possibility that increased diversity within law enforcement could result in increased tensions between officers and minorities. The American workforce is approximately 63% White and 53% male. However, the vast majority of the American police force is White and male. Thus, the demographic composition of law enforcement may also pose unique problems for diversity management efforts.

Research suggests that people in racially homogenous environments may construe the concept of "diversity" in ways that are consistent with their social dominance motives and may be more likely to resist race-based diversity efforts (Unzueta, Knowles, & Ho, 2012). For example, individuals with high SDO may be more likely to define diversity in terms of educational background or rural (versus urban) upbringing to justify their racially homogenous workplace as sufficiently diverse without increasing racial minority representation. Additionally, recent evidence suggests that members of high-status groups (i.e., White men) may perceive prodiversity messages as unfair and threatening to their group's status (Dover, Major, & Kaiser, 2016). In response to increased diversity, Whites may exhibit greater fear and anger toward minority groups (Outten, Schmitt, Miller, & Garcia, 2012), greater implicit and explicit bias against racial minorities (Craig & Richeson, 2014), and increased concern for their group's own position (Danbold & Huo, 2015). Accordingly, as we implement diversity efforts in this highly homogenous context, we must be mindful of how both internal and external race relations could be impacted.

Further, in light of the strong solidarity values among police officers (Crank, 2014) minority officers who fear workplace rejection could be prompted to try harder to be accepted by their peers. This may be especially likely among newly hired minority officers who are recruited and selected as part of the implementation of our diversity recommendations (e.g., Matschke & Sassenberg, 2010). Thus, increasing minority police personnel in response to turmoil between law enforcement and minority communities could also result in increasingly negative interactions between newly hired minority officers and minority civilians. Failure to consider the ramifications of diversifying the American police force without exploring these dynamics could fan the flames between law enforcement and communities of color.

Conclusion

This commentary is not offered to discourage I-O psychologists from actively pursuing partnerships with law enforcement agencies. It is instead offered to encourage us to pursue these partnerships with open eyes and sharp minds. We have a strong foundation on which to build new insights, but

our ability to position ourselves as uniquely qualified experts in this area will likely require us to retool and upskill. Traditional approaches to diversity management, as well as personnel selection, training, performance management, and the like, must be adapted to fit the unique context of policing and the unique population of police officers. Although an increase in racial diversity among police officers is indeed a legitimate recommendation for addressing racially biased policing, we must be mindful of the potential complexities of its implementation. Only then will we be able to equip law enforcement agencies and their employees with adequate support to maximize the benefits and mitigate the challenges of increased diversity among officers.

Instead of rushing into a blazing inferno expecting to use the traditional tools of our trade and prevail heroically, I-O psychologists should practice fire safety in our efforts. I-O psychologists cannot go in blind or assume this fire is like any other. We should challenge ourselves to be thoughtful in our approach to partnering with law enforcement. It is critical that the I-O psychology community dedicate itself to further research within law enforcement contexts using police officer samples. We should use both our existing knowledge and our borrowed knowledge from related fields (e.g., social and political psychology, sociology, law, and criminal justice) to inform our partnership efforts. It is critical that we accurately identify the source of the fire and focus our recommendations and implementations appropriately. We must also be careful not to turn up the heat on minority officers or fan the flames in a way that increases racial bias against minority officers or minority civilians.

References

Bardi, A., Buchanan, K. E., Goodwin, R., Slabu, L., & Robinson, M. (2014). Value stability and change during self-chosen life transitions: Self-selection versus socialization effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 106*(1), 131–147.

Barlow, D. E., & Barlow, M. H. (2002). Racial profiling: A survey of African American police officers. *Police Quarterly, 5*(3), 334–358.

Correll, J., Park, B., Judd, C. M., Wittenbrink, B., Sadler, M. S., & Keesee, T. (2007). Across the thin blue line: Police officers and racial bias in the decision to shoot. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*(6), 1006–1023.

Craig, M. A., & Richeson, J. A. (2014). More diverse yet less tolerant? How the increasingly diverse racial landscape affects white Americans' racial attitudes. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 40*(6), 750–761.

Crank, J. P. (2014). *Understanding police culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Danbold, F., & Huo, Y. J. (2015). No longer "All-American"? Whites' defensive reactions to their numerical decline. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 6*(2), 210–218.

Dover, T. L., Major, B., & Kaiser, C. R. (2016). Members of high-status groups are threatened by pro-diversity organizational messages. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 62*, 58–67.

Gatto, J., & Dambrun, M. (2012). Authoritarianism, social dominance, and prejudice among junior police officers: The role of the normative context. *Social Psychology, 43*(2), 61–66.

Hall, A. V., Hall, E. V., & Perry, J. L. (2016). Black and blue: Exploring racial bias and law enforcement in the killings of unarmed Black male civilians, *American Psychologist, 71*(3), 175–186.

Jost, J. T., & Thompson, E. P. (2000). Group-based dominance and opposition to equality as independent predictors of self-esteem, ethnocentrism, and social policy attitudes among African Americans and European Americans. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 36*, 209–232.

Kahn, K. B., & Davies, P. G. (2011). Differentially dangerous? Phenotypic racial stereotypicality increases implicit bias among ingroup and outgroup members. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 14*(4), 569–580.

Matschke, C., & Sassenberg, K. (2010). Does rejection lead to disidentification? The role of internal motivation and avoidance strategies. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 40*(6), 891–900.

Outten, H. R., Schmitt, M. T., Miller, D. A., & Garcia, A. L. (2012). Feeling threatened about the future Whites' emotional reactions to anticipated ethnic demographic changes. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 38*(1), 14–25.

Overbeck, J. R., Jost, J. T., Mosso, C. O., & Flizik, A. (2004). Resistant versus acquiescent responses to ingroup inferiority as a function of social dominance orientation in the USA and Italy. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 7*(1), 35–54.

Ruggs, E. N., Hebl, M. R., Rabelo, V. C., Weaver, K. B., Kovacs, J., & Kemp, A. S. (2016). Baltimore is burning: Can I-O psychologists help extinguish the flames? *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 9*(3), 525–547.

Sidanius, J., Liu, J. H., Shaw, J. S., & Pratto, F. (1994). Social dominance orientation, hierarchy attenuators and hierarchy enhancers: Social dominance theory and the criminal justice system. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 24*(4), 338–366.

Unzueta, M. M., Knowles, E. D., & Ho, G. C. (2012). Diversity is what you want it to be how social-dominance motives affect construals of diversity. *Psychological Science, 23*(3), 303–309.

Theoretical Applications of the MODE Model to Law Enforcement Training and Interventions

Keith L. Zabel
Wayne State University

Kevin L. Zabel
Western New England University

Michael A. Olson
University of Tennessee

Jessica H. Carlson
Western New England University

Keith L. Zabel, Department of Psychology, Wayne State University; Kevin L. Zabel, Department of Psychology, Western New England University; Michael A. Olson, Department of Psychology, University of Tennessee; Jessica H. Carlson, Department of Psychology, Western New England University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Keith L. Zabel, Department of Psychology, Wayne State University, 5057 Woodward Avenue, 7th Floor, Detroit, MI 48202. E-mail: keith.zabel@wayne.edu